This study complicates the gendering of “mother nature,” pointing to an underlying everyday discursive formation of nature that is decidedly androcentric. The dialectic at play, a favorably forefronted gynocentric pole masking a dominant androcentric pole, problematizes past understandings of binaries and offers new ways to understand humanature. Building upon the burgeoning study of critical ecocultural dialectics, we empirically investigate nature framings in North American ocean and forest contexts. We suggest that a gynocentric greenwashing exists in discourses about “the environment,” in which communal, embodied human orientations with nature are favorably forefronted, but individuating, frontal orientations are overwhelmingly practiced. As such, everyday ecologically exultant discourses may obscure deeply embedded exploitive orientations that centrally regulate our perceptions of, and interactions with, nature.

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Many would argue that human relations with(in) nature are not what they ought to be. Global catastrophes such as climate crisis and species and habitat destruction emerge from our overwhelmingly off-balance ecocultural relations. One method of investigating problematic humanature relations is critical-cultural environmental communication scholarship. From a critical-cultural perspective, scholars are interested in probing this imbalance in order to identify, expose, and critique the material-symbolic roots of our anthropogenic global ecological predicament and explore the possible effects (Conley & Mullen, 2008; DeLuca & Slawter-Volkening, 2009; Peterson, Peterson, Peterson, Allison, & Gore, 2006).

In this study, we join this body of literature to explore a distinctly gendered imbalance at the heart of humanature relations. We hope to promote and further dialectical thinking within critical-cultural approaches to communication, specifically in the realm of environmental discourses. Our core objective is to critically assess how these ecocultural tensions are produced ideologically and communicatively, and to question their effects on sustainability.
Through the empirical investigation of androcentric (masculinity norms-centered) and gynocentric (femininity norms-centered) framings in ocean and forest contexts, we suggest that a gynocentric greenwashing exists in everyday North American discourses about “the environment.” In these discourses, we argue that a gynocentric communal and embodied human orientation to “mother nature” is favorably forefronted, yet an androcentric individuating and frontal orientation to a consumable nature is overwhelmingly practiced.

In what follows, we first explore ecocultural dialectics. We then examine scholarship that exhibits how humans construct and conceptualize nature in gynocentric and/or androcentric terms. Using two ethnographic case studies and working from a critical-cultural perspective, we identify and investigate how androcentric and gynocentric formations are constructed through two dialectically gendered orientations toward nature—frontal versus embodied and individual versus communal. Using examples from our comparative empirical interpretations, we then point to an asymmetrical androcentric–gynocentric dialectic at play in environmental relations, which may provide insight into a cultural imbalance at the center of our current ecological experiences.

**Ecocultural dialectics**

Marx, Hegel, Burke, Bakhtin, and Kierkegaard offer various perspectives on dialectics. Among such diverse standpoints, Rasmussen and Downey (1989) note common themes, including that “dialectical relationships involve tension between elements which are both competitive and complementary” (p. 67). We work from this broader conceptualization of dialectics—the simultaneously interconnected yet conflicted pulls between two forces.

Communication’s focus on dialectics has ranged from Baxter and Montgomery’s (1996) examination of relational dialectics to Grossberg’s (1979) exploration of Marxist rhetoric and dialectics. Within culture and communication studies, Martin and Nakayama (1999) call on scholars to think dialectically to better understand the dynamics of cultural life. In this vein, Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue that a dialectical perspective helps highlight social life as “a dynamic knot of contradictions, a ceaseless interplay between contrary or opposing tendencies” (p. 3, emphasis in original).

Within critical and cultural explorations, studies highlight the power inherent within dialectical tensions in constructing the “other” (e.g., Kawai, 2005) or in constructing one’s own identity (e.g., Milstein & Manusov, 2009). Environmental communication scholars expand such questioning to investigate constructions of humanature relations, identifying dialectical pulls within environmental discourses, such as anthropocentric (exclusive human-centered) versus ecocentric (inclusive nature-centered) framings. Marafiote and Plec (2006) illustrate a heteroglossic feature of environmental discourses, arguing that contrasting ideologies can be found within individuals’ single utterances.
In examining human orientations to nature, Milstein (2009) identifies three specific dialectics: mastery-harmony, othering-connection, and exploitation-idealism. While harmony, connection, and idealism are often favorably foregrounded, mastery, othering, and exploitation orientations tend to hold more sway in everyday and institutional communication. In effect, the tension between two poles in an environmental dialectic can result in the widespread appearance of sustainability, while anthropocentric power-over orientations dominate.

Indeed, environmental communication scholars argue that dominant Western discourses largely position humans and the nonhuman world in an ideologically and materially oppositional culture–nature binary (Conley & Mullen, 2008; Dickinson, 2011; Schutten, 2008). Eschewing dialectical thinking for this binary lens, humans often perceive themselves as separate from and superior to nature. The binary framework helps explain how humans construct nature as other, leading to catastrophic environmental degradation.

**Gender and nature**

Within the spectrum of interdisciplinary research on gender and nature, ecofeminism links environmentalism and feminism to focus on ways in which nature is constructed as feminine (e.g., both nurturing and motherly yet simultaneously actively objectified and exploited). As such, ecofeminists bring attention to “the way gender, often unconsciously, is deeply implicated in the ecological crisis—not only in the macro-level pathologies of ecological devastation but also in the minute practices and assumptions of daily life” (Curry, 2005, p. 96).

Ecofeminists address material-symbolic constructions of difference and the domination of nature. In this regard, ecofeminists critique not only society, but also “radical” environmental movements such as deep ecology, arguing even such movements separate humans from nature and homogenize nature by creating a universal model (Bullis, 1996; Plumwood, 1997). As such, some environmental movements are rooted in, and reproduce, the very system they wish to change by assuming that “differences warrant hierarchical ordering of differences, and hierarchical ordering of differences warrants subordination of those placed lower on hierarchies by those placed higher” (Bullis, 1996, p. 124).

