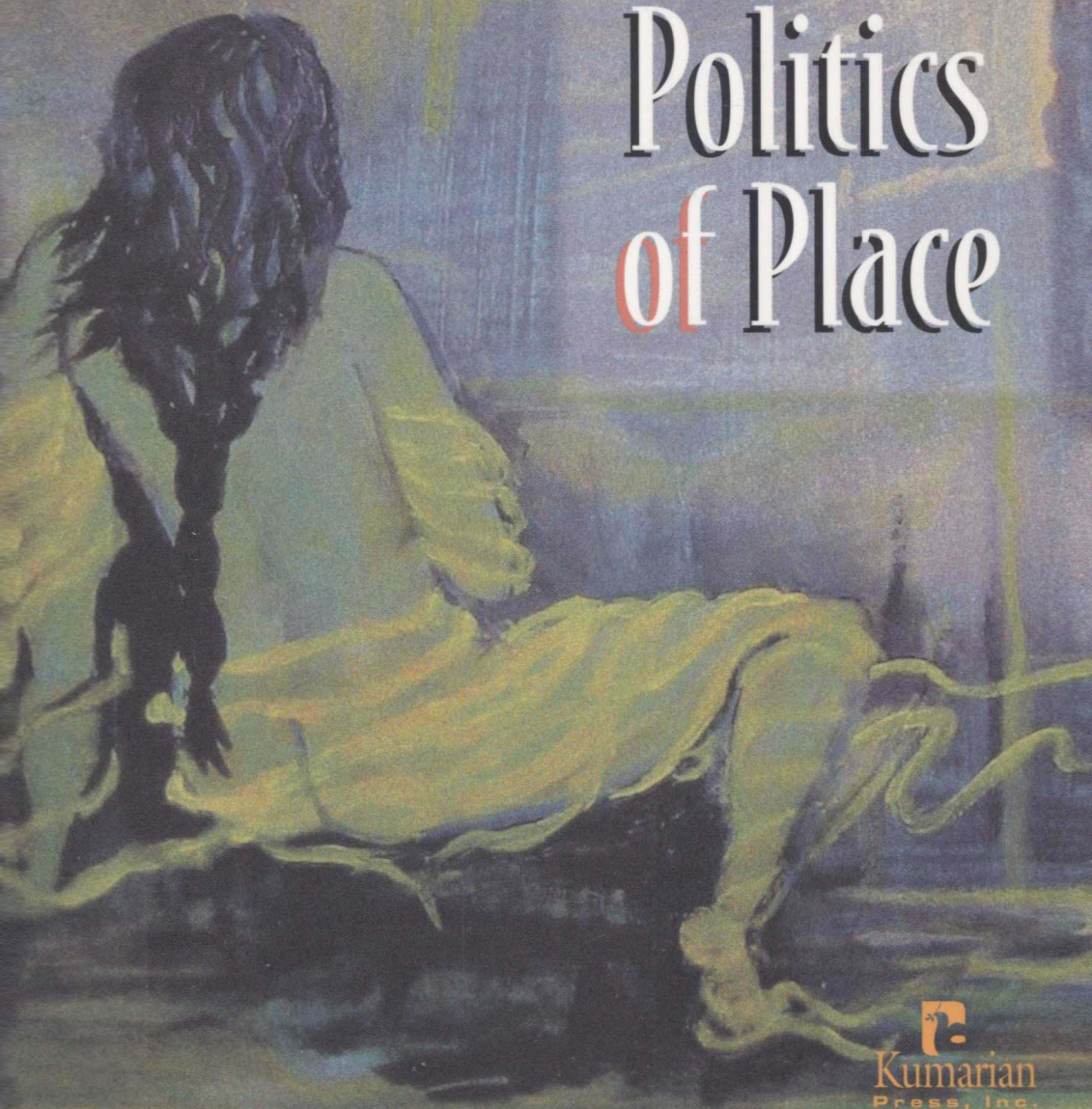


Wendy Harcourt  
and Arturo Escobar

# Women and the Politics of Place



  
Kumarian  
Press, Inc.

# WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE

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Edited by Wendy Harcourt  
and Arturo Escobar



  
**Kumarian**  
Press, Inc.

*Women and the Politics of Place*

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# WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF PLACE

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# Acronyms

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AGM	alternative globalization movement
AMC	Asian Migrant Centre
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
BSF	Bologna Social Forum
CVO	professional civil society organization
DAWN	Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era
ENDA	Environment Development Alternatives
EU	European Union
G8	Group of 8
GDP	gross domestic product
GJSM	Global Justice and Solidarity Movement
GNP	gross national product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IUCN	International Union for the Conservation of Nature
JBG	<i>Junta del Buen Gobierno</i>
KKJS	Koel Karo Jan Sanghathan
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	nongovernmental organization
Nufo	North-Karelian Youth Forum
PCN	<i>Proceso de Comunidades Negras</i>
PPA	participatory poverty assessment
SID	Society for International Development
TAMWA	Tanzania Media Women's Association

UMWA	Uganda Media Women's Association
UN	United Nations
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
WAF	Women's Action Forum
WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organization
WICEJ	Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice
WPP	Women and Politics of Place
WSF	World Social Forum
WTO	World Trade Organization

# Preface

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In today's world, places are no longer isolated, nor are they pure, static, or just traditional. Places are clearly made and affected by their encounters with global processes."

The book *Women and the Politics of Place* is the outcome of a seven-year-long exploration of the relationship among women, globalization, and place-based politics. The process of exploration had several aims. The first was to document how women in place are living their lives at different levels of resistance and creativity in the face of what are often perceived as overwhelming and largely abstract global forces. The second was to bring together some of the exciting people known to the editors who were undertaking activist research on place and women's political mobilization. The process gave the space for women and men of different cultures, intellectual and activist backgrounds, and ages who are interested in place-based politics to work together on some of the underlying theoretical issues that link place, women, body politics, environment, community, activism, justice, and alternative globalization. In this, the book built on an earlier collective research project, 'women on the 'Net,' to which some of the authors belonged.<sup>1</sup> The third was to create a group process that was mutually supportive and challenging, yet found new ways of working that were neither purely academic nor activist-oriented. Instinctively the group strove to find its own unique balance reflecting the personalities and political concerns of everyone involved, as well as the possibilities offered by

cyber networking and meeting places afforded by transnational and national networking.

Several key events marked the book's pathway. The first was a debate among the book's editors, Wendy Harcourt and Arturo Escobar, around 'global' organizing, and how to bring together feminist and ecological politics and theory in a discussion on women and globalization that cut through binary local/global divides. The result was an issue of *Development* vol. 41 no. 2, entitled "Globalism and the Politics of Place," published in June 1998. On the strength of the interest generated around that journal issue a Rockefeller Foundation grant was awarded to the Society for International Development for further research and also a meeting in 2001 where many of the authors first met. The meeting, held at the Foundation's Research and Study Center in Bellagio, Italy, set the framework for *Development* vol. 45 no. 1, "Place, Politics and Justice: Women Negotiating Globalization." This second *Development* issue was published in March 2002 in both English and Spanish and was launched at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon in April 2002. The four-day Eugene meeting held on the boundaries of the university and community attracted a diverse range of academics and activists from the community. The meeting was unusual for both academic and community meetings. It was marked by learned discussions and heated debate stimulated by reports, performances, and analysis from community activist groups, young women filming, a running commentary on the wall of the meeting room, dancing and singing, and shared personal maps and stories. The deep sense of connectedness among the group indicated that this was the beginning—not the end—of the process. A leaflet and CD were produced for wider dissemination, and members of the project were invited to various venues, including international meetings in Australia, Germany, India, the United States, Italy, and Tanzania. We also found in Kumarian Press a supportive and enthusiastic publisher.

