Gender, Pesticides, and Environment

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Abstract
In the 1960s, American pesticide companies utilized gender as a tool to promote pesticide usage on the Homefront. In an era of instability, pesticide use and the elimination of pest enemies was presented as part of women’s domestic role. Interestingly enough, gendered arguments that appealed to female domesticity and American ideals of gender roles, the home and family were also utilized by the anti-pesticide dialogue, most prominently in Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring. This essay will explore the role of gender in both the pro-pesticide and anti-pesticide information that was presented to the American public in the sixties.

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The American “war against winged pests was underway,”1 in 1945 according to a Time article. In the midst of this domestic pesticide war against insects, weeds and rodents, “described in the modern vernacular as ‘pests’,”2 Rachel Carson’s 1962 publication of Silent Spring warned Americans of the dangers of pesticide usage and the lack of environmental foresight when pesticides such as DDT were employed. But the post-World War II and Cold War American search for stability and control, in its institutions, and social structures, also spread to a desire for control over nature. Insecurities in American society, including fears of another post-war depression, tense international relationships, anxieties over atomic weapons, and changing gender roles3 created an era of uncertainty, masked by a focus on domesticity, the family, and domination over nature. In this era of uncertainty, the wartime development of DDT and other insecticides demonstrated the quest for human power over nature,4 and promised scientific certainty and control. Following the end of the war in the Pacific, all restrictions on DDT were lifted, allowing DDT to be sold without restriction to consumers.5 But, this technological ability for humans to “kill both national and natural enemies on a unprecedented scale”6 evoked fears about the same science that sought to bring stability to Americans. This essay will compare pro-pesticide images with the anti-pesticide linguistic imagery presented in Silent Spring, to show an intriguing similarity. Pro-pesticide images paired pesticide usage and spraying with images of hegemonic femininity and domesticity to normalize post-war pesticide usage in the United States to consumers. Similarly, feminine ideals were used to shape American public thought about the environment through the use of linguistic imagery in the anti-pesticide discourse, as presented in Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring.

Hegemonic ideals of gender, femininity and the family in post-war America were promoted through media and photography, such as Life magazine, to separate gendered spheres of work and life in the post-World War II era. These ideas of American society and culture are important to understanding the gendered discourse in both the pro-pesticide vision of America and the anti-pesticide, ecological vision. In the midst of a destabilized post-war period, American ideals, as presented visually in Life, depicted a return to pre-war gender roles. These ideals separated women into the suburban home, as housewives and mothers, from men in the public sphere of American life as breadwinners and economic drivers. During World War II, about six million American women had entered the labour force due to the wartime mobilization of men.7 These changes to women’s roles in society were destabilizing to American ideals of domestic femininity. As a result, beginning in the 1940s, Life used images of middle-class white families, suburbianization, consumerism, and conventional gender roles8 to “signify national ideals,”9 ignoring many women’s desires to remain employed in the post-war period. The ‘family ideal’ is shown on the 1953 cover of Life. The husband stands dominantly over his wife and children in this photo, in what is presumed to be the family’s suburban home.10 This photograph shows American ideals of gender spheres – men as dominant and working, women as supportive

6 Ibid., 1508.
8 Kozol, Life’s America, 69.
9 Ibid., 56.
10 Nina Leen, Cover Photograph, Life, January 1953, cover.
mothers and “adoring wives,”11 portrayed deliberately by Life as subordinate to men.

A great emphasis was placed on the family and domestic life as a structure of stability and comfort. According to historian Susan M. Hartmann, “The insecurity and anxiety generated by the presumed Soviet threat put a premium on family stability and linked women’s traditional domestic roles to the nation’s security.”12 The emphasis on domestic gender roles in American visual culture, such as in Life, characterized the housewives’ duties as important to national security. Vice President Nixon in the 1959 ‘Kitchen Debate’ with Soviet Premier Khrushchev emphasized that the female housewife, living in a suburban home amongst consumer goods was representative of American freedom.13 In contrast, the Soviet Union had mobilized all of its female workers and left no room for housewives.14 In this period, the American home and the idealistic gender-ordered family structure within it became symbolic of security and of the American way of life, serving as an emblem of difference between American capitalism and communist enemies.