Bullis (1996) argues that “ecofeminism, by considering gender, and the feminist focus on ‘other’ and difference, as a central axis, has the potential to destabilize and repattern environmental discourse” (p. 145). Plumwood (1997) further highlights ecofeminism’s liberatory aims, illustrating how exclusionary and oppressive ideological frameworks, such as androcentrism or ethnocentrism, parallel anthropocentrism. These parallels are not by chance, as centrist thinking breeds and sustains further centrisms.

Important, yet less frequently studied, is masculinity in environmental discourses (Connell, 1990; Rogers, 2008; Stoddart & Tindall, 2011). In examining the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and environmentalism, for instance, Rogers (2008)
analyzes television advertisements that symbolically link environmentally destructive practices of meat consumption and SUV-driving with masculinity, taking advantage of the “crisis in masculinity” to sell destructive nature consumption. This points to a broader link between largely masculine systems of globalized neoliberal economic production that have concurrently marginalized women and nature (Merchant, 1995; Shiva, 1988). Thus, masculinist tendencies, and the patriarchal “master mentality,” are closely aligned with modernism and the resultant capitalist and technoscientific exploitation of nature (Curry, 2005).

In investigating gender and nature, many scholars examine value-laden hierarchically arranged dualisms and dialectics, such as humanity–nature, male–female, and reason–emotion. In each, the first category is more valued and the second category’s “lower” role is to serve the needs of the “higher” category (Curry, 2005). Put differently, the marked “lower” category renders the “higher” category “invisible and natural” (Saukko, 2006, p. 136). To these, we introduce the androcentrism–gynocentrism dialectic. Gilman (1914) first described androcentrism as male-centered social practices that normalize and universalize masculinity and position everything else as other and deviant. To these, we introduce the androcentrism–gynocentrism dialectic. Gilman (1914) first described androcentrism as male-centered social practices that normalize and universalize masculinity and position everything else as other and deviant. In contrast, gynocentrism centers and celebrates norms of femininity.

In the androcentric–gynocentric dialectic, culturally constructed prototypical masculine and feminine orientations to nature can appear to coexist. For example, Littlefield (2010) complicates broad-sweeping ecofeminist claims that deer hunting is a unilaterally violent form of domination of nature and women. Instead, Littlefield points to multiple masculinities, where male hunters can incorporate feminine values (e.g., compassion, communal friendship development, and nature appreciation) into the largely masculine hobby. However, as we argue in this paper, even though gynocentric values may be favorably expressed, androcentrism ultimately may be privileged.

Similarly, the emerging field of queer ecology studies questions human-constructed gendered nature dualisms (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010). As such, queer ecology explores and resists heteronormative framings of nature and retheorizes human-nature relations, mostly by “challenging heteroecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual gender positions” (p. 22). In what follows, we join ecofeminist and queer ecology studies questioning to illustrate, and in the end to attempt to alternatively conceptualize, the androcentric–gynocentric ecocultural dialectic. To do so, we first examine the two tensions that we argue are key androcentric–gynocentric dialectic elements, frontal versus embodied and individual versus communal orientations to nature.

**Frontal versus embodied orientations**

Humans use the body to relate within/to nature, a practice that is culturally constructed and mediated in gendered ways. Gaze and ocularcentrism (favoring of vision) play a central role in frontally orienting humans to nature, and a number of scholars critically explore and critique frontal orientations (Berger, 1980; Foucault, 1977; Kaplan, 1997). Foucault’s (1977) Panopticon illustrates how a human
one-way subjective gaze in ocularcentric cultures enables prototypically androcentric orientations of hierarchy and domination. In humanature relations, the favoring of the gaze can privilege a frontal orientation to nature that distances and objectifies (Dickinson, 2011; Milstein, 2009).

Brown (1986) identifies and problematizes ocularcentric cultures’ primary use of “tunnel vision” or the “preconditioned tendency to look for one thing or set of things in the environment to the exclusion of all others” (p. 36). In contrast, embodied orientations use a more immersed multisensory perceiving to relate to/within nature (Abram, 1997; Carbaugh, 1999). Similar to ocularcentrism, Behnke (1999) describes “detentive gaze,” a frontal orientation that encourages separateness, competitiveness, and potential conflict. Behnke argues, with mindful practice, one can shift from detentive to contentive, where one corporeally and emotionally inhabits the gaze and experiences a primary and inclusive (vs. removed and exclusionary) way of seeing that senses organismic connectedness and solidarity.

Abram (1997) argues our senses were formed in reciprocity with and tie us to the earth; by acknowledging and remaining aware of how we sense and are sensed, we can reconnect in ongoing ecological and emotional interchanges. Alaimo (2009) further argues for feminist transcorporeal orientations to nature, where material-symbolic borders between entities are transgressed and one’s emerging perception of vulnerability informs a new environmental ethic. Whereas frontal practices are more one-sided and distancing, an embodied orientation is more mutual and involves connecting and being connected.

**Individual versus communal orientations**

Environmental issues often are situated within a Western episteme that largely promotes individual framing, in which nature is understood through singular parts or objects. Numerous scientific perspectives use individuating approaches, such as atomistic frameworks within molecular biological systems (Mickunas & Pilotta, 1998). Opie and Elliot (1996) argue that the scientific method in itself is an objectifying lens. Additionally, the field of natural history has long discovered, described, and cataloged nature in individual units and parts, similar to the objectification of female bodies in parts. From a gendered perspective, an individual orientation is further problematic because it obscures interconnectedness and highlights the rational individual.

Milstein (2011) complicates this argument, pointing to ways scientific individuating can protect aspects of nature, such as an endangered species; she argues this powerful individual orientation, however, must be combined with an equally powerful communal, or ecocentric, lens to restore ecosystems. A communal orientation emphasizes interdependence and connection, working within and among humans and nonhuman entities and systems—experiencing the proverbial forest for the trees. Concerned with individual and centric orientations, Bullis (1996) promotes an ecofeminist communal orientation based on solidarity, where the world is understood as a web rather than a hierarchy. Instead of totalizing and objectifying, Bullis’s perspective involves incorporating multiplicity and is grounded in material
lives; difference is not erased (nor hierarchically arranged), but is instead maintained, appreciated, and incorporated.

