

ECOFEMINIST DIALOGUES

Diane Wilson vs. Union Carbide: Ecofeminism and the Elitist Charge of “Essentialism”

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If 'Woman' is Just an Empty Category, then Why
Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night?
—Laura Lee Downs¹

*Aim a blowtorch at my eyes
Pour acid down my throat
Strip the tissue from my lungs
Choke my baby to death in front of me
Spare me nothing
Watch us starve
Don't ever say sorry*

—Unknown Bhopal Survivor

My object is to present the extraordinary story of Diane Wilson, a white fisherwoman and mother of five from Texas, who, in her passionate commitment to environmental justice, set out to make Union Carbide accountable in Texas and Bhopal.² In doing so, I encounter "ecofeminism," a branch of feminism and political ecology designed "to understand and resist the interrelated dominations of women and nature."³ I am especially interested in whether the academic charge that ecofeminism is "essentialist" and contaminated by capitalist patriarchal ideology can withstand political scrutiny.⁴ I argue that the ultimate test of a theory is its *outcomes*, because all theory is a form of practice, and all practice incorporates a form of theory.⁵ It is when the connection remains unarticulated and a process of privileging one side over the other emerges that constructive critique becomes counter-productive. I hope to honor the fierce activism of Diane Wilson and, at the same time, to ground and contextualize debate about ecofeminist essentialism in her passionate life.

¹ Laura Lee Downs, "If 'Woman' is Just an Empty Category, then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night? Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject," *Comparative Studies in Social History*, 35, 1993, pp. 414-37.

² Union Carbide merged with Dow Chemical in 2001. See Jack Doyle, *Trespass Against Us: Dow Chemical and the Toxic Century* (Monroe, MN: Common Courage Press, 2004).

³ Heather Eaton and Lois Ann Lorentzen (eds.), *Ecofeminism and Globalization* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), p.1.

⁴ Earlier *CNS* discussions of this issue can be found in Elizabeth Carlassare, "Destabilizing the Criticism of Essentialism in Ecofeminist Discourse," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 5, 1994, pp. 50-66; Mary Mellor, "Eco-Feminism and Eco-Socialism: Dilemmas of Essentialism and Materialism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 3, 1992, pp. 42-62.

⁵ Susan Bickford, "Why We Listen to Lunatics: Anti-foundational Theories and Feminist Politics," *Hypatia*, 8, 1993, pp. 104-123; Chris Cuomo, "Toward a Thoughtful Ecofeminist Activism," in Karen Warren (ed.), *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 42-51.

Essentialism is a philosophical charge applied when words like nature, woman, class, or race are used to imply something unchanging, biologically innate, ahistorical, or universal. It is the nemesis of social constructionists who see all social categories as relative to a given socio-historical or cultural discourse. The understanding that culture and social practices affect ways of seeing and thinking has been present in the social sciences for well over a century. But in the past decade or two, an oversimplified version of this notion has become an *idee fixe* for many postmodern academics, for whom there is no underlying reality, only the interplay of discourses and symbols. In some quarters, it is politically incorrect even to use the word "woman" without first problematizing it.

So, with an over literal emphasis on discursive practices and a corresponding lack of conceptual tools for discussing material objects and relations, constructionist academics are made uneasy by feminist, environmentalist, or ecofeminist activists, who situate their politics in the material experiences and language of everyday life. Yet politics become mute if they are disconnected from the conditions of everyday life. This is why Valerie Bryson recognizes in social constructionism “an essentially conservative theory, that turns feminism from a subversive social movement into an inward-looking elite activity ... [one] that in rejecting the possibility of wholesale transformation discredits all movements for social change.”⁶

While many constructionists fixate on the closed determinist structure of language games, the notion of change is central to all activism. Fighting essentialist notions like "biology is destiny" has been a central tenet of feminism as well as ecofeminist thought. Again, women from both groupings seek to end the exploitation and destruction of life by the capitalist patriarchal system. But this common ground is not always acknowledged. The danger is that recognition of Diane Wilson's remarkable achievement may be lost in the crossfire of theoretic controversy between feminists and ecofeminists.

Diane Wilson's political activism began in Seadrift, Texas, a place with only 1,500 residents that is nevertheless described on its website as the only "city" in San Antonio Bay. The population is mostly Anglo, with smaller numbers of Mexican and Vietnamese Americans.⁷ The only thing that justifies the city label is the presence of numerous chemical plants that dominate the landscape on the flat, straight road that leads to Seadrift. Dow Chemical and Formosa Plastics are the two biggest plants in the area; others are Alcoa, British Petroleum Chemicals, and Dupont. But Dow and Formosa are the primary steady sources of employment for locals.