Pesticides were normalized into American life by associating pesticide consumerism with images of ‘ordinary’ American families and housewives using pesticides, such as those found in Life magazine. Advertisements promoted DDT as an effective pesticide for use in the domestic setting. A 1947 advertisement by the Pennsalt Company, one of the largest DDT producers, titled ‘DDT is Good for Me-e-e’ states that “everyone can enjoy added comfort, health and safety…. which benefits industry, farm and home.”15 This advertisement links the use of DDT to domestic upkeep, cleanliness and safety in the home, which were positioned to be the duty of domestic housewives. Another advertisement for DDT coated wallpaper for children’s rooms made an appeal to American motherhood, through the portrayal of a happy mother tending to a young infant in a room papered with ‘Trimz DDT Children’s Room Wallpaper.’ The advertisement tells women to “protect your children against disease-carrying insects!”16 These advertisements normalize the domestic consumption of DDT and pesticides by housewives and mothers. Yet, the initiative of women is undermined by the advertisement’s statement that “Medical science knows.”17 The male-dominated institution of science is portrayed as a knowing figure of authority over domestic women, similar to Life’s portrayal of the ideal American family as patriarchal. American gender ideals expected male breadwinners to provide income for household goods, which female consumers were thought to purchase.18 Pesticides created and sold to women by male-dominated institutions reinforced ideals of the patriarchal American family and the female domestic consumer. DDT was also less expensive than other insecticides,19 allowing housewives to spend less of their husband’s money by selecting DDT as the economical insecticide to keep the home safe from pests. Wives and mothers purchasing DDT were not only ‘thrifty,’ but also fit into the 1950s ideal of “superwoman,”20 who was able to upkeep her suburban home and the health of her family, and perform a wide range of domestic occupational roles within idealistic societal gender constructs.

DDT continued to be normalized through photographs, such as those found in a 1948 edition of Life, that show DDT fogging and spraying. In one photograph, a pesticide fog spreads over a hotel resort in New York, as heteronormative couples and white families stand and watch.21 This image presents pesticide spraying as both normal and safe for the family. This message is further promoted in an image on the following page of children playing amongst a cloud of pesticide fog. The photograph, titled “Children Romp in Fog after the Fog Truck”22 depicts pesticides as a safe and normal aspect of American life, as American couples stroll amidst pesticide fogs and children play in them. Another image, “DDT Fog Swirls around Kay Hefferan at Hones Beach, N.Y.” shows an idealized feminine, white and attractive woman casually standing in a cloud of DDT on the beach, continuing to eat her hotdog and drink her soda.23 As women were expected to have knowledge on both health and food due to their occupations as domestic housewives and mothers,24 the use of an ideologically feminine model further promotes the normalcy and supposed safety of DDT in American lives and homes as she comfortably eats and smiles at the camera. These advertisements and photographs in Life claimed that consumer pesticide usage was a safe and normal part of American life, through the association of DDT with images of hegemonic femininity, the protection of healthy childhood, and the security of American family.

Since the gender ideals of the post-War and Cold War era dictated that the private sphere of family and the home was the realm of women, the protection against all American enemies, including pest enemies, became the duty of women. Images depicted women using pesticides to fight an individual war on the home front. The rhetoric of pesticide use in the post-World War II and Cold War eras resides in militaristic ideas of ‘annihilation’ of American enemies (both human

11 Kozol, Life’s America, 73.
13 May, Homeward Bound, 16.
14 Ibid., 19.
15 "DDT is good for me-e-e!" Time, July 20, 1947.
17 Ibid.
18 May, Homeward Bound, 166.
20 May, Homeward Bound, 185.
21 "Fogging," Life (July 19, 1948), 49.
22 "Fogging," 50.
23 Ibid., 51.
24 May, Homeward Bound, 185.
and pest\textsuperscript{22} to protect the American home, freedom and ways of life. According to historian Edmund P. Russell, “most Americans welcomed technology that brought ‘total victory’ over national and natural enemies.”\textsuperscript{26} Americans established insects as enemies in World War II, as many soldiers died from lice and mosquitoes carrying illnesses.\textsuperscript{27} In the post-war years, insect pests still were viewed as enemies in the eyes of American citizens, as both pests in the home and garden, and as carriers of disease. “Describing insects as national enemies elevated them from the category of nuisance to that of national threat,”\textsuperscript{28} leading to the American desire to eliminate their pest enemies. The language of individualism is central in the post-war period and to the rhetoric of pesticide usage, as individual action “demonstrated the existence of democracy and freedom in contrast to suppression under communism.”\textsuperscript{29} The individual woman who fought pest enemies was elevated to a “domestic freedom fighter,”\textsuperscript{30} protecting not only her home, but also the American way of life, and thus contributing to the supposed security of the nation within her assigned gender role. In the post-war years and into the Cold War, Americans wanted security in their institutions, gender roles, homes, and in their country.\textsuperscript{31} Pests and their ability to penetrate the boundaries of the American home were thus viewed as threats to the security desired by Americans. Alongside gender ideals that placed women in the home, Americans sought to “shape the world to long-standing human visions;”\textsuperscript{32} This vision included one where suburban housewives, using pesticides in their battle to protect American security, would annihilate American insect enemies.