**Gendering nature in ocean and forest contexts**

We offer two ethnographic case studies to provide related, but varied, contexts to explore gendered productions of nature. Milstein has spent several summers as a participant observer studying communication in the world’s highest concentration of whale watch tourism, located in transnational Canadian and American Pacific waters. Endangered orcas are the main focus, but other whales, including humpbacks and grays, encounter tourism as well. Milstein observes a variety of communicators, including tourists and whale insiders (such as tour operators, tour naturalists, marine monitors, scientists, whale advocates, volunteers, and island locals), both on the water in tour or monitor boats and on land at public shores. Milstein also records extensive written texts, including tourism marketing materials and educational signage and exhibits.

Dickinson has spent five months as a participant observer studying communication in North Carolina’s Educational State Forest (NCESF) system—six forest sites designed to teach forestry management practices, conservation, and environmental topics to K-12 schoolchildren. The communicators Dickinson observes include students, teachers, parents, and chaperones bussed into the forests for fieldtrips. Dickinson also works alongside and interviews forest service personnel and documents texts, such as forest service literature, teaching materials, and curricula. Dickinson also documents the materiality of the forests, including trees, trails, outdoor classrooms, exhibits, and “talking-tree” and “talking-rock” trails, where visitors press a button near a tree or rock and hear a human voice recording speak as the tree or rock.

Within each site, communication focuses on nature representation. Staff communicators, such as whale tour naturalists and state forest rangers, represent nature to visitors often via “edutainment” discourses, in which information and education are melded with, and at times subordinated to, entertainment, a process some staff communicators accept and some lament. Visitors negotiate these representations and offer some of their own. Differences between the case sites are also important to our analysis. Transnational tourism focused on endangered whales provides ecocultural constructions of nature within an oceanic sphere with wild animals. For terrestrial humans, oceans often represent a loss of human control and a venture into the wild unknown. Out of their element, humans often encounter wild whales as magnificent and ephemeral, serving no utilitarian purpose for humans, but instead more intrinsically valued as a way to know nature. In contrast, the extensively managed timber state forests are known manufactured entities on solid ground. Through forest conservation management monoculture practices, human control is extreme, and visitors are taught to value trees largely as human resources.

Despite extant literature’s long-problematizing of a predominantly gynocentric cultural framing of nature, in our case studies, we each separately note an
androcentric–gynocentric dialectic, in which the gynocentric is favorably forefronted, but the androcentric is decidedly privileged. This overarching dialectic is most strikingly illustrated by tensions within individual versus communal and frontal versus embodied orientations. To highlight what we argue is an overarching quality of these gendered ecocultural tensions, we present our interpretations from the two sites in conversation with one another, referring to ourselves in these sections in the first person with Milstein as researcher in the ocean site and Dickinson in the forest site.

**Individual versus communal**

In the first tension, nature is conceptualized as individuated versus communally enmeshed. Communal framings are forefronted in nature discourse in each site. At the same time, we illustrate that individual framings are naturalized, and far more prevalent, in everyday discourse.

*Communal*

The main focus of whale tourism along this transborder Pacific Coast is Southern Resident Killer Whales (SRKW), three family pods of wild orcas that comprise about 85 whales. Tourists often learn that these orcas are considered endangered precisely because their community inhabits a human-battered oceanic ecosystem. The best guides teach that SRKWs, the first orca community in the world to be declared endangered, are dying off due to three ecologically communal connections.

First, as top predators in the ocean, orcas bioaccumulate human pollution, making them literally toxic (Ross, 2006). Mother orcas pass concentrated doses of human-made toxic chemical pollutants to their calves through breast milk, resulting in infant deaths; most firstborns do not survive. Because male orcas cannot communally pass on toxins, toxins likely kill off most before they reach reproductive age and further severely endanger this population. Second, extreme human disruption of salmon habitat and overfishing has dangerously diminished SRKW’s main diet of salmon. Third, SRKWs share the waters with increased human vessel traffic, including tour boats, yachts, commercial fishing boats, oil tankers, cruise ships, and even low-flying whale-seeking airplanes, which increases hungry orcas’ stress levels, decreases their surface breathing time, and likely cuts off some access to their already decreased prey (Ashe, Noren, & Williams, 2010; Noren, 2011; Noren, Johnson, Rehder, & Larson, 2009). The interconnectedness of humans, whales, salmon, waters, and ecosystem is further highlighted when, in such a human-distressed ecosystem, starving orcas must turn from community to individual, turning within to their own toxic blubber for sustenance, likely accelerating premature deaths.

This ecosystemic-scale communal lens on the whales has possible restorative qualities, as it highlights human effects on whales and ecosystem and reciprocal interrelatedness. As stated, however, only the most effective guides relay endangered species information within a communal systemic framework. Most guides list risks using governmental/scientific jargon and passive syntax that can obscure interconnection and human agency. Many also omit mention of vessel traffic, a risk
which, when noted aloud to tourists, could point to whale watch boats as potential
problems. Here is one such agent-less, jargon-dependent, and vessel risk-avoidant
statement from a tour naturalist to tourists: “The whales are on the endangered
species list primarily because of pollution and prey stock reduction.”

While ecological communal framings of orca endangered status are exceptional,
most guides do represent orcas themselves as highly communal. This consistent
framing emerges from orcas’ matriarchal social organization. As matriarchs, the
orcas manifest an appealing type of community to some Westerners in the cultural
undoing of hierarchical patriarchy. The eldest maternal female leads her extended
family until her death (the eldest matriarch of the three pods turned 100 during this
writing). Calves grow up but never leave their mothers. The communal meaning of
matriarchy dawns on visitors as they realize the giant male whales they see are not
leaders, but are family and community members, sons, brothers, cousins, and uncles
of whales with whom they swim. One tour operator notes:

We’re born to leave our parents and they are born to stay. A lot of time when the
mom dies the son dies shortly after. Can you imagine the heartbreak? There is
some kind of bond there that we can’t even feel or understand. Everything they
do is related to that family. She is the matriarch and what she says goes.
Unquestionably.

