

RE



SISTERS











# RE/SISTERS

A Lens on Gender and Ecology

Edited by Alona Pardo

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# Foreword

*RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology* surveys the relationship between gender and ecology to identify the systemic links between the oppression of women, feminised bodies, and Black, trans and Indigenous communities, and the degradation of the planet. It comes at a time when earthed bodies, extractive bodies, gendered bodies and colonised bodies are bending and mutating under the stresses and strains of planetary toxicity, rampant deforestation, species extinction, the privatisation of our 'common' wealth, and the colonisation of the deep seas and intergalactic skies at the whims of the neoliberal military-industrial-agricultural-nuclear juggernaut that has penetrated deep into the bowels of our earth and beyond. At its heart, *RE/SISTERS* is an attempt to shine a light on these nefarious activities and show how, since the late 1960s, artists, in particular women and gender-nonconforming artists, have resisted and protested the destruction of life on earth by recognising their planetary interconnectedness and non-separability.

Organised thematically, this publication, which follows the structure of the exhibition it accompanies, explores the connections between environmental and gender justice as indivisible parts of a global struggle to address the power structures that threaten our precarious ecosystem. Uniting film, photography and performance work by nearly fifty women and gender-nonconforming artists from across different decades, geographies and aesthetic strategies, the exhibition reveals how a woman-centred vision of nature has been replaced by a mechanistic, patriarchal order organised around the exploitation of natural resources, alongside work of an activist nature that underscores how women are often at the forefront of advocating and caring for the planet.

Ecological destruction and racism are two of the biggest challenges of the twenty-first century. They are also inextricably intertwined: there is a stark divide between who has caused, and continues to exacerbate, climate change, and who is suffering its increasingly catastrophic effects. In response, the exhibition argues for a radical, intersectional and decolonial brand of ecofeminism that is non-monolithic, inclusive and platforms the work of artists from Global Majority, Indigenous and diaspora

communities. Touching on themes including the politics of extraction; creative acts of protest and resistance, or what Silvia Federici calls the 'joyful militancy' of feminism; the labour of ecological care; environmental racism; and queerness and fluidity in the face of rigid social structures and hierarchies, the exhibition acknowledges that women and other oppressed communities are at the core of these battlegrounds, not only as victims of dispossession but also as fighters, as protagonists of the resistance.

In line with the tentacular identities presented in the exhibition, and in the spirit of creative diversity and inclusivity with which the show is envisaged, Suzanne Dhaliwal and Kathryn Yusoff were early allies of the project. We are indebted to them for the unparalleled energy with which they shared their knowledge, challenging and ultimately collaborating with us to make this exhibition a reality.

Communicating the depth, power, aesthetic reach and radical, often pioneering ideas espoused by the artists featured in *RE/SISTERS*, which challenge conventional systems of knowledge, is no mean feat. We are immensely grateful to the authors of the close studies, lively texts and fluid ideas that grace the pages of this book: Lucy Bradnock, Angela Dimitrakaki, Anna Feigenbaum, Ros Gray, Greta LaFleur, Astrida Neimanis, Christine Okoth, Catriona Sandilands and Kathryn Yusoff. Thank you for your attention, care and expertise. The task of translating these ideas of terraforming, aqueous kinship, radical feminist and queer politics and earth care was nobly and sensitively taken on by Amélie Bonhomme and Amy Preston, supported by Christopher Lacy, of The Bon Ton. Our thanks also extend to Rochelle Roberts at Prestel for giving us the creative space and oxygen to breathe life into this publication, and to Aimee Selby, whose editing wizardry was transformative.

*RE/SISTERS: A Lens on Gender and Ecology* is the product of a transnational web of generosity and belief in the value of art and exhibition making. Our sincere gratitude goes to the lenders who parted with works of personal significance for the sake of the exhibition. An exhibition of this scale and complexity would not have been possible without the support of UK and international museums, artists' estates and foundations, collections and galleries as well as individuals, including: Estate of Laura Aguilar; AKINCI,



Amsterdam; Alexander Levy Gallery, Berlin; Alison Jacques, London; Autograph ABP, London; Estate of Helène Aylon, New York; Bishopsgate Institute, London; Bonnefanten Museum, Maastricht; British Library, London; Copperfield Gallery, London; David Castillo Gallery, Miami; Deutsche Bank Collection; Electronic Arts InterMix, New York; Jan Fischer; Gagosian; Galerie Lelong; Gladstone Gallery, New York; Glenstone, Potomac, Maryland; Estate of Laura Grisi; Hauser & Wirth; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; James Cohan Gallery, New York; KADIST Foundation; Kurimanzutto; Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York; Lisson Gallery; MACBA, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection; Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich; Nicoletti, London; P420 Art Gallery, Bologna; Peace Encampment Herstory Project; Peace Museum, Bradford; People's Archive of Rural India; Richard Saltoun Gallery, London; Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York; SepiaEYE, New York; Estate of Gurminder Sikand; Silverlens Galleries; Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts; Tate; University of Oregon Libraries; Victoria Miro, London; Vielmetter, Los Angeles; The Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths, University of London; Women's Library, London School of Economics; Woodman Family Foundation; Zilberman Gallery, Istanbul; David Zwirner; and those who wish to remain anonymous.

Our greatest thanks of course are reserved for the brave, visionary and imaginative artists whose work has guided us over the last eighteen months. Thank you for showing us the way: Laura Aguilar; Helène Aylon; Poulomi Basu; Mabe Bethônico; melanie bonajo; Carolina Caycedo; Judy Chicago; Tee A. Corinne; Minerva Cuevas; Agnes Denes; Chloe Dewe Mathews; Feminist Land Art Retreat; Format Photographers (Melanie Friend, Sheila Gray, Pam Isherwood, Jenny Matthews, Maggie Murray, Raissa Page, Brenda Prince and Val Wilmer); LaToya Ruby Frazier; Gauri Gill and Rajesh Vangad; Simryn Gill; Fay Godwin; The Grindmill Songs Project; Laura Grisi; Barbara Hammer; Taloi Havini; Nadia Huggins; JEB (Joan E. Biren); Anne Duk Hee Jordan; Barbara Kruger; Dionne Lee; Zoe Leonard; Mary Mattingly; Ana Mendieta; Fina Miralles; Mónica de Miranda; The Neo Naturists (Christine Binnie, Jennifer Binnie and Wilma Johnson); Otobong Nkanga; Josèfa Ntjam; Ada M. Patterson; Ingrid Pollard; Zina Saro-Wiwa; Susan Schuppli; Fern Shaffer; Sim Chi Yin; Xaviera Simmons; Pamela Singh; Diana Thater; Mierle Laderman Ukeles; Úyra Sodoma; Andrea Kim Valdez; and Francesca Woodman.