To normalize pesticide usage while conveying the importance of pest ‘annihilation,’ militaristic imagery and language was paired with images of hegemonic American women in domestic settings using pesticides. Pesticides were advertised “For the never-ending battle against pests in and about the home,”\textsuperscript{33} informing American women of their duties to protect the home against pest enemies who did not respect the idealistic boundaries of the secure, American suburban home. The use of militaristic language and imagery not only elevated women’s importance in pest elimination, but also combined comfortable images of femininity with the technological superiority of Americans that had been confirmed by the atomic bomb during the war. “In its advertisement for DDT, S.B. Penick and Company called for women to join a domestic version of World War II, ‘the continued battle of the home front.’”\textsuperscript{34} Other pesticide advertisements appealed to militaristic rhetoric and domestic ideals through statements such as “Super ammunition for the continued battle of the home front.”\textsuperscript{35} This advertisement for Penick insecticides shows a woman who is white, thin, wearing a dress, apron and heals, holding a DDT spray gun against the insects in her kitchen. She is both ideistically American and feminine, her role as a housewife defined by her appearance in the kitchen. She holds a DDT spray gun aggressively and wears a military helmet, linking her pest eradication duties in the home to larger themes of protectionism of the American home and ways of life from enemies. Women’s ‘war against pests’ in the home was promoted in American publications, such as \textit{Science News Letter} in 1945 which stated “Total Insect War Urged,” to make “personal life safer, more comfortable.”\textsuperscript{36} The safety of Americans was advertised as a home front war, fought primarily by domestic women. Gender played a very essential role in normalizing the pro-pesticide rhetoric to Americans. Suburban Americans in 1946 were said to be “engaged in their annual war against the cabbage worm, and homeowners in their summer offence against the housefly and the mosquito.”\textsuperscript{37} This use of linguistic imagery, among other images that pair pest annihilation with women, not only worked to normalize pesticide usage in domestic settings, but also gave female homemakers credit for fighting a supposed “war on the home front.”\textsuperscript{38}

While strikingly different in its message, Rachel Carson’s \textit{Silent Spring} drew upon a similar image of the American private family home to represent her anti-pesticide argument in a way that would resonate with the American public. In the first section of her book entitled ‘A Fable for Tomorrow,’ Carson imagines an American town “where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings,”\textsuperscript{39} until a “strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change.”\textsuperscript{40} These changes included the death of livestock, birds, plant-life, and even of children “who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours.”\textsuperscript{41} Carson’s alarming prediction of the effect of pesticide usage on the fate of America, and the American family and home, was disturbing to the already destabilized post-War American society. Whereas the American home was supposed to be a place of security amongst Cold War national insecurity, Carson proposed that homes sprayed with pesticides were dangerous to the family. She discussed the attempted eradication of the gypsy moth through aerial spraying of “quarter-acre lots of suburbia…

\textsuperscript{22} Russell, “Speaking of Annihilation,” 1505.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 1506.
\textsuperscript{27} Nancy Langston, Toxic Bodies: Hormone Disruptors and the Legacy of DES (USA: Library of Congress, 2010), 86.
\textsuperscript{28} Russell, “Speaking of Annihilation,” 1527.
\textsuperscript{29} Kozol, Life’s America, 70.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 65.
\textsuperscript{31} May, Homeward Bound, 13.
\textsuperscript{32} Russell, “Speaking of Annihilation,” 1509.
\textsuperscript{34} Russell, “Speaking of Annihilation,” 1527.
\textsuperscript{36} Science News Letter 47 (January 6, 1945), 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Anthony Standen, “DDT: It will not rid the world of insect pests but it is still a wonder bug killer,” (Life, July 8, 1946): 47.
\textsuperscript{39} Carson, Silent Spring, 1.
\textsuperscript{40} Carson, Silent Spring, 2.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
showering insecticide over children at play and commuters at railway stations.”