Historically, the main industry of Seadrift has been fishing, especially "shrimping." However, by the late 1980s, locals began to notice their catches of shrimp, crab, oysters and fish declining. This coincided with unusual occurrences in San Antonio Bay, such as brown tides followed by red tides and foaming green tides. According to Diane Wilson, a third generation shrimper, the fish were "acting strange," and large numbers of fish, shrimp, and dolphin were dead in their nets or washed up onshore. Something was very wrong, but it was 1989 before she read an article stating that the county she lived in was the most toxic in the U.S. Meanwhile, she learned that Formosa Plastics was

⁶ Valerie Bryson, *Feminist Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1992), p. 229.

⁷ "Welcome to Seadrift, Texas on the San Antonio Bay," online at www.viptx.net/seadrift/home.html.

planning expansion, alarming her enough to call a public meeting to discuss possible effects on their environment.⁸

Thus, Diane Wilson became an "unreasonable woman." Today she inspires a worldwide movement of ecofeminist resisters. The collective of *Unreasonable Women* (UnRW) was formalized in May 2002 when 34 women met on a four-day retreat with members of the Bioneers, to theorize "the urgent need for a unified environmental and social change movement that will inspire women from all race and class backgrounds to engage in effective action."⁹

Since its foundation, UnRW has supported Diane Wilson in her actions against Dow Chemical, contributing money, skills, media attention, and even personal care during and after her hunger strikes. She and UnRW have joined with Code Pink, another movement of grassroots women using non-violent direct action to promote peace and social justice.¹⁰ Code Pink came into being in November 2004 in response to the Iraq War when Medea Benjamin, Starhawk, Jodie Evans, Diane Wilson, and approximately 100 other women marched through Washington, D.C. and set up a four-month vigil in front of the White House. Since then, Diane Wilson has traveled to Iraq with the group to further express opposition to the war.

In the feminist, and sometimes Marxist, academy, there is a tendency to dismiss women like Diane Wilson as theoretically naïve. How should those of us committed to social and environmental justice bridge this divide between theory and practice? Do I "use" Diane Wilson to support a political theory, or do I use theory to make sense of her firebrand anti-capitalism? What, as an academic, do I bring to her struggle that was not there before, some publicity perhaps? Can I offer "legitimacy?" But legitimacy in whose eyes? And why? In *Made from this Earth*, the foundational ecofeminist, Susan Griffin, puts her finger on the dilemma of *who* may speak, *when*, and *how* when she reflects: "I cannot say whether it was feminism that gave me the right to speak about my own life in my writing, or whether it was speaking about my own experience that transformed me into one who would demand her own rights."¹¹

Finally, what can the maturation of Diane Wilson's "not in my back yard" stance into a full-on ecofeminist stance of "not on our planet" teach theorists about the development of political activism and anti-capitalist struggles?

Unreasonable Women

The idea of ecofeminism as an international phenomenon grew out of a conviction that feminism was the ultimate solution to the world's ecological and social problems.¹² It goes without saying, therefore, that all ecofeminists are in a sense "unreasonable women." Carolyn Merchant suggests that the term "ecofeminist" was introduced by Francoise D'Eaubonne in her 1974 book *Feminism or Death*.

⁸ Diana Claitor, "Bay Watcher: What Does it Take to Get Chemical Manufacturers to Clean Up Their Acts?" *Hope Magazine*, May/June, 2003.

⁹ "Unreasonable Women," online at: www.unreasonablewomen.org.

¹⁰ "Code Pink, Women For Peace," online at: www.codepinkalert.org.

¹¹ Susan Griffin, *Made from this Earth: An Anthology of Writings* (New York: Harper Collins, 1983), p. 5.

¹² Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

As with feminism in general, ecofeminism has come to be made up of many divergent strands and members.¹³ These range from groups of housewives organized against pollution in their neighborhood to academics writing in universities and the *Chipko*, or tree hugging movement, of North India. Ecofeminism is full of "big promises" and seeks "to radically restructure, rather than reform, social and political institutions."¹⁴ Like feminism *tout court*, ecofeminism has always been a social movement of women committed to profound change of a personal as well as political kind. And right from the outset, ecofeminism has been remarkably sensitive to links between local and global.

In *Ecofeminist Natures*, Noel Sturgeon writes that ecofeminism in the U.S. emerged in the mid-1970s, making strong conceptual ties between women, nature, and anti-militarism.¹⁵ The Women's Pentagon Action took place in the early 1980s, followed over that decade by many non-violent direct action encampments, like Seneca Falls, Puget Sound, and the Mother's Day Actions at the Nevada Test Site. Sturgeon says that:

The politics, and practice of the direct action movement aspired to be feminist, participatory, democratic, antiracist, anticapitalist, antiheterosexist, environmentalist, and anti-imperialist, as well as opposed to ageism, disability prejudice, and sometimes speciesism ... The movement's politics and organizational structures were continually contested...¹⁶