A defining feature of exhibitions at the Barbican is the ambition of the spatial interventions. As ever, we have reinvented the architecture of the gallery in response to the energy and spirit of the works in the exhibition.

We are indebted to Jessica Reynolds, ably assisted by Alistair Walker, of vPPR Architects for their vision, sensitivity and commitment to the exhibition design.

We are extraordinarily fortunate to work with a wonderful team of like-minded individuals who share our values and without whom this project would simply not have been possible. They include: Kate Fanning, Alice Lobb, Hannah Woods and Lotte Allan (Coordination); Katrina Crookall (Deputy Head of Visual Arts); Maarten van den Bos, Jamie Measure-Hughes, Margaret Liley and Bruce Stracy (Production), and all of the installation crew; Ariane Oiticica, Hannah Carr, Lily Booth and Georgia Holmes (Communications); Isobel Parrish and Hannah Moth (Marketing); Natasha Harris, Susie Sterling and Alina Tiits (Development); Jo Davis and Rosie Gibbs (Retail); and Vania Gonzalez and Matt Harle (Creative Collaboration and Learning).

Special thanks to Curatorial Assistant Colm Guo-Lin Peare for his sustained support of this project; his energy, enthusiasm and diligence have known no bounds. Sincere appreciation is also extended to Manuela Hillman, Curatorial Placement, whose research greatly enriched the show.

After London, the exhibition will tour to Fotomuseum Antwerp (FOMU), Belgium. We could not be more delighted to share this thought-provoking exhibition with our European (re)sister.

Staging a project of this ambition would not be feasible without a group of generous supporters. We remain extremely grateful to the City of London for their ongoing support of the Barbican and to Vestiaire Collective for their significant contribution to this project. We would also like to thank the Helen Frankenthaler Foundation and Fluxus Art Projects for their generous assistance.

Throughout this exhibition and accompanying publication, we are led by the artists, whose work engages the intricate and eternal networks that connect us not only to the earth but also to one another. They have guided us through poisoned pipes and orgasmic waterways to call out injustices while celebrating earth's generative potential; they have swum under and sailed across oceans, ice and coral to show us new and radical ways of seeing and living; they have ducked, dived and dodged barriers, bullets and bulldozers to challenge destructive extractive politics and bring it to our urgent attention. Our hope is that we do our best to follow these artists in their vision of a more just and equitably gendered, ecological and decolonised future. We hope you will join us on this transformative journey.

Alona Pardo  
Curator  
Barbican Art Gallery

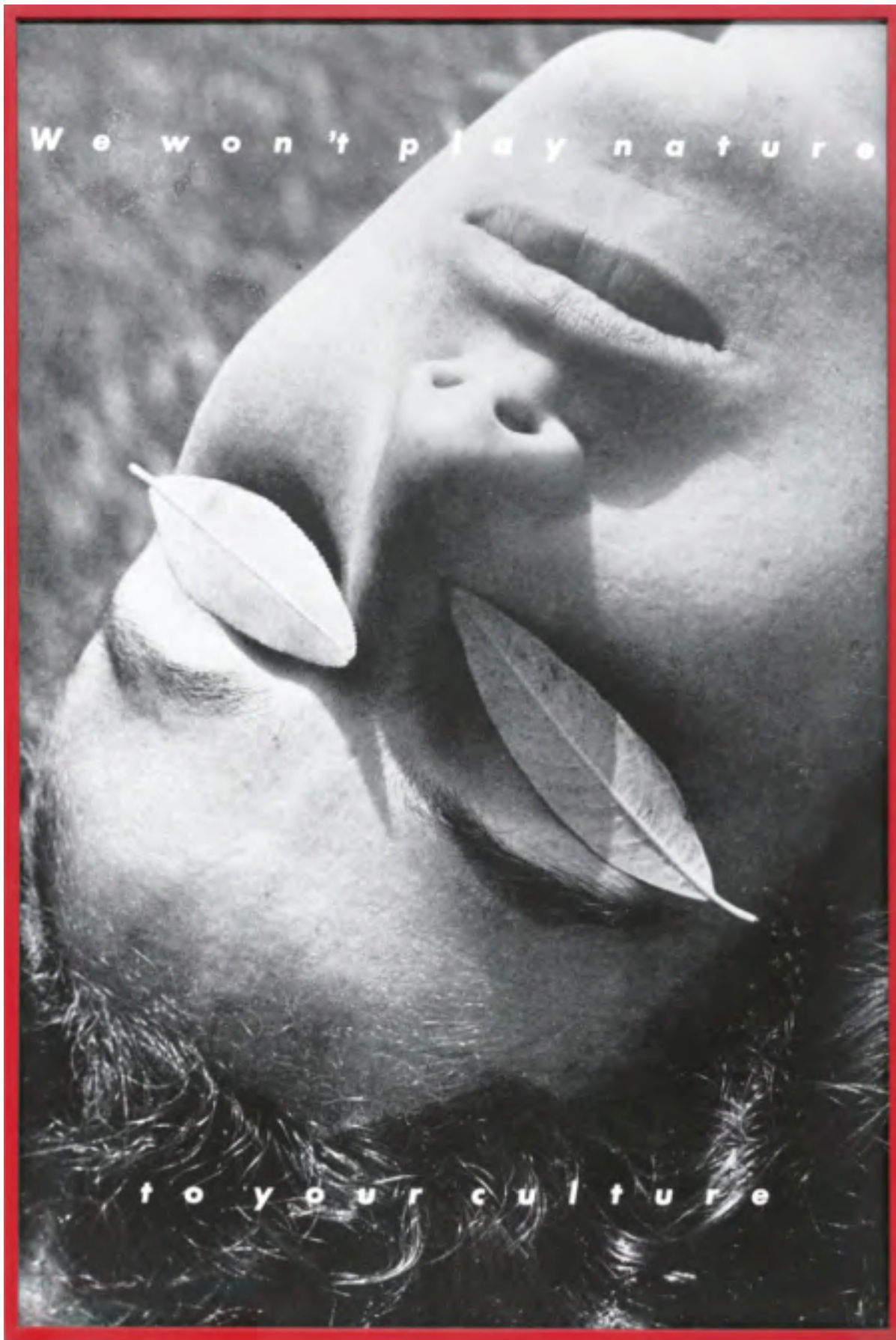
Shanay Jhaveri  
Head of Visual Arts  
Barbican











Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We won't play nature to your culture)*, 1983



# Reweaving the Web of Womanist Ecopolitics

Alona Pardo

Eyes wide shut. Eyes obstructed. Eyes covered with leaves. Eyes looking up to the sky. Eyes boldly reimagining or willing into being a world unfettered by the restrictive dualities of our gendered, binary, capitalist structures. In Barbara Kruger's seminal work *Untitled (We won't play nature to your culture)* (1983; p. 14), a closely cropped image, likely culled from a 1950s fashion magazine, shows a glamorous white woman lying against a grassy background with her eyes gently covered by leaves, entangling woman and nature in a symbiotic whole. With the woman's face sandwiched between the title's liberatory feminist message, which serves as a jarring reminder of women's historical role in society, the work signals how women have been straitjacketed in the West by the values of Enlightenment epistemology, made unwilling subjects of reductive Cartesian dualisms and dichotomies – culture/nature, male/female, mind/body – and a hierarchically ordered world view. Directly refuting the freighted position that men are producers of culture and that women are synonymous with nature and are therefore objects, subjects and products to be dominated by the heteropatriarchal gaze, Kruger's searing, defiant and radical work opens our eyes and minds to the possibility of a third way, a new mode of being in our womanist bodies,<sup>1</sup> freed from the shackles of masculine cultural imperialism while embracing non-separability from our ecological community. A world not defined by the crass divisions that oppress, stifle and silence marginalised others – including women, othered bodies and gender-nonconforming individuals as well as all other life forms – and free from the tyranny of the nuclear-military-industrial complex, whose prosperity and continued dominion relies on the subjugation of women and a violent extractive politics.

Kruger's work has been read by some feminist theorists as denying women a way to 'associate with either the image or the "nature" it allegedly represents', arguing that her language, couched in the ambiguous displacement of 'we' and 'you' pronouns, suggests that not only will feminists not play 'nature' but that 'they simply will not – cannot – play'.<sup>2</sup> However, read through an ecofeminist lens, Kruger's work, as Stacy Alaimo suggests, allows the possibility 'for feminists to "play nature" in parodic, subversive, and otherwise postmodern ways that confront, destabilize,

or transfigure the associations between "woman" and "nature"'. But playing nature, Alaimo concludes, can be a risky business.<sup>3</sup>

By insisting on the marriage of text and image in her work, we might also view Kruger as materialising the clarion call issued by French theorist Hélène Cixous, that 'Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.'<sup>4</sup>

No matter where the battle lines are drawn, however, it is worth noting that the negative association of woman with (passive, silent, irrational) nature in Western thought has consistently motivated many feminists to attempt to extricate 'woman' from the category of 'nature' in order to combat such essentialism.

The broad contours of ecofeminism in Europe and North America were shaped as early as the 1960s by figures such as Rachel Carson, whose seminal work *Silent Spring*, published in 1962 and which followed on the heels of the thalidomide scandal and public warnings about the dangers of nuclear fallout, alerted the United States to the poisonous legacy of pesticides in our planetary ecosystem. Widely acknowledged as having crafted a vision of nature as a web of interdependent organisms, Carson's ideas resonated with ecofeminist theory as it began to develop a decade after the book's publication, something Carson prefigured when she wrote: 'The "control of nature" is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.'<sup>5</sup> Emerging from the intersection of second-wave feminist theory with ideas of social and ecological justice, ecofeminism gained traction through the 1970s in the Global North with publications such as Françoise d'Eaubonne's searing tome *Feminism or Death* (1974), Susan Griffin's *Women and Nature* (1978) and Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980).

Despite their blind spots (more on which later), these early ecofeminists attempted to join the dots between the

intertwined oppressions of gender, ecology, race, speciesism and questions of nationhood. While Griffin emphasised how the ‘feminized status of women, animals, nature, and feminized others (children, people of color, farmers, slaves, as well as the body itself, emotions, and sexuality) have been conceived of as separate and inferior in order to legitimate their subordination under an elite and often violent and militarized male-dominant social order’,<sup>6</sup> the French feminist d’Eaubonne’s manifesto, in which she coined the term ecofeminism, demanded nothing less than radical ‘mutation’, which she argued would result in a ‘great reversal’ of man-centred power. This grand reversal of power, she goes on to suggest, does not imply a simple transfer of power from men to women; instead it entails the ‘destruction of power’ by women – the only group capable of executing a successful systemic change, one that could liberate women as well as the planet.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, Merchant’s powerful volume bridged socialist feminism and ecology to expose how the domination of women and nature has shared roots in the flawed logic of science and capitalism. As Greta Gaard notes: ‘Most provocative is her intersectional linkage of racism, speciesism, sexism, colonialism, capitalism, and the mechanistic model of science–nature via the historical co-occurrence of the racist and colonialist “voyages of discovery” that resulted in appropriating indigenous peoples, animals, and land.’<sup>8</sup>

Through the 1980s and 1990s, divergent schools of thought that yoked together global patterns of ecological degradation with women’s oppression – from the materialist ecofeminism advocated by Maria Mies and Ariel Salleh to the socialist ecofeminism put forth by Ynestra King, alongside Vandana Shiva’s critique of colonial development in the Global South – led to a febrile energy and a sense that ecofeminism, building on ‘third-wave’ feminism, was gathering steam. The ripple, alas, never swelled to a wave, and by the 2010s the lingering accusation of its essentialism – charged with irreducibly equating women with nature, among other concerns – relegated ecofeminism to the footnotes of feminist theory.