Here, Carson describes a scene that draws upon American ideals of homeownership and the private, domestic home. Even hardworking, home-owning Americans, commuting to work from suburbia, would be susceptible to pesticides. Her language poses pesticide spraying as threatening and invasive into the American home, the children playing outside of it, and the breadwinning commuters who worked to achieve the American dream of homeownership in the suburbs. Through her writing, Carson suggests that domesticity and the private-sphere of the home are destabilized by pesticide usage, effectively employing these American ideals in her anti-pesticide discourse.

Carson presents childhood and motherhood as threatened by pesticides, evoking themes of materialism to popularize her anti-pesticide message. She draws upon maternal fears of childhood illness and death as a principal factor as to why Americans should stop using pesticides. Carson asserts, “New generations suffer for the poisoning of their parents. No one knows whether the same effect will be seen in human beings, yet this chemical has been sprayed from airplanes over suburban areas and farmland.” This statement uses ideals of motherhood to suggest that by not supporting pesticide usage, women (viewed as reproducers) could support the health of their unborn children. The linguistic imagery in Carson’s writing also implies that American parents complacency with pesticide usage and spraying is harming their children. In discussion of some of the effects of DDT, Carson uses the mother-child ideal to explain how mothers can unknowingly harm their children:

“The poison may also be passed on from mother to offspring. Insecticide residues have been recovered from human milk in samples tested by Food and Drug Administration scientists. This means that the breast-fed human infant is receiving small but regular additions to the load of toxic chemicals building up in his body.”

The image that Carson evokes though her language – of a mother unknowingly feeding poisoned milk to her small and innocent infant – uses the innocence of childhood to formulate an anti-pesticide message. Silent Spring often returns to the theme of contaminated milk, recreating the image of mothers unknowingly feeding contaminated, harmful milk to their children. Carson explores the concentration of DDT in milk forty-eight hours after a dairy farm experienced aerial pesticide spraying. The study’s findings that the milk tested had fourteen parts per million of DDT in it, yet was still sold to consumers, exemplifies the hidden threat posed by pesticides. Breast milk and cows’ milk, traditionally viewed as a wholesome staple of childhood growth and development, is posed as dangerous to children and threatening to maternal knowledge of childrearing, furthering Carson’s anti-pesticide message as one rooted in maternal fears.

Silent Spring’s anti-pesticide argument makes a gendered appeal to women, as Carson presents DDT and pesticide usage as a threat to reproduction, and thus a threat to women’s roles as reproducers and gender roles as domestic wives and mothers. The way in which Carson talks about pigs and hens, their young not living past a few days or not even hatching, evokes vivid imagery that could easily be associated with fears of how pesticides could impact human infants and children. Carson discusses how pesticide materials accumulate in the human body, and “even penetrate the germ cells to shatter or alter the very material of heredity upon which the shape of the future depends.” By presenting pesticides as not only threatening to individual American women’s reproduction but also to the existence of future generations, Carson appeals to women’s idealized roles as reproducers. Looking at birds following a series of pesticide sprayings, Carson states: “The birds that survived may have been rendered sterile. Although a few nests were found in the treated area, a few with eggs, none contained young birds.” Imagery created by Carson’s description of sterile birds and empty nests is translatable into how pesticides could impact Americans – leaving childless homes and sterile women, unable to reproduce a future generation. The linguistic image of a threatened future generation was further destabilizing to the American search for stability throughout this period. Finding of other scientists of the time – who noticed that in the early 1960s bird shells were weakening – helped to popularize Carson’s assertions that DDT impacted estrogen levels and reproduction. The threat of sterility and the inability to reproduce challenged American ideals of women’s roles as both reproducers and as mothers, as well as hegemonic representations of the nuclear family within the American home.