In another example, a naturalist asserts, “These whales are matriarchal, meaning
that the whales stay with the moms for life, forever,” to which a female tourist with
baby on knee replies, “I love it!”

Guides often accentuate the tight-knit community aspect of the SRKW family
pods by explaining recent scientific findings that each pod has its own distinct
dialect, despite that pods often temporarily intermingle. Thus, a trained ear can
distinguish a whale’s pod by communal calls alone. Visitors often positively respond
to representations of whales as communally in close communication and matriarchal.
One tourist notes:

I don’t think there’s any other animal we see that so strikes the awe of humans.
Why? They’re so social. I think it’s something we can relate to. And they’re
always in communication, no matter how far they are from each other . . . It’s
one of the few true matriarchs in the animal world, too. The females are the
absolute king [sic], the ruler.

Tourists, too, as we see above, often lexically impose a culturally ingrained
androcentric lens upon this aspect of orca community. Some naturalists correct this
perception, reimposing a gynocentric lens. One naturalist states, “Female whales are
the route finders. It’s not a hierarchy. Humans are always looking for that—who is
dominant. With whales it’s horizontal.”

In forests, communal relationships typically are forefronted through depictions
of nature as a holistic ecosystem, a communal family, and a shared home. Rangers
and educators frequently communicate to visitors that trees live within a harmonious
ecosystem, where all life forms work together. Throughout the lessons, many rangers use “community,” “shared,” and “connection” to depict relationships within nature. In talking-tree recordings, messages highlight forests as a community of living things that make up an ecosystem that animals and plants mutually share. For example, one loblolly pine recording states: “Did you know a forest is more than just a lot of trees? It is a community of living things that are all tied together with the environment.”

Trees often are depicted through family relationships, which link individual trees to interconnected groups. Trees are presented as “parents” and seeds are their “children,” as one recording explains: “usually trees like me will grow only from seeds—like the young trees behind me. Since they came from seeds in my cones, you might say they’re my children!” Trees are positioned as “cousins,” “relatives,” “ancestors,” and “kinfolk” with other trees, nearby and far away. One shagbark hickory recording explains: “I have 20 cousins that live in the United States. One of my cousins lives in Mexico and two live in the Orient,” while another tree recording asks: “Did you know that I have only one other relative in the entire world? He is called Chinese Tulip tree and lives in Central Asia.” In a forest exhibit that teaches how humans produce materials such as turpentine and tar from trees to build ships—the longleaf pine recording positions the tree alongside “ancestors” and “grandparents:”

Let me start by telling you a little about my ancestors . . . They were tapped for turpentine and logged for lumber . . . Why if it weren’t for my grandparents in the 1700s, ships from England would not have sailed.

While family associations are emphasized, they are primarily compared to human relationships and practices. One example appears in an oak tree recording: “Like you and your family, we trees have first and last names . . . my last name is Oak, which places me in a specific family, called a genus. My first name makes me different from other members of my family.” While this quotation appears to highlight communal links, the heteropatriarchal familial naming practice assumption is quite stark. Here, trees in a family take on the same last name—a distinctly human androcentric practice that can privilege hetero normative Western family units of reproduction (Sturgeon, 2010).

Additionally, forests are depicted as providing a communal “home” for nature, and the forest service protects this home. Through this home metaphor, forests are said to provide home-like necessities for trees and wildlife, such as shelter, growth, food, enjoyment, and nourishment. To illustrate, in one lesson, when children begin poking at a millipede on a trail, the ranger says:

This is their home so we shouldn’t be picking them up and trying to grab them and poking at them, should we? It would be like me going to your house and poking at you like this [ranger pokes a child]. Would you get annoyed with me if I did that all the time?

Here, the ranger encourages students to recognize the millipede is home and should be left alone.
Similarly, the forest service and NCESF sites are depicted as protectors of this home. One talking-tree recording explains: “We’re pretty proud of our home here because our forest and all its components—soil, water, and wildlife—are kept healthy through the Forest Service’s active involvement.”

By positioning forests through communal relationships, ecosystems, family associations, and home, life forms are engaged in cooperative symbiotic relationships. Yet, these associations are predominately anthropocentrically positioned, pointing to the complex and sometimes contradictory practice of depicting nature as collective but centered around humanity.

**Individual**

Despite the communal framing of trees and whales, we found both sites privileged individual framing. This individual orientation is so prevalent, in fact, we argue it is difficult for people within these sites to perceive the interconnectedness that is core to comprehending ecological connection. We do not argue that individual framings are always problematic; instead, when dialectically positioned with communal framings in a way that decidedly privileges individual perspectives, more holistic approaches can be obscured. In what follows, we point to two ways in which individual is favored over communal—first, a strong iconic focus on whales and trees that overshadows ecosystems and, second, a lexical individualizing via objectifying and gendering pronouns.

**Iconic**

Communicators produce both whales and trees as iconic in our sites. The Canadian–U.S. Pacific whale tourism industry strongly markets orcas and draws tourists who may care little about other nature they encounter on their tours. Whales, however, can become an iconic touchstone for nature, leading some people to feel they are experiencing nature at a deep level. Also, as top oceanic predators, orcas could serve as precious ecological markers in their bioaccumulation and embodied manifestation of endangered communal ecosystems. Along this vein, one whale advocate argues that, in their precarious state, endangered orcas “represent our waking awareness of disappearing and destroying nature, of our subduing culture.” Yet, instead of increased ecological consciousness, touristic focus on whales often becomes an individuating tunnel vision. Another whale advocate argues that though whales, as charismatic megafauna, are presented as a potential doorway to a deeper comprehension of “our link with nature” they become “the entirety that the doorway opens up to.” Whales’ individuating iconic star status thus can serve as dead end instead of doorway to complex understandings of ecological relationships, separating species from ecosystem and obscuring communal interdependence (Milstein, 2008).