Ecofeminism also came under fire for aligning itself with spiritual rather than material practices. Detractors accused cultural ecofeminists of employing gendered and

sexist terms such as ‘Mother Earth’, coupling women and nature in a co-dependent relationship that encouraged their mutual exploitation. In contrast to ecofeminists who emerged from European philosophical traditions, the physicist and ecofeminist Vandana Shiva promoted a brand of cosmic humanism that she argued was ‘informed by the increasing awareness among humans of the ecological processes of the earth that shape and sustain life. We are part of the earth community. We are earth citizens. The earth has rights, and we have a duty to care for the earth, all her beings, and our fellow humans.’<sup>9</sup> While many ecofeminists resisted the gendering of ‘Mother Earth’, Shiva looked to the Sanskrit gendering of ‘Prakriti’ in Indian philosophy, a ‘She’ who ‘is the creative force of the universe’.<sup>10</sup> Further, Euro-American ecofeminists were charged with neglecting the resourceful resistance of Indigenous women who through their ancestral knowledge of the land preserved the well-being of the biosphere, atmosphere and hydrosphere, and of simultaneously failing to acknowledge the asymmetric burden of environmental degradation on women of colour, particularly in the Global South.

In a desperate flight from nature, many feminists were concerned that any affiliation of women with nature would set back the wider women’s liberation movement, especially for the LGBTQ+ community. As women struggled to improve the material conditions of their lives by accessing the workplace, feminists were troubled by the ecofeminist association with ideas of female reproduction, which they felt would further reinforce gendered and socially constructed divisions of labour.

In a bid to distance themselves from the concept of ecofeminism, some exponents adopted new labels, including ecowomanism and environmental feminism. However, as the impacts of ecological destruction on our planetary survival have climbed up the political agenda and the intersection of gender and climate justice has come into razor-sharp view, a new, decolonial brand of ecofeminism is enjoying a revival, one that embraces ‘antiracist, anti-colonial, anticapitalist, proqueer feminists of every color and from every people’.<sup>11</sup> Terms such as Capitalocene, Plantationocene and Anthropocene act as cultural-geological



markers that make clear that the violent abuses inflicted upon our ecological processes are inherently gendered, and shine a light on the toxic combination of globalised corporate hegemony and destructive masculinities that characterise the age of capitalism. Emboldened by the reorientation of ecological concerns as entwined with gender justice struggles, contemporary ecofeminists argue that the historical responsibility for the irreversible geochemical transformation of our ecosphere is rooted in gendered and racialised violences that act in concert with exploitative labour practices, together enabling and supporting extractive cultures that deplete the earth's resources. Acknowledging that these unequal power relations disproportionately impact the lives of women, in particular women of colour, feminist theorists such as Maria Mies and Silvia Federici have drawn attention to the roles of women, 'who, in every time and in every society, have produced life on this planet and on whose work, therefore, all other activities depend'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as the sociologist and activist Ariel Salleh observes, both women and nature suffer jointly from these exploitative practices, particularly when women are denied education and opportunities and relegated to reproductive and domestic roles.<sup>13</sup>

Ecofeminist scholars have long critiqued feminised constructions of 'nature' while challenging patriarchy, the masculinism of capitalism, and colonial abuses against nature, women and marginalised communities. Increasingly, feminist theorists recognise that there can be no gender justice without social and environmental justice, and ecofeminism is being reclaimed as a unifying platform that all women can rally behind.

In 1981, fuelled by anger at the proposed siting of nuclear missiles belonging to the US Air Force at the Greenham Common RAF base in Berkshire, England, a group of 36 women and four men marched 200 kilometres from Wales to Greenham Common in protest. The following year, this largely women-led anti-nuclear protest established a permanent women-only camp there and began adopting 'Edwardian suffrage tactics',<sup>14</sup> such as chaining themselves to the perimeter fence and weaving webs of yarn in and through the chain-link railing, which they

appropriated as a site of both physical and symbolic intervention to attract press attention and gain wider public support for their cause. Using the fence almost as a loom, the women's woven webs, in which they often entangled themselves, represented a rhizomatic, transnational network of connected individuals.<sup>15</sup> As one demonstration of their direct yet nonviolent protest strategies, the tactic stumped the largely male police force, who were 'trained to deal with force and aggression, not to extricate themselves from woollen webs'.<sup>16</sup> Over the course of its nineteen-year existence, the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp became synonymous with a particular brand of feminist peace politics. By publicly and collectively performing everyday domestic activities on the site, including eating, sleeping and cooking, the women transformed them into political acts. Like Reclaim the Night,<sup>17</sup> the women of Greenham suggested that just taking up space was a political undertaking.

Employing concepts and tools from the field of art, the women of Greenham Common got creative, distributing powerfully illustrated zines and flyers communicating their anti-nuclear feminist message (pp. 116–21), and deploying mirrors to reflect the nefarious activities on the base back at the soldiers while simultaneously subverting the surveillance role of the security cameras; collective singing, meanwhile, brought together a chorus of interconnected voices, raising spirits and feeding into a long history of song as a tool for the dissemination of political messaging. This women-led resistance movement was extensively photographed by the agency Format Photographers (pp. 4, 99–115, 316–17), and their images formed a central part of a highly visual campaign that inspired a wider culture of DIY flyers, zines, posters and films. Described as the only 'solely female agency in British photographic history', Format was founded in 1983 by Maggie Murray, Val Wilmer, Anita Corbin, Sheila Gray, Pam Isherwood, Jenny Matthews, Joanne O'Brien and Raissa Page and at its core was designed to combat sexism and exclusion in a world of male-dominated photography agencies.<sup>18</sup> Format's politics were directly influenced by their feminisms and ultimately dictated who, what and where they photographed. The collective nature of this loose alliance



*Top:*  
Helène Aylon, 'sac' Survive and Continue: An Anti-War Ceremonial,  
poster, 1982. From *Terrestri: 'Rescued Earth'*, 1982

*Bottom:*  
Helène Aylon, *Woman with Baby*, 1982. From *Terrestri:*  
*'Rescued Earth'*, 1982

of women photographers meant they could easily cover the 9-kilometre-long perimeter of Greenham Common, affording them unparalleled access to the diversity of activities that unfolded across the camp. Equally, as women photographers they were able to build trust with the women protesters, granting them insights not available to others and resulting in arresting and dynamic images of the regular blockades, mass actions organised in the winters of 1982 and 1983, acts of fence cutting and climbing, as well as how the women survived day in, day out, subject to the cold and damp of the British weather and regular acts of police brutality.