The response of women's groups, research communities, and activists made it clear that the project was answering an important need. Equally important was the friendship that grew with the frank discussions, e-mailing, and occasional meetings among the group members. In addition the personal difficulties faced at different times by nearly all the authors, from brushes with death to the loss and critical illness of

loved ones, to major changes in life situations, were shared and recovery quietly supported. The richness of the book reflects the honesty of this process and how each of us grappled with difficult issues at personal, political, and theoretical levels.

The group continues to be positive and committed to many creative outcomes, learning from the pain as well as happiness such intimate and long-term engagement for political change brings. We are very grateful to the commitment of all of those involved in the book, from its inception to its completion. We particularly acknowledge the contributions and support of: Lourdes Arizpe, Fonu Bain-Vete, Kitt Bohn-Willeberg, Guy Bentham, Susan Garfield, Jim Lance, Sandi Morgen, Lila Rabinovich, Evelyn Schielke, Lynn Stephen, Nadra Sultan, Lynn Szwaja, and Nahda Younis Sh'ada. We hope that the book will be of use to all of those who join us in our collective, place-based activities for gender, economic, and social justice.

*Wendy Harcourt, Arturo Escobar, Laura M<sup>a</sup> Agustín, Sonia Alvarez, Lamis al-Shejni, Fatma Alloo, Marisa Belausteguigoitia, Randa Farah, Katherine Gibson, Julie Graham, Libia Grueso, Liisa Horelli, Smitu Kothari, Khawar Mumtaz, Michal Osterweil, Dianne Rocheleau, Yvonne Underhill-Sem, and Gerda Wekerle.*

## Note

1. One result of that collaboration was the edited collection, *Women@Internet: Creating cultures in cyberspace* (Harcourt 1999).

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# Introduction

## Practices of Difference: Introducing Women *and the Politics of Place*

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*Arturo Escobar and Wendy Harcourt*

**T**his book is born out of different attempts by a small group of theorists and activists to make sense of women's mobilizing transnationally around place. The core of the book comes from stories of women's actions in different parts of the world. Building on the experiences of women's mobilizations around sexual and reproductive rights, land and community, contested economic terrains, rural and urban environments, and global capital, we develop a framework that highlights the interrelations among place, gender, politics, and justice. We call this framework 'Women and the Politics of Place' (WPP).

We see this book as contributing to the analysis of political movements (the women's movement and economic and social justice movements, including those evolving around the World Social Forum processes). Here our book contributes to a dual rearticulation of politics. On the one hand, our book is a challenge to the traditional left to be aware of how the place-based practices of women involve an interrelated set of transformations around body, environment, and the economy that could provide alternative ways forward in their mobilizations, as explained by the WPP framework. For example, when opposing economic restructuring it is important to take into account factors affecting body, environment, and home that are made invisible by conventional political ideologies. On the other hand, women's groups involved in sexual, health, and reproductive rights issues could also use the language

and perspective provided by WPP to reinterpret their struggles as enmeshed in broader environmental and economic processes.

In putting this book together, the question of why women and why place emerged in multiple ways. As the project unfolded, we started by theorizing place to mean what women define as their environment and what determines their livelihoods, being, and identity; that is, body, home, local environs, and community—the arenas that women are motivated to defend, define, and own politically.<sup>1</sup> In putting together the present book, we decided on a ‘women and the politics of place’ conception that brings together into one framework discourses and struggles about: the body, usually the focus of the women’s rights movement; the environment, the interest of ecology movements; and diverse economies, usually the concern of global social and economic justice movements. In other words, our conceptual framework aims to analyze the interrelations created in women’s struggles among body, environment, and economies in all of their diversities (diverse embodiments, diverse ecologies, diverse economies). In doing so we aim to demystify theory that ignores women’s experiences of their lived bodies, the local economy, and the environment in order to relocate their politics of place as key to our understanding of globalization. We deliberately are focusing on women rather than speaking of feminist analysis or gender relations. We see the political importance of looking at women mobilizing in place, beginning with how women themselves experience it. We do this in order to not blur their specific experiences with the men with whom they are often working. Too often the differences for women and men become smoothed away in progressive analytical frameworks. Knowledge about women continues to be hardest to come by, and although many of us work in feminist theory, we try in this book not to assume that readers share that knowledge, but instead bring it in when it helps explain the story we are telling.

