

## We Research

### Scholar-Activist Women Trace Connections Between Colonialism, Capitalism, Injustice, and Environmental Decline

By Perin Ruttonsha and Ellie Perkins

In North America and internationally, partly as a result of the climate crisis, activists and communities are increasingly standing up for social and environmental justice and destabilizing inequitable hierarchies that have been perpetuated over centuries. Global histories of marginalization based on Indigeneity, race, class, and gender can no longer be ignored—along with related impacts on biosphere and climate systems—as corollary damage from economic growth. In fact, it is becoming clear that the continuance of human socio-economic systems depends on our ingenuity to (re)establish just and sustainable ways of governing and caring for one another.

Several scholar-activist women, whose work focuses on these intersections, spoke at the Canadian Society for Ecological Economics (CANSEE) 12th Biennial Conference, in May 2019. Each, in her own way, underscored that the dismissal and sidelining of some people and viewpoints is borne from the same mindset that permits and pardons environmental exploitation, coupled with the erroneous claim that the resulting economic growth will ultimately correct these social injustices. They also described how the expansion and reinforcement of colonial capitalist regimes has been key in producing social differences with grave ecological consequences. This article summarizes some of their ideas about the links among gender, injustice, economy and environment—bringing them into dialogue with one another, as in fact happened, both in panel discussions and informal conversations. These speakers included (speaker names are noted in parentheses throughout the text, next to the points they raised):

Bengi Akbulut, who teaches ecological economics and geography at Concordia University. She theorizes the political economy of care work, and discussed the importance of *collective cultivation of a social commons*.

Eriel Deranger, the Executive Director of Indigenous Climate Action, a member of the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nation, and an international leader of Indigenous climate, environmental justice, and youth movements. She noted how local *connectedness with the natural world* is the basis of Indigenous strength and authority.

Jessica Dempsey, a geography professor at the University of British Columbia. She studies the complex politics surrounding environmental issues such as extinction and biodiversity loss, often in collaboration with Rosemary Collard of Simon Fraser University. She positioned *social inequality as a driver of environmental degradation*.

Kaitlin Kish, a postdoctoral researcher at McGill University, who studies the political economy of degrowth and socio-ecological transitions. In her plenary talk at the conference, with her small baby asleep in a wrap-carrier, she advocated for *creating a radical political economy centred around home and community building*.

Deborah McGregor, Faculty of Environmental Studies and Osgoode Hall law professor at York University, Anishinaabe from Whitefish River First Nation and an expert on Indigenous knowledge systems and environmental justice. She spoke about the *relationship between traditional ways of knowing and sustainable environmental governance*.

Susan Paulson, Associate Director of the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Florida, who explores how gender, class, and ethno-racial systems interact with biophysical environments in Latin American communities. She highlighted the inseparability of and intersections among *gender, ethnicity and livelihoods*.

Leah Temper, a research associate at McGill University who is founder of the Environmental Justice Atlas, which tracks international cases of community resistance against extractive industries. She spoke of the *injustices of extractive economies*, both socially and ecologically.

## *Segregating Livelihoods*

*“This system emerged that divided two things which should be inseparable — it divided production from reproduction, identified production as masculine and reproduction as feminine, and then attributed greater monetary and other value to manly production. That’s a new way of gendering labour, which evolved together with markets, the nuclear family, and also the portrayal of sexual dimorphism as the natural basis of economies.”*  
- Susan Paulson

The creation of differences is the basis of inequality, which perpetuates segregation and discrimination among social groups and between humans and other beings. Historically, these differences have been drawn across gendered, racial, colonial and anthropocentric lines, as part of the advancement of capitalist regimes, beginning hundreds of years ago (Dempsey; McGregor; Paulson). *Accumulation by difference making* is a central theory framing and explaining the development of these injustices and divisions (Dempsey; Paulson), with accumulations of power, status, control, and wealth traded against the autonomy, sovereignty, and resilience of those driven to the margins of economic systems. A labour force was necessary to advance the capitalist programme, and this became the place of men, leading to the institutionalization of paid work. Meanwhile, women were expected to tend to the home, with care work gendered as a female role (Akbulut; Dempsey; Paulson). Thus, two spaces and two labour types appeared, the productive and the reproductive (Dempsey; Paulson). Significantly, Dempsey contended, these two realms exist in a contradictory relationship, the productive eroding the reproductive, devaluing free economic contributions from women, along with those

of the natural world. Women blend into the backdrop of society, like “nature,” separate from the “real economy” and discounted within conventional economic metrics—both commonly used and abused as resources for measured production (Akbulut; Dempsey; Temper). Yet, the reproductive contributions of women have also been explicitly tied to political economic strategies for nation building through population growth (Paulson). For Indigenous women and men, the marginalization imposed through capitalism has been even more stark and brutal (Deranger; McGregor; Temper). Not just separate, the role of Indigenous peoples were rendered nearly invisible in the development of economic systems during European settlement of North America, while also severing, and demonizing, their cosmological connection to the natural world as livelihood (Deranger).