In solidarity with their European resisters, on 4 July 1983 a number of allied feminist groups established the Women's Encampment for a Future of Peace and Justice near the Seneca Army Depot in Romulus, upstate New York. Their choice of Seneca was resonant as it allowed the activists to harness past narratives of resistance associated with that location, most potently a long history of women's rights activism stretching back to the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. The first women's rights convention in the United States, this meeting led to the signing of the Declaration of Sentiments, a document that 'articulated the consciousness of women's rights' in the mid-1800s.<sup>19</sup> Beyond this more recent feminist lineage, the women's groups recognised Seneca Falls's significance as a Native American homeland that had once been nurtured and protected by the women of the Iroquois people, while also being a key way station along the Underground Railroad, the network of secret routes and hideouts that supported the flight of enslaved African Americans from bondage in the South, mainly to northern free states or Canada.

In the summer of 1983, the lesbian photographer and activist JEB (Joan E. Biren) joined the women's movement in Seneca, giving visibility through her camera to the women protesting militarism, violence against women, nuclear waste and environmental radiation, and the future destruction of the earth itself (pp. 12–13, 124–31). In concert with her 1979 self-published book *Eye to Eye: Portraits of Lesbians*, a collection of black-and-white portraits of lesbians going about their everyday activities that gave radical visual

form to an intersectional brand of lesbianism that actively defied negative representations of queer lives, JEB's explosive colour photographs of the women living and working at Seneca, many of whom identified as lesbian, sought not only to give these women representation but to 'dar[e] people to imagine another world into existence'.<sup>20</sup>

A year earlier, the American process-based artist Hélène Aylon, inspired by the Australian anti-nuclear activist Helen Caldicott (who had, among other achievements, successfully convinced Australia to sue France over its atmospheric testing of nuclear weapons in the Pacific in the early 1970s), embarked on an epic US coast-to-coast road trip and anti-nuclear performance that she christened *Terrestri: 'Rescued Earth'* (pp. 18, 174–79). Aylon's caravan of women – which included disabled women, Native American women, artists and other women activists – advocated a politics anchored in ideas of the communal labour of ecological care, ritual healing, and caretaking as a form of resistance, while developing tools for the international cooperation that the artist saw as critical to planetary survival. Their actions revolved around rescuing and healing contaminated soil from twelve Strategic Air Command (SAC) sites, including the Seneca Army Depot, which formed an important part of the USA's nuclear deterrent strategy. Making the case for applying an expansive outlook to the practice of human sympathy and encouraging a system of interdependence that would extend beyond immediate social and familial circles, Aylon, who collected the soil in what she called 'sacs' (for 'survive and continue'), made the link between her artistic practice and 'Looking at news photos of refugees, [where] there are always images of women fleeing with a "sac" of precious belongings in one hand, a child clasping the other hand. We, too, would take our most precious belonging – i.e. the Earth itself, in all its variety, in our "sac," and carry it to safety.'<sup>21</sup>

Engaged with ideas around feminist ecopolitical transformation, Aylon's performance was rooted not only in human–nature relations but, more importantly, the 'poetics of responsibility'.<sup>22</sup> As an ethico-political act, Aylon's work foregrounded the possible impact and corrective potential of cultural activity and human engagement,



rather than romanticising a notion of a redemptive communion with nature. Read through this lens, Aylon's concern was not only to find ways to reconnect with nature but, more significantly, to strive for a future that ensures human survival while preventing environmental and planetary destruction.

Despite the diverse communities that coexisted at both Greenham and Seneca, including environmental and anti-nuclear activists, lesbian and queer groups, vegans, unionised women, intellectuals, mothers, children, grandmothers and artists, many have since reflected on the intersectional shortcomings of these movements, which privileged white, middle-class voices and concerns.

While women in the Global North were resisting the rise of the nuclear-military complex, in the 1970s a women-led grassroots movement emerged in the Uttarakhand region of northern India to informally resist and protect local forests from deforestation. While the women of Greenham Common created a 30,000-strong human chain around the 9-kilometre perimeter of the base in an action known as Embrace the Base,<sup>23</sup> almost a decade earlier, in the foothills of the Himalayas, women and children had created human shields around trees slated for felling by state and corporate agents for capitalist gain. By adopting a nonviolent tactic of resistance, these women, who relied materially on the forests not only for firewood and fodder but for their continued way of living, effectively halted the deforestation of their common land. Long before Silvia Federici shone a light on the relationship between capital, feminism and the 'commons', the women of the Chipko movement, as it became known, placed their physical bodies in harm's way to protect their communal economies and cultures from the consequences of extractivism (pp. 136–41). In a protest against the dual forces of capitalism and the lingering legacy of British colonialism, by successfully opposing the planned fate of the trees, the women gained control of the means of production and the resources necessary for their daily lives. Chipko became emblematic of the ecofeminist movement precisely because it demonstrated the entangled relationship between the material needs of the women and the necessity to protect nature from domination and oppression.

In the 1960s, the term 'common oppression' was adopted by the feminist movement to underscore that all women are oppressed.<sup>24</sup> However, as bell hooks noted, the idea of 'common oppression' allowed privileged white women to 'ignore the differences between their social status and the status of masses of women'.<sup>25</sup> In the late 1980s, Western ecofeminists began appropriating Indigenous knowledge and activism, calling themselves 'global sisters'.<sup>26</sup> Without acknowledging historical factors and racisms, however, ecofeminists in this way perpetuated the oppression of other women. Authors such as hooks have contended that we must analyse race and its function within capitalism to understand the links between racist, classist and ecological oppression.

Operating at the nexus of race, gender, urban ecological infrastructure, systemic injustice, environmental racism and heteropatriarchal capitalism, LaToya Ruby Frazier's striking series *Flint is Family* (pp. 152–59) exposes the segregation and racism that persists in the contemporary American landscape. In 2016, the artist and activist spent six months living in Flint, Michigan, with three generations of women – the poet Shea Cobb, her mother Ms Reneé and daughter Zion – capturing their everyday lives as they endured the effects of one of the most harmful man-made ecological failures in US history: the water crisis in their hometown. Through her photographic project in a city where more than half of the population is Black, and where 40 per cent of residents live below the poverty line, Frazier utilises her work 'as a platform to advocate for others, the oppressed, the disenfranchised'.<sup>27</sup> By presenting the daily challenges faced by the Cobb family as a result of their lack of access to safe water, Frazier calls out the systemic injustice of environmental racism in African American communities.