The question, ‘Why women?’ is meant to underline that we are not talking about all women. Generally speaking, we are focused on the experiences of subaltern women, although we also write about other women who are mobilizing on behalf of subaltern women. By ‘subaltern’ we adopt the Gramscian framework (and the meaning later used by Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, among others) to mean those groups that, in a given hegemonic formation, occupy subordinate positions vis-à-vis the

dominant groups in relation to questions of work, exploitation, racism, ethnicity, and other forms of cultural subordination. So, for instance, in the patriarchal capitalist formations of today's neoliberal societies, groups such as poor urban women of color, migrant domestic workers, indigenous peoples, many ethnic minorities, poor rural communities, and so on would fit this category.

However, we are not interested in just any subaltern activities; we are interested in those in which the defense of place becomes a politics of place—that is, when subaltern women become engaged in collective political struggles around place, linking subaltern voices with collective action against inequality. Furthermore, among these latter we chose to focus on transformative politics of place as opposed to reactionary defenses of the status quo by subaltern groups. This transformative politics may involve resistance, but it also involves reappropriation, reconstruction, reinvention, even relocation of places and place-based practices; and the creation of new possibilities of being-in-place and being-in-networks with other human and nonhuman living beings. Our choice of which women and which places has emerged from the group's own interests and concerns; there is no attempt to cover a representative sense of place or women (see the Preface for an account of the project's history). This book does reflect a very broad range of interests, places, and women, illustrating the international setting of the group and the feminist (or, some might argue, the Social Forum) spirit of working collectively and horizontally across disciplines, ages, genders, race, and place.

Each of the chapters that follow enables us to look through different lenses at women's place-based struggles in different parts of the world. From narratives emerging from Papua New Guinea, Eastern Africa, Pakistan, the Dominican Republic, the Colombian Pacific, Canada, India, South East Asia, the United States, Finland, Mexico, Europe, Palestine, and the Middle East, we discover the intelligent, courageous, and decided efforts by women's groups to engage in what we call 'politics of place.' The experiences narrated by these chapters show how women in their various struggles around place are defending it, transforming it, redefining it, recreating it in nontraditional locations, even leaving it—and in so doing are creating a new form of politics. Our book tries to show how these responses challenge dominant social, cultural, and economic trends at regional, national, and global levels.

### **Challenging Mainstream Academic Frameworks and Development Regimes**

In developing this analytical framework, this book aims to contribute to several debates. The first is to expose how the patriarchal and totalizing character of most established academic frameworks (for instance, about globalization, empire, and geographies of place and space) disempower women, place, and their politics. Patriarchy varies from place to place depending on the power plays, but it is always present and, in using the term, we are underlining the constantly unequal relations of power between men and women as well as among women and among men. In focusing on the stories of women in place-based movements, we aim to show how women engage creatively with globalization in multiple ways, and with particular reference to body politics as core to women's experience of place and politics. In this we are also engaging with feminist theory and practice within the academe and the women's movement.

Secondly we are challenging the current focus of the development regime on women, particularly concerning social problems and issues such as violence against women, reproductive rights, human rights, health, entrepreneurship, market citizenship, and so on. We believe these recent trends in the development apparatus are better understood as a biopolitical response to the consequences of neoliberal globalization. In other words, when confronted with increasing poverty, social dislocation, income disparity, displacement, and violence, the development apparatus responds with carefully targeted interventions at the level of the body, health, and reproduction. Some researchers refer to this biopolitical response as the management of the social. This book aims to make visible their disempowering effects on women and place.

By bringing to the fore women's place-based struggles, we challenge the policy makers, scholars, and NGOs who look at globalization through what we may call 'globalocentric' frameworks. The agents of transformation, in these dominant narratives, are markets, corporations, big governments of the North, the global economy, financial capital, and new technologies. These are indeed real forces transforming the world. In these globalocentric perspectives there is little that people in localities can do. Places, communities, and regions have to adapt or perish, so