Similarly, in forests, communicators privilege individualized framings of trees by focusing on the singular tree as an iconic actor who plays a leading role for humans and by linking trees to businesses and products. While trees offer resources for animals and plants, their main duty as utilitarian icons is to provide objects and services for
people—lumber, soil erosion prevention, water conservation, and esthetic beauty. Companies and industries are incorporated into forest narratives, such as trees’ utility to commercial timberlands and timber extraction, tobacco, textile, mining, and furniture making. A tree’s body is broken down further into individualized and usable parts—the canopy that acts as an “air conditioner” and reduces heat; roots that prevent flooding; and chemical ingredients that go into food, medicine, coffee, and even Mountain Dew. One recording positions trees as “smog eaters”—devices that help consume human-induced smog. Moreover, “fast growing” species such as the loblolly pine are particularly iconized, as the quicker trees grow, the more they can produce. While these discourses, to some degree, appear to position trees within an ecosystem to which humans and nature belong, individualizing trees anthropocentrically as icons that produce products and services also serves to dwarf communal orientations. Instead of centering forests as holistic ecosystems of which many entities are a part, humans are the center, for which individual tree units and parts provide plywood, paper, charcoal, furniture, newspapers, toys, chewing gum, turpentine, gun powder, and rayon—building blocks of industry and industrial output.

**Gendering and objectifying pronoun use**

While a societal purge of the universal “he” and gender-specific language (e.g., replacing mankind with humankind) has commenced, we find the same is not true in language about nature. With whales, the use of “he” and “it” pronominalization often is highly problematic, misrepresenting sex and sexuality and effectively erasing female whales. Those charged with representing whales stress accurate pronoun use. In contrast to visitor and scientific predominant use of “it” or “he,” most whale insiders use accurate sex as a first point of identification, judging the sex of whales by fin height (adult male fins can reach six feet and female fins half that size). Naturalist guides often teach visitors this identification method. However, after guides introduce nearby whales as female, most tourists continue to identify those whales as “it” and, secondarily, “he.”

This objectification of whales via pronominalization further is reflected in published scientific texts originating from some on-site whale scientists. Widely adhered to scientific and governmental writing norms of using “it” when referring to a wild animal persist, despite the pronoun’s lack of detail or accuracy. Some argue, to be published, scientists must use “it” instead of an accurate sex-pronoun. Such a norm, reproduced by some researchers, who often establish close caring relations with whales, discursively denies sexed uniqueness and also subject-to-subject interspecies relationship, privileging an objectifying lens.

Such dominant androcentric “it” and “he” pronominalization corresponds with reproduced modes of heteronormativity in local exhibit representation. The Whale Museum on San Juan Island, for instance, displays a photograph featuring a belly-up whale’s erection protruding from the ocean, with the accompanying cutline:

The primary indication of sexual activity is adult male erection during belly-up surfacing. Females simultaneously surface belly-up alongside courting males, as
though trying to evade the male’s advances . . . Sexual behavior between males is seen more frequently than actual mating, and may represent play or displays of dominance more than direct sexual interaction.

Here, androcentric and heteronormative framing is rife with males on their back signaling masculine sexual action and females in the same position signaling prim and proper feminine avoidance of male “courting” and “advances.” At the same time, erections shared among male whales, though represented as more frequent, are positioned as either “play” or moves of dominance, effectively erasing a spectrum of nonheteronormative whale sexual behaviors and reinstating a hierarchical competitive androcentric lens.

While orca sexuality clearly does not abide by dominant cultural norms of many Western humans, tour operators rarely draw tourist attention to whale sexuality that is not heteronormative. In contrast, among themselves, whale insiders often favor accurate representations. In the following, an orca researcher tells a volunteer about a day of data collection:

Researcher: We saw every behavior that day in a short time. Then there was this bunch of males rolling over each other with their penises out. At one point, one of their penises ended up in another one’s open mouth, sliding through.

Volunteer: I guess whales can be homosexual, too.

Researcher: Absolutely. I was like, right on. They don’t have all the social hang-ups of us humans. They have it figured out a little better than we do. Also, younger males have sex with older females.

Volunteer: They have a better social system.

In this insider setting, outside of tourist earshot, orca sexual norms are not only discussed, but distinguished as superior to human. This is in stark contrast to the overwhelming privileged use of “it” or “he” in the average tourist exchange and the general avoidance of nonnormative sexuality.

In forests, individualizing also occurs through androcentric objectification and gendering pronominalization, such as representing trees predominately as “he.” In reality, trees are sexed and reproduce in a variety of complex ways. For instance, in dioecious reproduction, one tree that contains only pollen (male germ cells) fertilizes a separate tree that contains only ovules (female germ cells), creating a seed. Monoecious trees (such as conifers) have separate male and female flowers on the same tree. Other reproduction characteristics exist, such as a tree that contains both male and female parts within the same flower (a hermaphrodite). In tree reproduction, there is no clear male–female binary.

Despite this complexity, trees are most often represented as and reduced to “he/male,” and not “she/female” or “it.” This androcentric individualizing practice
in the forest education setting takes the form of a predominant use of male-gender pronouns to disproportionately refer to trees, nature, and animals as “he.” One example is seen in a sweetgum tree recording:

The loblolly pine behind me started growing in my shade in 1954, and like all pines, had to find sunlight to keep growing. That’s why he is leaning toward the sunlight and has all his limbs on one side. He won’t make very good lumber, but he’s a good neighbor.

In another example, in a class on insects, a teacher constantly uses “he” to describe an adult insect even though the teacher indicates that the insect is a female who gives birth.

Pronouns and gender characteristics are incorporated into the talking trails. Of the 61 talking stations, 36 use “male” voices, while 16 use “female.” A “cover information sheet” shows how forest officials assigned gendered voices for the recordings:

1. White oak: male, older if possible, since this is the oldest tree on our trail.
2. Sweetgum: female, age should be considered middle-aged, but not gruff.
3. Flowering dogwood: female, age should be young, mid-twenties.
4. Loblolly pine: male, age should be in mid-thirties.
5. Yellow poplar: male.