Since concern over the health of family is traditionally seen as a female role, Carson’s anti-pesticide message appealed to ideals of domestic care and work in the private sphere. According to Carson, “every meal we eat carries its load of chlorinated hydrocarbons in the inevitable consequence of the almost universal spraying or dusting of agricultural crops with these poisons.” Carson posits this threat as one that is penetrating the barriers of the American home, rooting her concern within the domestic sphere. She suggests that pesticides have entered every aspect of the American private life – reproduction, motherhood, childhood, and even in the food eaten by Americans. The use of hegemonic ideals of femininity and domesticity gathered support for Carson’s anti-pesticide science, as women became involved in a different...
war to promote the safety of their families. According to Dr. Maril Hazlett, “Many of Carson’s female supporters understood ecology and the natural environment as extensions of the feminine domain of the home,” allowing women to critique the scientific and chemical invasion of the private sphere of American life, while still remaining within the bounds of female gender roles. Insecticides were thus rendered as enemy to American social ideals of gender, the family, domesticity and motherhood, influenced by Carson’s use of gendered language and appeal to hegemonic gender roles.

Further, Carson’s use of gendered and militaristic linguistic imagery proposes a different war on the home front. She shifts the focus away from the war against pest enemies being fought by American housewives, to a different war—this one against pesticides, as the true enemies of the home and family. Carson looks at pesticides in the private sphere of human life, such as in the home, to suggest that the home was threatened not by an insect enemy, but a synthetic chemical enemy. In one chapter of *Silent Spring*, Carson revisits the theme of the war against invasive insect pests on the home front, through recounting the entrance of an invasive Japanese beetle species into the United States and describing the reaction of mid-western states as:

“...an attack worthy of the most deadly enemy instead of only a moderately destructive insect, implying the most dangerous chemicals distributed in a manner that exposes large numbers of people, their domestic animals, and all wildlife to the poison intended for the beetle. As a result...have exposed human beings to undeniable hazard.”

Carson demonstrates how the ‘war against pests’ on the home front is more dangerous and destructive than the pests themselves. Her focus on the harm pesticides pose to individuals exemplifies the needlessness of the home-front war against pests, which was popularized by pesticide companies. Carson’s use of militaristic linguistic imagery further suggests pesticides as invasive and threatening to Americans in their homes. She describes aerial spraying as “drenching a housewife making a desperate effort to cover her garden before the roaring plane reached her.” The description of the ‘roaring plane’ produces an image that suggests a war like threat attacking the American home, spraying unwanted chemicals over fearful American wives and invading the family through their food. Carson linguistically creates an image to readers of a home front war induced by pesticide usage, that threatens the American family more than any insect pest could. In the final paragraph of *Silent Spring*, Carson states:

> It is our alarming misfortune that so primitive a science has armed itself with the most modern and terrible weapons, and that in turning them against the insects it has also turned them against the earth, framing insecticides as not only enemy to hegemonic American ideals of home, domesticity and gender roles, but also as a war-like enemy to the Earth as the ecological ‘mother’ of all life.

In this history of pesticides and gender, gender ideals can be viewed as a tool that was employed to impact public thought on the environment. Images, such as advertisements and photographs in *Life*, paired pesticide usage with comforting portrayals of idealized American femininity, domesticity, security and family life. Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* used similar American ideals to depict the dangers of insecticides in her anti-pesticide message. Evoking fears of chemical enemies penetrating the American home and family, Carson made a gendered appeal against pesticide usage. Gender plays a very important role in the ideal vision of American life, as does the ability for Americans to control their natural enemies and protect the idealized institution of the home. In the struggle to find security and assert a national identity in the post-war and Cold War years, advertisements and other media such as *Life* “vigorously promoted a vision of the American nation through pictures of nuclear families surrounded by consumer products in suburban homes;” Insect pests did not fit into this picture of American freedom, comfort and security. But, as Rachel Carson demonstrated, neither did the toxicity that would later be found in the breast milk of American mothers as a result of pesticide usage. Thus, the visual and linguistic depictions of hegemonic gender ideals must be viewed within the context of a destabilized society. Hegemonic gender roles were central to the imagery of both the pro-pesticide and anti-pesticide visions of American safety and stability. American’s need to be safe within their homes influenced environmental public thought on pesticide usage. As the nation struggled to determine if invasive pests or the incessant use of pesticides posed the greater threat to national safety, the reliance on hegemonic representations of femininity and American life created stability amongst these fears, ultimately linking environmental public thought as inseparable form gendered ideals in this period.

### References


> “DDT is good for me-e-e!” *Times*. July 20, 1947.


54 Ibid., 158.


56 Kozol, *Life’s America*, 56.


Standen, Anthony. “DDT: It will not rid the world of insect pests but it is still a wonder bug killer.” *Life* (July 8, 1946): 47-54.