Academic conferences followed the actions of these street fighters and were dedicated to exploring the manifold relations between women and nature. In addition, several environmental disasters around this time gave further impetus to ecofeminism as a social movement. These included the partial nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island, the toxic gas disaster at Bhopal, and the Chernobyl catastrophe in the Ukraine. The early writing of Susan Griffin, Charlene Spretnak, Starhawk in California, and Ynestra King at the Institute of Social Ecology in Vermont all helped to crystallize positions that began to be called ecofeminism among Pentagon activists and others.¹⁷

Yet, as Noel Sturgeon notes, the issue of how to conceptualize the "special connection" between women and nature often presumed by the designation of ecofeminism has been highly contested among ecofeminist theorists and their critics. She outlines five approaches to the relationship between women and nature, which taken together form two opposing views: the first critiques the link between women and nature, while the second, seeks a positive articulation of it.¹⁸

The first stance has been read simplistically and patriarchally by critics of ecofeminism to mean a reduction of women to "their reproductive biology and culturally defined roles as

¹³ Carolyn Sachs, "Connecting Women and the Environment," in Carolyn Sachs (ed.), *Women Working in the Environment* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1997).

¹⁴ Stephanie Lahar, "Ecofeminist Theory and Grassroots Politics," in Warren, 1996, *op. cit.*, pp.1-2.

¹⁵ Noel Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁷ See Griffin, 1983, *op. cit.*; Charlene Spretnak, *The Politics of Women's Spirituality: Essays by Founding Mothers of the Movement* (New York: Anchor, 1982); Starhawk, *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority, and Mystery* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990); Ynestra King, "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology," in Judith Plant, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1989), pp. 18-28.

¹⁸ Sturgeon, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

nurturers."¹⁹ This inaccurate perception of ecofeminism as committed to essentializing patriarchal archetypes grew after some West Coast ecofeminists engendered their politics through a woman-centered spirituality drawing on Goddess or Mother Earth metaphors.

But as Ynestra King was early to point out, the woman-nature construct is not a dualist either/or but a dialectical relationship that can serve as "a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture."²⁰ In other words, it has been the critics of ecofeminism themselves who, by repeatedly assuming the woman-nature duality is a static category in academic debates, have limited ecofeminism's theoretical and political possibilities. Ecofeminism has from its very beginning been committed to visionary politics that defies reductionist categories. Thus, Laura Lee Downs adopts this line: In "denying the possibility of genuine contact or exchange across the bodily boundaries of socio-biological being, the highly restrictive epistemological base of identity politics narrows the scope of human knowledge and limits the possibility of constructing new kinds of communities."²¹

The two most representative North American collections of ecofeminist writing are Irene Diamond's and Gloria Orenstein's *Reweaving the World* and Judith Plant's *Healing the Wounds*.²² They present a range of approaches to ecofeminism from hands-on neighborhood struggle to spirituality, provoking the judgment of Janet Biehl, an ecofeminist turned social ecologist, that it is a blatantly contradictory position. Her book *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* states: "Some assert that 'All is One' while others argue for particularism and multiplicity."²³ She thinks that these "contradictions" are evidence of the lack of rigorous debate. But Biehl's objection to diversity is an odd one coming from an anarchist; and her confusion of diversity with contradiction is a poor lapse for a would-be "rationalist." Nevertheless, apparently differing views under the ecofeminist rubric are relatively minor compared to the sin of essentialism. For to be essentialist is to adopt universals uncritically; it is "reactionary" and "regressive." Biehl declares that "the very word ecofeminist has become so tainted by its various irrationalisms that she "can no longer consider this a promising project."²⁴ Key to her notion of irrationalism is the way in which some ecofeminists draw on metaphor, myth, and even spirituality.

Another critic of ecofeminism is Joni Seager, who nevertheless borrows a number of ecofeminist ideas for her book *Earth Follies*. She divines "a strong apolitical, acultural and ahistorical undercurrent to ecofeminism that is especially limiting. ... It is not clear that ecofeminism provides a strategy for environmental change beyond one based on a personal response to the planetary crisis."²⁵

¹⁹ For an absurdly reductionist reading of ecofeminism see Mark Somma and Sue Tolleson-Rinehart, "Tracking the Elusive Green Women: Sex, Environmentalism, and Feminism in the United States and Europe," *Political Research Quarterly*, 50, 1997, pp. 153-169.

²⁰ Ynestra King, *What is Ecofeminism?* (New York: Ecofeminist Resources, 1990), cited in Sturgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 67. Another dialectical approach to dualism is Ariel Salleh, "Contribution to the Critique of Political Epistemology," *Thesis Eleven*, 8, 1984, pp. 23-43.