While Frazier exposes the impact of systemic racism on colonised bodies and the structures of power that allowed toxic water to perforate the boundaries of the human body, Taloi Havini's three-channel film *Habitat* (2017; pp. 90–93) explores the earth as body, investigating the devastating impact of the Panguna copper mine, which for almost half a century contaminated agricultural land and the life-sustaining waterways that criss-cross the

Autonomous Region of Bougainville in Papua New Guinea. Havini's film surveys the material impact of the mine, which in the 1980s reshaped Bougainville's lush landscape into a psychedelic patchwork of vivid blue-green as a result of poisonous tailings – the waste products of the mining process – seeping into the land, which was transformed in parts into a barren wasteland. Examining capitalism as an extension of colonialism that perpetuates the destruction of the environment and Indigenous communities, Havini articulates how the colonisation of Indigenous women – Bougainville's social structure is matrilineal – resulted in cultural disruption and undermined the matrilineal passage of property and land through women to women.

Highlighting the intrinsic relationship between the control of water and political power has been central to a decolonising anti-capitalist discourse since the late twentieth century, as made clear by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano in his seminal book *Open Veins of Latin America* (1971). Throughout global history, rivers have acted as important sites of both conflict and community. Over the last century, rivers have undergone various processes of contamination, taming and dismantling, as the work of Havini, Zoe Leonard (pp. 260–63) and Carolina Caycedo powerfully visualises. These human interventions have led to the profound alteration of river flows, giving rise to problems of environmental equity and prompting concerns around nationhood, sovereignty and survival. The vested interests of those who are enacting these interventions in the landscape make clear that disparities in water accessibility, rights and protections as well as decision-making powers exist along gendered, class-based and racialised lines. They also call into question the dynamics between human and nonhuman agency; many of these challenges can be traced back to the colonial pursuit of river ecosystems and communities and the attempt to impose order on them through extensive hydraulic infrastructure projects that attempt to control the unruly flow of water.

Carolina Caycedo's long-term multidisciplinary research project *Be Dammed* (begun in 2012) investigates the effects of dams on riverine ecologies and communities in South America, where the natural flow of rivers, on which

people depend for their livelihoods, are vital sources of life, spiritual and ecological balance and connectivity. Inspired by an article by the Colombian activist Jonathan Luna that described how the Magdalena River had breached its banks during the construction of the El Quimbo Dam, rebelling against 'the transnational corporation Emgesa by rising from its banks and eroding the dike that was preventing its natural flow',<sup>28</sup> Caycedo redirected her practice to reflect on the social, political and spiritual agency of nature as formed of living, breathing, other-than-human entities. Within this framework, Caycedo's *Water Portraits* (2015–; pp. 40–41, 70–71) present rivers as individuated organisms that sustain both human and nonhuman life in their rich embrace. The naming of these works as 'portraits' is critical to understanding Caycedo's position that rivers are 'the veins of the planet'.<sup>29</sup> In stark contrast to the received dualistic, heteropatriarchal value system of the Global North that views nature and culture as fundamentally opposed ways of being, Caycedo's work advocates an interspecies politics that recognises nature as having agency.

Rivers are not alone in being commandeered and colonised by the extractive capitalist politics of our globalised world. As the anti-capitalist feminist academic and writer Silvia Federici persuasively points out in her book *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (2018), 'the last decade has seen the largest enclosure of the worldly commons in history'.<sup>30</sup> Federici proposes our commons as land, water and air alongside 'languages, libraries and collective products of past cultures'.<sup>31</sup> Drawing connections between previous forms of enclosure that occurred with the birth of capitalism and the destruction of communal land regimes, and the 'new enclosures' at the heart of global capitalist accumulation, Federici goes on to argue that today, 'women are the main social force standing in the way of a complete commercialization of nature, supporting a noncapitalist use of land and a subsistence-oriented agriculture'.<sup>32</sup>

In this light, it is possible to read Agnes Denes's iconic 1982 work *Wheatfield – A Confrontation* (pp. 160–65), for which she planted 8,000 square metres of wheat in Battery Park landfill, on a site originally earmarked for the construction of a high-rise office building, as a reappropriation of the





Laura Aguilar, *Nature Self-Portrait #9*, 1996

commons. Transforming the formerly barren, unused land into a flourishing field of golden wheat, Denes drew attention to entangled ideas of reproduction, the social division of labour and the commodity flows of global trade that dispossess millions of people around the world. Attesting to the rampant privatisation of our common land by the capitalist military-industrial-nuclear complex, Fay Godwin's documentary black-and-white photographs of the British countryside systematically observe the role of land and land ownership in Thatcherite Britain, offering viewers a quiet yet compelling critique of neoliberalism in Britain through the 1980s. Her series *Our Forbidden Land* (1990; pp. 251–55) exposes the historic enclosure of land, from the legacy of the eighteenth-century highland clearances to the Thatcher government's sell-off of 40 per cent of the publicly owned forests in Britain. Similarly, the occupation of Greenham Common by the women's peace movement in this same period could also be viewed as a battle over land. The Common, previously accessible by the public, had been enclosed by the military and the 'Greenham women sought to free it again for the people, regularly cutting the fences and trespassing inside'.<sup>33</sup>

Dovetailing with the emergence of ecofeminism in the USA through the 1970s and 1980s, Ana Mendieta's photo-performances, which she termed 'earth body' sculptures, took the form of terraforming connections between her own woman-identifying body and her immediate natural environment. Begun in 1973, her *Siluetas* series (pp. 201–3) features her omnipresent yet often simultaneously absent form, fusing a feminine bodily outline with organic matter and geological formations. Mendieta's works can be read not merely as essentialising representations of the link between womanhood and the earth but, more significantly, as an attempt to resituate life on earth within an interconnected web of organisms, through which everything can be replenished collectively. Women have often been theorised as 'property' and as a 'natural resource' in the political economy, while nature has been feminised and commodified culturally and linguistically in the anthropocentric nature-culture divide to justify its exploitation. Drawing on her own experiences of social injustice as a woman and a transcultural subject, Mendieta's silhouettes are vivid

sociological depictions of a nature that has been rendered inferior and manipulated; one that jointly bears the scars of the many violences perpetrated against both women and minorities.