### *Body and Heart in Production and Reproduction*

“When European colonists came to the Americas they didn’t just come here to reap the bounties of the new world, they came to extinguish the Indigenous peoples that were here so that they could support their doctrine of discovery and man’s dominion over nature....We now live in a country that is dominated by a petrol economy...We have become economic hostages and forced into these systems.”  
-Eriel Deranger

As productive and reproductive realms of labour began to structure capitalist economies, and as Indigenous rights and cultures were eroded, these differences were “naturalized” into the corporeal or sentimental aspects of the lives of men and women. The gendering of labour in the name of growth enlisted men in long working hours and intensive physical labour, and subordinated Indigenous and racialized men in dangerous jobs, at times resulting in illness, disability and death (Paulson). Today, these gender norms are producing toxic male mentalities, which pressure men to engage in extremist lifestyles, aspire to high incomes as a sign of status, consume more meat and alcohol, and forego participation in parenting; this can lead to higher rates of violence and suicide (Paulson). On the other hand, contemporary women often face double standards. While the expectation remains that they will work in support of their families and communities, as altruistic, *caring* subjects, motivated by genuine emotions of care (Akbulut), those who choose to embrace a conventional role of primary caregiver may encounter criticism by others who have fought to overcome this condition, in the name of feminism (Kish). Moreover, the social standards introduced through the gendered division of labour continue to exert control over women’s reproductive agency, for example, through ongoing abortion policy debates (Dempsey). Dempsey, drawing from work with Rosemary Collard, has interpreted abortion politics as undermining the sexual autonomy of women and reasserting conventional gender hierarchies. She also drew a parallel between today’s feminism and the fifteenth century persecution of witches in Europe, as presented in Silvia Federici’s 2004 book, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Witches were a group of women who abstained from the advancement of capitalism, and also offered traditional knowledge on reproductive health. In this way, they represented an early feminist effort of passive resistance, wisdom and strength, vilified and persecuted because they were viewed as a threat to patriarchal hierarchies and dominant economic systems (Dempsey). Violence against witches was not simply a story of female oppression, but also one of anthropocentric expansion, with controlling male interests paving the way to a new economic (and subsequently environmental) order, through the silencing of perceived opponents (Dempsey). Their story is comparatively evocative of more recent Indigenous experiences, where communities have been subjected to extreme acts

of violence, leading to death, in speaking up for their rights to land, resource and environmental safety (Temper).

### *Where Social Inequality and Environmental Decline Intersect*

*“If one buys the argument that difference along gendered, racialized and colonial lines is a key driver of ecological crisis, in that it renders some people and spaces more sacrificial, then we might suggest that movements organizing against social difference are, themselves, ecological.”*

-Jessica Dempsey

The Anthropocene is an idea which clusters all humans together as “Anthropos” despite the vast extremes in their suffering from and responsibility for the ecological and climate changes which define it. Underneath lies a hidden narrative of power, based on the making of difference, wherein Indigenous lands and peoples, women, and “nature” are used as resources for capitalist accumulation. Thus, the Anthropocene era—in which human communities dominate Earth systems and even shift evolutionary cycles—evolved through and was built upon multiple instances of subjugation. The conditions of the Anthropocene, and its outcome of climate crisis, present the occasion to come together within communities of action of change (Deranger; McGregor; Temper), and yet this community work, such as mitigating and remediating environmental damage at a local level, oftentimes falls on women and Indigenous peoples (Dempsey; Deranger; McGregor). There is a question, then, of who should be taking responsibility for social and environmental concerns that are ultimately shared and affect all of life (Akbulut; Deranger; Paulson; Temper). Caring for the environment, like caring for one’s community, has often been treated as an altruistic behaviour (Akbulut)—rendered trivial along with a general apathy towards work that capitalist economies gender as female (Dempsey). For Dempsey, the invisibility of female subjects within the economy is mirrored in our attitudes towards the natural world. Thus, the assault on female autonomy and dignity, as evidenced in anti-abortion politics and the Me Too backlash, is concomitant with the politics of climate change. Moreover, these attacks and suppression of female agency are in fact a central driver of the Anthropocene, perpetuated through capitalist and colonial social relations. For example, extractivist industries, and the economic growth they support, have been made possible only through extreme violence and marginalization, along lines of gender, race, and Indigeneity (Dempsey; Deranger; Paulson; Temper). Dempsey explained that social-feminist and anti-racist movements are inherently ecological, and empowering political solidarity and intersectionality across social and environmental campaigns through conversation among activists, is essential to mobilize change.