Gendering also surfaces in the recordings, such as the sweetgum recording that notes: “These big ole trees around me just won’t let a little gal like me get much sun in the forest. But I do like the shade and I’m patient, so I can wait.”

In the above examples, sex attribution is not simply about designating trees as male or female, but as particular kinds of gendered bodies (Butler, 1993). Further, pronominalization combines with other syntactical and lexical choices to polish a decidedly androcentric and anthropocentric lens, exemplified in the American beech recording:

Still others [trees] have been removed to provide man with foods, fibers and medications. Above all they have provided him with wood. Prehistoric man used woods to make his first spear, his first boat, and his first wheel. . . . Living trees are as valuable to man as are tree products because they help conserve natural resources.

Here, where nature is perceived and used for discursively masculinized gendered utility, parallels between anthropocentrism and androcentrism may be particularly visible.

Frontal versus embodied
In ocean and forest contexts, communicators often favorably express and appear most affected by their embodied and multisensory experiences with nature. These transcorporeal orientations (Alaimo, 2009), those which transgress material-symbolic
boundaries between human and nature, are often discussed with appreciation or longing. Yet, in daily practice, study participants largely communicate a frontal orientation that reproduces human–nature separation and relies on vision as a singular entitled and consumptive sense.

Embodied

An embodied orientation to nature is palpable in communication about whales breathing, an experience that is auditory and at times olfactory. Whale breath is loud, almost percussive, and when close enough, strongly fishy. Whale insiders often speak of loving hearing whales breathe, of there being “no sweeter sound,” and often joke of not washing clothes after a whale exhales onto them.

Naturalists sometimes sensitize tourists to listen for whale breath by being quiet and paying attention as the boat approaches whales. Visitors at times talk of deeper realizations that come with sensing a whale breathing, such as one volunteer who says, “I love that breathing. It’s kind of humbling at the same time. Huge and majestic, and they’re just breathing.” A tourist provides another example: “It’s the hearing that makes it like it’s a sentient creature there,” to which another tourist adds, “Life is so mediated now, especially through sight. It’s the mammal part, the part we share, before it dives back into the ocean.” This sensory experience of breath introduces dissonance to many who previously experienced representations of cartoon whale “spouts.” The perception of the blowhole not as fountain, but as material signifier of breath helps reorient one to another embodied mammal.

Tour boats with hydrophones (underwater microphones) mediate another embodied experience. In calm conditions, a tour operator can lower a hydrophone and passengers hear orcas communicate. The physics of water make sound the primary modality in which information is carried—thus one is able to suddenly encounter messages within the ocean. Like the experience of whales breathing, the hydrophone consistently shifts frontal, or detentive, gaze to contentive gaze (Behnke, 1999), moving one corporeally into the water. The first time I hear orcas through the hydrophone, I record in my fieldnotes: “We can hear them! I feel it inside more hearing them, an expansion in my chest and heart, more of a wholeness within, not just a frontal seeing experience, a whole experience of being near them.” Around me, passengers exclaim, “I’m afraid to breathe.” “Listen! Yow!” “Oh! I hear them!” “They’re magnificent!”

Similarly, an embodied orientation to nature is forefronted in forest settings. Dominant messages in the sites, and in environmental education curricula in general, position children as having a lack of exposure to nature and promote multisensory embodied approaches to reconnect them. Rangers in the site use an environmental education curriculum—the American Forest Foundation’s “Project Learning Tree”—that calls for bringing students experientially into nature and promoting hands-on lessons. The curriculum encourages students to experience forests, providing opportunities to see, feel, smell, and experience nature. The
importance of using one’s senses is reiterated throughout the forests, such as one talking-tree recording that instructs the visitor:

With your eyes you can discover the different shapes and sizes of trees. With your hands you can discover how the bark feels or how some leaves feel smooth and others feel fuzzy. With your nose you can smell the aromas of pines or a black birch. With your ears you can hear rustling in the breeze, and birds singing in the treetops.

Another recording highlights the communicative dimension of sensing:

Please continue to enjoy a quiet walk in the forest, and pause to listen to what it has to “say.” Any natural setting has much to communicate. We just need some “sensercize” to tone up our senses.

Educational practices in the forest, such as acquiring, studying, and investigating, call on children to use their bodies and senses. In classes, students watch rangers collect tree ring samples and often touch and smell the samples, and they use nets to catch, touch, identify, and then release water life. Children excitedly dip their hands in water pulp when making paper and touch and smell the damp paper as it dries. Rangers lead students on trails to collect and identify leaves and tape them to collection books. In interviews, rangers state that these kinds of sensory lessons are important ways for students to experience nature. In effect, in the forest sites, multisensory embodied experiences are promoted as ideal ways to connect with nature.

Frontal

While participants and curricula appear to favor such multisensory embodied experiences, frontal orientations are consistently privileged. In “wildlife watching,” and specifically “whale watching,” the name and materiality of the practice positions humans first and foremost as frontally oriented, vision-focused audience. Communicators on boat and shore overwhelmingly speak of the “view” they “get” of whales and whether others, on boat or shore, are “getting better views.” In daily communication, many naturalists praise tour captains for positioning passengers close enough for “great views.” One tourist illustrates a frontal ocularcentric orientation in her description of being on a boat and having a very close whale encounter, only to regret she “missed” the experience because she did not see it:

I was focused on one side and an orca came up a few feet from the boat on the other side. The orca sprayed us! That was the coolest sound ever. Just to hear that and be sprayed by a whale (smile, hands clap to face) ... We were so angry we missed it.

Similarly, many tourists who do not see whales or see them only at a distance express disappointment based on expectations created by tourism marketing materials that picture whale close-ups. One tourist stands at “Whale Watch Park” on San Juan
Island in the United States holding a brochure in front of the ocean, pointing to a photo of orcas traveling amid kayaks at the same park, and says, “Where’s that? I want to see that. I see the kayaks. I heard the whales were here between June and September.”