The colonised, othered and marginalised body is equally critical to the work of Laura Aguilar, who turned towards photographing under-represented subjects like herself, a Latina, lesbian and large-bodied woman. In her black-and-white *Nature Self-Portrait* series (1996; pp. 22, 208–13), Aguilar photographed her naked body inserted into the settler-colonial landscape of the American West, at once interrupting the heterosexist white male gaze and troubling Western views of beauty. By mimicking geological formations and natural elements in the land, imaging herself variously becoming a boulder or a tree, Aguilar appropriates strategies of camouflage as a political performance tool. As Laura Levin writes, in such practices camouflage is 'as much about revealing as concealing', since it 'highlights the non-human site as itself a performing entity, reminding us that the communication between self and setting is rarely unidirectional'.<sup>34</sup> By building a reciprocal relationship with the environment, Aguilar unsettles the status quo of extractive logics as they pertain to both the body and land. Levin further suggests that 'such an approach can productively trouble distinctions between nature and culture, and ground murky words like "space" and "site" in the language of ecology'.<sup>35</sup>

While the desertscape of New Mexico became the topographical locus of Aguilar's self-portraits, her identity as a lesbian woman, examined in depth in earlier works, was superseded in these images by concerns around the representation of her brown body in relation to the politics of settler-colonialism. A decade earlier, however, artists such as JEB, Barbara Hammer and Tee A. Corinne had begun exploring the knotty matrix of lesbianism and queer landscapes in their respective practices. A pioneer in the political exploration of lesbian life and sexuality, the experimental queer filmmaker Barbara Hammer's short film *Place Mattes* (1987; pp. 230–31) explores intimacy and eroticism in the space between reaching and touching. Filmed while Hammer was teaching at Evergreen State College in Washington state, the film frames the artist's

torso, limbs and other physical extremities as they float effortlessly across the landscape of the Pacific Northwest in a lyrical exploration of sexuality and women's pleasure. Wielding her camera as an extension of her body, and fracturing her physical form into its constituent parts, Hammer denies the objectification of the male gaze, while the natural settings of Yosemite National Park and Puget Sound reinforce her rejection of the patriarchal world. Further, by using an optical printer to create multilayered, skewed and processed images, Hammer 'queers' the image, poetically suggesting the way in which the body is always mediated, constructed and open to new interpretations.<sup>36</sup>

In Oregon, Hammer's friend and lover the photographer Tee A. Corinne also explored the potentiality of a radical feminist-lesbian vision of America. In the mid-1970s she joined the burgeoning 'back-to-the-land' movement: spurred by opposition to the ongoing Vietnam War, worsening ecological conditions and rampant consumerism, this movement, which began in North America in the 1960s, was made up of people – 'mostly white and middle class, including many lesbians, some of whom identified as ecofeminists' – who believed that by retreating to nature, they could, as Nancy Unger writes, 'transcend the sexism, homophobia, violence, materialism, and environmental abuse afflicting mainstream society'.<sup>37</sup> While the queer writer and scholar Catriona Sandilands acknowledges that 'lesbian separatism was founded on essentialist constructions of gender and nature', she argues that some of these communities have 'developed, over time, a blend of lesbian principles and local environmental knowledge. This has produced a complex tradition of lesbian eco-political resistance' and a 'distinct lesbian culture of nature'.<sup>38</sup> Corinne became a central figure in Southern Oregon's lesbian separatist community, and her black-and-white photographic series *Isis* (c. 1986; pp. 36, 214–17), in which she camouflages labial imagery in tree trunks, forest clearings and sandy shores, recentring and conjoining womanist pleasure with nature, was, she argued, a 'route to claiming personal power for women'.<sup>39</sup> While the series could be read as just another set of images of woman-as-landscape, the British lesbian activist Tamsin Wilton has argued that 'Corinne's celebration of woman in the

woodland focuses on women's sexuality, the seat of female sexual pleasure. In other words, precisely what is most often erased in the woman-as-landscape genre.'<sup>40</sup>

In the intervening decades, attitudes towards gender identity, sexuality and ecology have, to paraphrase Judith Butler, been considerably troubled. However, while the gendered terms of reference have shifted in shape and meaning, artists have found that eroticism, as 'a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane', as articulated by Audre Lorde in her 1978 lecture 'Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power',<sup>41</sup> can be harnessed to re-weave ideas around queer landscapes, ecosexual erotics and ecologies across time and space. From the lesbian landscapes of Corinne to the aqueous intimacies of Anne Duk Hee Jordan's seductive technicolour film *Ziggy and the Starfish* (2018; pp. 300–303), queered eroticism has a liberatory power that cannot be constrained by normative sexual binaries and constructs. Playing out in the vast continuum of oceanic space, in Jordan's film, gelatinous sea slugs slowly but surefootedly caress each other while the dizzying colours of sea anemones' labia-like anatomy are imaged as powerfully sensual. Bobbing along to a soundtrack culled from vintage erotic films and underwater noise, Jordan's film presents the watery world as immeasurably fluid, while the porous boundaries of multispecies kinship are presented as endlessly subversive.

Queer ecologies argue for a world that operates beyond the narrow confines of gender by merging sex-positive feminism and queer community-building to invent new forms of resistance for ecological, sexual and gender justice. As Donna Haraway implores, we must strive to breathe, walk and sense towards more liveable worldings for all marginalised humans and other-than-humans.







# Earth as a Medium of Struggle

Kathryn Yusoff

## Geologic Subjects

While the concept of the Anthropocene is beginning to function as a catch-all in scientific discourse for diagnosing environmental and planetary ills, understanding the earth as a critical medium of struggle has a much longer history of engagement by women, queer and nonbinary artists. Prior to the debates about what it means to be an Anthropocene subject in rapidly changing climate and ecological environments, the long haul of geologic subjectivity was already an everyday relational reality for many who labour in and with the earth, especially the racialised poor in the afterlives of colonialism. This positionality of the 'earth-bound' is not some naturalised process of gender affinity for the earth, nor an expression of being 'part of nature', but a position of proximity that is the product of material and structural relations that have defined the epoch that 'we' are transitioning out of (the Holocene) and which configure the one 'we' are now said to be in (the Anthropocene) – namely, the earth practices and subjective practices of colonialism. These conjoined earth and subjective practices transformed the world, from river straightening, dam building and hydrological processes to the geochemical balance of carbon and nitrogen. What colonial earth practices materially fashioned was unequal environments, a terrain defined by material abundance alongside the poverty of pollution. The 'we' of humanity sits on broken ground, unevenly positioned in relation to the violence of the earth and the toxic residue of extraction.