### *Evolutionary Variables: Differences as Strength*

*“The evolutionary feature that has assured survival throughout a much longer lifetime is our biophysical capacity for symbolic thought and communication, that enables groups of humans to collaboratively develop languages, religions, kinship, other systems that survive the individual organism and that produce new generation of humans, their habits and their habitats.”*

- Susan Paulson

*“What should we do? How about trying to be good ancestors.”*

-Deborah McGregor

In today's gender politics, the notion of fluidity, or non-polarization, has become significant. In a similar vein, from an anthropological perspective, Paulson recalled that gendered, racialized, colonized, and anthropogenic relations are strongly conditioned by symbolic meanings, created by societies and cultures. It is context, not biological inevitability, that has produced equalities and inequalities among different groups. Furthermore, the human capacity for symbolic thought grants us flexibility to redefine the meaning of our relations with the environments in which we live and work, including those which place human societies at risk of collapse. Paulson's research in Latin America has revealed more diverse approaches to social roles and identities than are present in Western, patriarchal, heteronormative societies. She advocated for more variation in how we "see" one another, in favour of a pluriverse of dynamic interactions that continue to shape people in their worlds, without requirement for explicit labels of gender and ethnicity. Paulson questioned Western conceptions of biological determination, and what we take for granted as being "natural", and therefore sustainable. The ecological/biological and the social are inseparable, she discussed, and ideas of social significance can, in fact, trigger biological responses (she passed around lingerie artefacts as an example). Through an Indigenous perspective, human relations with the natural environment, in fact, underpin cultural ideologies and governance approaches, based in principles of reciprocity (Deranger; McGregor). More so, these languages and cultures, tied to the lands, have been a source of resilience for Indigenous communities, through centuries of conflict and environmental change (Deranger; McGregor).

### *Redefining Societies: A Feminism of Common Ground*

*"Care is a recognition of our interdependence.... Commoning is radical carework. It creates relationships that provide access to the means of material and social reproduction -- outside market and state mediation."*

-Bengi Akbulut

Increasingly, ecological economists are turning to community building as a foundation for resilient and sustainable societies (Kish; Paulson; Temper); however, in doing so, they recognize the risks of rescripting women into conventional gendered roles (Akbulut; Dempsey; Kish; Paulson). For some speakers, strong family values, connected communities, and self-sufficient, place-based livelihoods may be the antidote to depersonalized, globalized economies (Akbulut; Deranger; Kish; Paulson). Yet, in modern, Western societies, these same values have been tied to the types of gender division previously described. Neither has the reform of gender divided roles through feminist movements led to equality, in all cases. For example, the reintroduction of women into the workforce in high-income countries has arguably provided another source of cheap labour (Paulson), while the commodification of care work has not occurred at a fair rate of compensation (Akbulut). Thus, these scholars seek to ascribe new meaning to feminism, within the context of community-oriented, ecologically conscious, Indigenous inspired, modern societies (Akbulut; Deranger; Kish; Paulson)—a feminism that allows both men and women to self-define their social roles, while maintaining equal voice and status, regardless of the nature of their economic contributions, and with policies that support care-based work (Akbulut; Kish). Across the board, the panelists advocated for a type of community-engaged, social production,

rooted in place, and which values the wellbeing of all people and life over material outputs (Akbulut; Kish; McGregor; Paulson; Temper).

These speakers all showed how questions of gender and other aspects of personal identity within the economy are not simply about the nature of women's roles within the workforce -- productive or reproductive -- but also how capitalism has shaped the social identities of everyone, conscripting us all to roles in a globalized program of colonial, patriarchal economic expansion. Recognizing this is an important step towards building different and more collaborative lifeways.

*All these plenary speakers' video-recorded presentations are available at:*  
<https://davidsuzuki.org/science-learning-centre-article/engaging-economies-of-change-canadian-society-for-ecological-economics-12th-biennial-conference-may-22-25-2019/>

*For more information about these speakers and their work, see the Resources section at the end of this issue.*

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### **Resources (sub-section: Gender, Inequities, Environment and Capitalism):**

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Collard, R.C. and J. Dempsey, J. (2018). "Accumulation by difference-making: An Anthropocene story, starring witches." *Gender, Place & Culture* 25(9) pp. 1349-1364.

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Jobin, Shalene (2016). "Double Consciousness and Nehiyawak (Cree) Perspectives: Reclaiming Indigenous Women's Knowledge." In N. Kermoal and I. Altamirano-Jiménez (eds.) *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understanding of Place*, pp. 39-58.

Kwaymullina, Ambelin (2018). "You are on Indigenous land: Ecofeminism, Indigenous peoples and land justice." In L. Stevens, P. Tait and D. Varney (eds.), *Feminist Ecologies: Changing environments in the Anthropocene*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 193-208.

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Temper, Leah (2016). "Transforming knowledge creation for environmental and epistemic justice." *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability* 20, pp. 41-49.