The consumptive stance of ocularcentrism is reproduced in additional ways at different scales. At the scale of the tourist, the ever-present camera favors spectacle-seeking and a drive to reproduce professional nature images. This nearly impossible task often turns visitors, at first enthralled by their embodied experience of being close to whales, into frontally oriented highly frustrated people who at times swear at the whales for messing up their shots. At the scale of the industry, some companies offer “guaranteed whale sightings,” which lends to the perception of guaranteed watchable wild nature.

In the forests, while communicators stress the importance of appreciation and reverence for embodied experience, they chiefly engage in and promote the importance of frontal ocularcentric practices. Educators organize and teach lessons that primarily evoke the controlled use of sight. When students express a desire to experience something using other senses, as they frequently do, they are often refocused on watching. For example, before one lesson, a student asks, “Are we going to be holding any live animals today?” to which the ranger replies, “No, unfortunately we don’t have any.” The ranger then teaches an hour-long class where students are encouraged to look at things and to keep their eyes on the rangers and the lesson. Interestingly, directly after the ranger’s statement, I see a caterpillar on the ground, pick it up, hold it, smell it, and note its striking turquoise colors.

Instead of encouraging direct embodied experiences, rangers, recordings, and curricula typically describe nonocular senses for the visitor, telling the visitor how something sounds, smells, and tastes. For example, the sourwood recording notes, “They [sourwood leaves] have an unpleasant smell when broken and they have a bitter taste—that’s where my name ‘sourwood’ comes from.” Sourwood leaves are notoriously sour, yet, while safe to chew, rangers discourage visitors from tasting them. In an interview, one ranger compares how s/he was taught to identify a sourwood and how this practice has changed:

> You chew it and it tastes like a Granny Smith apple. Well, we can’t mention that to the kids anymore because they would do it. [It’s] the funniest thing, you’d turn around after you’d done that and they’re all pulling it off any tree and we thought, oh no, you can’t do that.

Frontal ocularcentric privileging is also found in the number of sensory descriptors and commands used in talking trails. For instance, in the talking-rock trail, sight is directly discussed 62 times (see is used 33 times and look 29). In contrast, listen is used seven times and hear once. Feel is mentioned once, as are touch and taste. This pattern is similar in the talking-tree recordings. In these frontal ocularcentric examples, suggestions and commands to look and see, and the general discouraging of touching, tasting, or smelling, inform an overarching detached and distanced orientation to nature.
Reimagining the androcentric–gynocentric dialectic

Many cultures frame and perceive nature as “mother nature” and “mother Earth.” Ecofeminists argue that in Western cultures this framing may constitute, on one hand, a nurturing home that humans should respect and, on the other, an objectified product that humans can alternately exult and exploit. As Roach (1991) and Stearney (1994) argue, the use of the “mother” metaphor can be problematic due to ways the concept of and practices surrounding motherhood function in patriarchal societies. The present study complicates the gendering of nature, pointing to the presence of an underlying everyday discursive formation of nature that is decidedly androcentric. The dialectic at play, a favorably forefronted gynocentric pole masking a dominant androcentric pole, problematizes past understandings of binaries and opens up new ways to understand humanature.

Ecofeminists, and other scholars of ecocultural discourse, point to widespread hierarchically arranged dualisms that emphasize a more valued first category and a second category whose “lower” role is to serve the needs of the “higher,” such as in the “culture–nature” binary (Curry, 2005). The androcentric–gynocentric dialectic nuances this framework. The pole favorably forefronted is the gynocentric, while the pole with higher status is the androcentric. Consequently, in a dialectical relationship, the gynocentric pole can serve the needs of androcentrism through a green masking of largely unsustainable everyday environmental discourse. Borrowing from Saukko (2006), the “lower” but publicly favored gynocentric pole serves the needs of the “higher” and commonly practiced androcentric pole by rendering it at once both “invisible and natural” (p. 136). Indeed, this off-balance dialectic leaves the paradoxical framing of “mother nature” intact by forefronting a nurturing and respect-demanding “mother Earth” figurehead and obscuring the ruling practice of exploiting earth as product.

In our sites, the privileging of androcentrism reproduces nature objectification and distancing, disregards or erases female and transgendered orders and beings, and imposes a separating and individuating lens. When positioned in a particular dialectic relationship with gynocentrism, androcentrism can reinscribe ecocultural framings that frontally orient humans as detached from nature while separating culturally iconic whales and controlled trees from ecosystems. With such a dominant androcentric pole, in conjunction with a particularly weak gynocentric forefronting, it can be more difficult to perceive the forest for the trees, or the ocean for the whales.

The tension within the androcentric–gynocentric dialectic certainly reflects the ability of such differing poles to coexist, and reveals the “ceaseless interplay” within the “dynamic knot” of contradictions that Baxter and Montgomery (1996) argue are at the heart of social life. In particular, the gynocentric forefronting, yet the actual daily privileging of androcentrism, illustrates how the heteroglossic quality of ecocultural discourse can at times serve to mislead. Indeed, this study points to a *gynocentric greenwashing* that can camouflage overwhelmingly androcentric orientations to nature.
Extrapolating from our two North American sites, we question whether in a variety of Western cultures such a lopsided androcentric–gynocentric dialectic might exist, in which we speak of “mother nature” and favor ecocentric, or green, thought, while daily communication practices privilege and reproduce naturalized framings that frontally orient ocularcentric humans to an individuated and removed nature. What this would mean for understanding humanature experience is that everyday gynocentric environmentally exultant discourse may obscure and reproduce deeply embedded androcentric exploitive orientations that centrally regulate our perceptions of and interactions with nature.