The subterranean position of the world's racialised poor is the consequence of dominant material practices that have transformed the earth, its subsurfaces and underground spaces through the colonial division of space, place and nature. The segregation of what is designated *bios* (as preferred forms of Life) and *geos* (as extractable earth) has become the de facto mode of planetary governance, with huge implications for the distribution of wealth and harm. Anthropocene earth is made from the material effects of colonial geosciences (such as the geomorphic impacts of mining, plantations, material distributions and geochemical transformations). Colonial earth practices, in their inception and afterlives, rely on racialised geographies of power to sustain and reproduce their extractive geo-logics.

Throughout *RE/SISTERS* there are explicit engagements with and renegotiations of the uneven geographies of colonialism and the category binaries that act to separate and adjudicate on who gets to be considered a subject in the hierarchies of fully human, nonhuman, inhuman. The normative geo-logics and Western-centralisms that stabilise extraction via binaries are disrupted through the recognition of bonds of solidarity with other bodies, such as earth-bodies, ore-bodies and nonhuman bodies, and other temporalities, such as generational times, ancestral times, tidal times and anti-colonial times. The artworks and photography collected here both explore the rigidity of body forms made in the wake of colonial, patriarchal object–subject structures (such as resource, race, family, home, gender, nation-state) and propose alternative horizons of practice that reject these expressions of power and their normative forms of destruction (such as pollution, waste, gender-based violence, racisms, nuclear devastation, deforestation). Working across scales, whether at the level of gender identity or mining the earth, *RE/SISTERS* narrates a set of intimacies that do not reproduce colonial spatial relations and asks questions about how bodies are grounded as material, juridical, social, political, gendered, nationalised and sexed entities. In asking how and through what mediums a body is grounded in the earth, the artists presented here pose localised questions of solidarity within the planetary politics of embodiment and inhabitation.

What is an earthed body, an earthbound body, an aqueous body, a body as a site of violence or extraction, a boundless intergalactic body, a body of harm, a body that stands in the way, a body on the line, a magical body, a racialised body, a maternal body, a cartographic body, a body of embodied knowledge, salt of the earth, a rock in the family?

## Bodies as Earth Systems

If bodies are understood as earth systems (not just biological or corporeal entities) and as such are seen as a stratum in planetary earth processes, as well as being involved in absorbing different geochemical loads (such as in Bhopal, India, or Flint, Michigan), then to address these modes of



difference and harm, bodies must be recognised as geosocial. That is, bodies are historically situated in both social and environmental states of being that live in the wake of colonial structures of harm that mobilised around a racialised axis. Earth bodies are racialised bodies, geosocial aggregates that participate in and are vulnerable to inhuman intimacy with geologic materials (in the form of everyday exposures, environmental racisms, the legacy of pollution); they are also differentiated geosocial bodies that act on and change planetary geologic states (such as in the climate-change intensification of weather events). We might think of *earthed* bodies as active and activated bodies that negotiate boundaries and borders, a transmission force to and through the earth. In understanding how bodies are differentiated through broader geosocial processes, the question becomes: whose bodies are earthed and whose get to have an aerial view; whose bodies does violence gravitate to, and from whose does it move away? Asking whose bodies are connected to the earth or subjected to having to develop what I think of as a ‘tactics of the earth-bound’ – understood as a political act and an alternative set of environmental epistemologies that respond to the violence and possibilities for freedom within inhuman-inhumane proximities – is a means to begin to understand how the earth becomes a medium of struggle. Thinking about different kinds of earthing – of attachment to, being held towards and in a particular relation of intimacy with earth materials or events – is a route out of an imperial objectification of the earth. To understand bodies as implicated in geochemistry and the geomorphics of planetary change is to see the geologic as a medium of social struggle, which in turn allows us to shift the focus from a purely scalar perspectivism on the earth to a temporal one.

To think of bodies as earthed is to see the earth as a medium of exchange and a generative site of values – as well as a battleground for the realisation of subjective and psychic conditions for the ‘wretched of the earth’ (Frantz Fanon). If the conflation of wretched earths and racialised subjects tells us anything, it is that the easy parallels realised in these slippages between the racialised poor and degraded environments need more complicated cartographic and conceptual mappings. Processes of racialisation

and transformation of the earth, as part of the weaponisation of geology, all too often exhibit tectonic and geopolitical collisions, whereby the geological conditions of violence are made into naturalised forms of racial weathering in racist climates. To say this another way, there is nothing natural about the link between race, gender and the normalisation of environmental harm. If racialised subjects are ‘disappeared’ at sea, this is a deliberate act of geopolitics in which the sea is weaponised as a border guard.

### **Colonial Extraction: Epistemologies, Gender and Sexuality**

In the extractive practices of colonialism and their ongoing presents, distinct relations to the earth, to the narrativisation of materialism and matter, and to gendered and sexed relations emerge. In the 1954 feminist film *Salt of the Earth* (dir. Herbert J. Biberman), about zinc mining and the geologies of settler colonialism in New Mexico, the central character, Esperanza Quintero, lays out the stratigraphy of relations, confronting her husband, Ramón:

Why are you afraid to have me at your side? Do you still think you can have dignity only if I have none? ... The Anglo bosses look down on you, and you hate them for it. ‘Stay in your place, you dirty Mexican’ – that’s what they tell you. But why must you say to me, ‘Stay in *your* place.’ Do you feel better having someone lower than you? ... Whose neck shall I stand on to make me feel superior? And what will I get out of it? I don’t want anything lower than I am. I’m low enough already. I want to rise. And push everything up with me as I go ... And if you can’t understand this you’re a fool.<sup>1</sup>

What Esperanza tells us is that the dual dynamics of racialisation enact a geophysics defined by the elevation of whiteness (in the case of the mine bosses) and deformation in the subjectivity of those who are racialised. As Esperanza makes clear, exploitation within these geophysics of extraction is intersectional, that is, it is raced and gendered. In the mine, race and gender intersect as a stratigraphic relation that becomes a mode of governance – one that continues to structure sites of extraction today (for example,