This can be seen more broadly in Western popular culture. In fact, more obvious off-balance androcentric–gynocentric dialectics hold sway in popular nature texts (e.g., Sturgeon, 2010), such as nature documentary driving discourses of the ferocity or violent competitiveness of the “animal kingdom” or animated films that replace female-run and worked insect societies with male-focused heteronormative societies.\(^4\) Alternately, one can look to the earlier discussed governmental and scientific texts where “it” is often the only acceptable pronoun for individual endangered animals whose reproductive sexes are key to their species recovery. More broadly, one can look to anthropocentric standards of the English language where proper pronoun use for nonhumans is “it” and correct relative pronoun use is “that” or “which” (instead of “who,” a term that connotes sentience and is generally reserved for humans).\(^5\)

The cultural implications of such an off-balance androcentric–gynocentric framing are immense. Haraway (1991) speaks of animals as a mirror that humans discursively “polish” and gaze upon to perceive themselves and society. On the basis of the empirics of this study, we argue both trees and whales are similarly situated. These mirrors not only reflect but produce culture, with profound material implications for the nature at which we gaze. For whales, the androcentric obscuring of communal and embodied orientations has material repercussions—as mentioned, females inadvertently and inevitably often kill their firstborn through their human-pollutant-contaminated breast milk and young males often die likely from these same human pollutants before reproducing, further endangering populations. In forests, individualizing and frontal orientations position trees as utilitarian units and direct particular actions, such as conceptualizing trees as detached objects that humans respect but ultimately control, cut down, and exploit.

The mirror is reflective, cycling back and forth within humanature. Kinsella (2011) similarly describes a “constant loop of self-identification” that takes place within ecocultural phenomenological dialectics. Within such integral cyclic reflections, we need thorough reflexivity in order to address the ways culturally constructed gendered orientations symbolically and materially shape the natural in and outside of ourselves. If we do not plainly perceive the imbalance of the androcentric–gynocentric dialectic in our ecocultural experience, we certainly materially experience it (for instance, in the same human-created toxins we pass onto our own infants through breast milk and in the objectification and control of bodies to meet consumptive desires).
Balance needs to be regained or, better, reconceptualized. This may not mean simply finding a center within the tension between androcentrism and gynocentrism. Instead, this may mean reimagining different, anti-hierarchical models or transgender spectrums. Such arguments are not entirely new. For example, in critiquing gender essentialism in the histories of environmentalism in the 1990s, Conway and Gars (1999) asserted that more “androgynous approaches” (p. 277) to mobilize feelings about nature automatically may surface based on the emergence of more equal human social relations. Alternately, in critiquing “mother” as archetypal image of Earth, Stearney (1994) argued for a purposeful search for a powerful yet gender-neutral image that motivates humanity to environmental responsibility. We argue, however, the need for new frameworks for perceiving and practicing nature must go beyond equally weighting an androcentric versus gynocentric dialectic or neutralizing gender in ecocultural discourse. As our study interpretations demonstrate, constructions of gender are still core to environmental perception and practice, and equality in representation is not manifest.

A reimagined model can include transgendered spectrums that embrace the interrelated fluidity and multiplicity of nature. Nature, of course, provides excellent models. The ocean and forests, in their different yet constant states of change, interconnectedness, and diversity offer a starting point as does the spider’s web, a system where two dualistic poles do not exist but instead where interwoven reciprocal ways of being are understood. As Bullis (1996) helps us ask, is there a way to reconceptualize difference by calling for solidarity rather than unity? How can we let differences exist without hierarchically ranking positions and warranting subordination?

Additionally, in expanding beyond gender to integrally related sexuality, queer ecology calls for extending environmental understanding “to explicitly non-heterosexual forms of relationship, experience, and imagination as a way of transforming entrenched sexual and natural practices” (Mortimer-Sandilands & Erickson, 2010, p. 30). Orca male-on-male and older female-on-younger male sexuality and trees’ lack of a clear male–female binary or solely heterosexual reproduction, if clearly represented, begin to reimagine heteronormative framings of nature and undo dualisms. As with the queer ecology path, both orcas and trees themselves can be seen to challenge “hetero-ecologies from the perspective of non-normative sexual gender positions” (p. 22).

Reimagining humanature relations, moreover, may mean reimagining the very nature of ecocultural theories and challenging popular “solutions” to environmental problems. As Plumwood (1997) argues, “The sophisticated understanding of androcentrism, which has emerged from feminism, can help resolve some problems with the key concept of anthropocentrism, which threaten the foundations of environmental philosophy” (p. 327). This notion can be seen in our two sites, which are ostensibly dedicated to beneficially addressing and changing ecocultural relations; yet, as we illustrate here, overarching discourses in these sites ultimately simultaneously gynocentrically greenwash and help reproduce dominant culturally
constructed androcentric and anthropocentric nature orientations. Indeed, it would follow that polishing our perceptions to reflect back nature’s actual complexity calls for more broad-spectrum and ecocentric ways of perceiving.

Endnotes

1 We use compound terms, such as *ecoculture* and *humanature*, to draw attention to the dialectic nature of culturally constructed binaries and to help engage ecology—culture and human—nature in integral conversation in research as they are in life. These symbolic moves are heuristic shifts away from separating the construct “the environment” from humanity and, instead, shifts toward lexical and reciprocal intertwining of nature and culture as interrelated historical and contemporary entities, in league with Haraway’s (2008) use of “naturecultures” (Milstein, 2011; Milstein, Anguiano, Sandoval, Chen, & Dickinson, 2011).

2 In fact, orcas are not whales, but are the largest dolphin on the planet. However, common and site-specific everyday usage of “whales” to describe orcas, and their position in this study as the focus of whale watch tours, drives the usage choice in this article.

3 Nine stations were not working. Although rangers provided the typed transcripts, the gender of the voice could not be determined.

4 For instance, Dreamworks’ *Bee Movie* and *Antz* misrepresent bee and ant colonies, using male main characters and heteronormative plotlines and obscuring knowledge of predominantly female insect societies.

5 Different languages’ culturally constructed standards of usage (Chawla, 2001) help shape different types of gendering and objectification of nature. For example, in German, “dog” is a masculine word while “cat” is feminine and proper pronoun use when discussing dogs or cats in general is gendered along these grammatical lines. Future comparative case studies in which different languages are at play would help explain how language and culture reciprocally function to reproduce the gendering of nature.

References