²¹ Downs, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

²² Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein (eds.), *Reweaving the World* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1990); Judith Plant, *op. cit.*

²³ Janet Biehl, *Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1991), pp. 2-3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5

²⁵ Joni Seager, *Earth Follies* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 251-52; see also Joni Seager, "Rachel Carson Died of Breast Cancer: The Coming of Age of a Feminist Environmentalist," *Signs*, 28, 2003, pp. 945-972.

To bypass these limitations, Seager proposes an alternative label, "feminist environmentalism." She claims this advances beyond ecofeminist politics but does not explain how; so her assessment that ecofeminism is acultural, ahistorical, and apolitical appears to be as much of a straw woman as Biehl's tract before it. Neither author fully represents *actual* positions taken by ecofeminists, as distinct from what others have sometimes assumed. More recently, Catriona Sandilands has produced another ambivalent account of ecofeminism that does not always give full consideration to the actual texts she critiques.²⁶

But another shortcoming of this scholarship is that it is largely inward looking with no grasp of the international ecofeminist literature, particularly the anti-capitalist and postcolonial writing of materialist thinkers like Maria Mies, Mary Mellor, Ariel Salleh, or Vandana Shiva.²⁷ The result is that Biehl and Seager end up essentializing ecofeminism itself, and in a very parochial way. Their hasty critiques also diminish the political contribution of working-class women like Diane Wilson.

Getting Connected

To equate all ecofeminist theory with essentialism or to say that it rests on a biologically determinist notion of gender difference or reified notion of nature is a gross misrepresentation of this political ecology. Kate Rigby notes that among ecofeminist writers, it's hard to find anyone who takes womanhood as biologically rather than culturally determined.²⁸ Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature* and Ynestra King's essays have always addressed the interplay of nature and history.²⁹ Susan Griffin adds: "To accuse early feminists of *essentialism* is oddly ahistorical, since the work of feminist thinkers in this century created the very ground on which gender is visible as a social construct."³⁰ If ecofeminists do draw on essentialist images, as in Starhawk's Earth-based ritual, these are used strategically; their function is to provide motivation and inspirational strategies for progressive action.

This point about metaphor and imagination is especially pertinent in the case of Diane Wilson, whose work has been highly effective in its contestation of corporate capital. This becomes very clear when she talks about how her formative ecological experiences grew out of life in a fishing family at Sea Drift. As she tells it:

Dad was a fisherman, and so we'd always go down to the bay. I started working for him on the boat, and I can remember going out to that bay, and I could see her. She was this woman, and she had this long hair and this long dress, and she was real... She had her arms around me... Her personality was as strong as if you had this grandma that you dearly loved, and you were right in the house with her... I feel like the

²⁶ Catriona Sandilands, *The Good Natured Feminist* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

²⁷ Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (London: Zed Books, 1986); Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics* (London: Zed Books, 1997); Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Mary Mellor, *Breaking the Boundaries* (London: Women's Press, 1992).

²⁸ Kate Rigby, "The Goddess Returns: Ecofeminist Reconfigurations of Gender, Nature and the Sacred," in Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden (eds.), *Feminist Poetics of the Sacred: Creative Suspicions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.23-54.

²⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1980); King, *op. cit.*

³⁰ Susan Griffin, "Ecofeminism and Meaning," in Karen Warren (ed.), *Ecofeminism: Women, Nature and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 214.

molecules in my skin separate in the bay, in the water, in the sound of the boat, so there are no lines, no divisions.³¹

Diane Wilson's articulation of the bay as a woman who has loved her and welcomed her motivates her activism. It is this love that gives Wilson her energy, sense of serenity and drives her passion. What she describes in such sensuous terms is the notion of a living earth reminiscent of many human cosmologies in the present and past.

The theme of an immanent feminine life force is common in U.S. cultural ecofeminism works, like Charlene Spretnak's *The Politics of Women's Spirituality*, Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade*, and Carol Christ's *Laughter of Aphrodite*.³² Each recognizes connections between all living beings and celebrates vital links between women and the natural world. In doing this, they risk the academic accusation of essentialism, because capitalist patriarchal ideology has used the idea of women as "Earth Mothers" to demean and control the second sex.

But it is arguable that the same rigid dualistic constructs that men have used to position women as inferior are embedded in the social constructionist reasoning of academic feminists who condemn essentialism in their sisters. The political consequence of this remote theoreticism, writes Laura Lee Downes, is that "the collapse of social relations into textual ones diverts our attention from the operation of power in the social sphere and fixes our gaze upon its metaphorical manifestation in the text."³³

When Diane Wilson is talking about "ideas," she is trying to describe a tangible material link between herself and the bay that feeds her. This is a link between the water and her body, which is shaped by her labor as a fisherwoman; it also encompasses her physical survival, which is derived from that rocking body of water.

Beyond this, Diane Wilson's understanding of global ecological crisis strongly resonates with the ecofeminist perception that the condition of the earth reflects our culture's fractured selves. She describes "the male patriarchal way" of thinking based on "separateness" this way:

The state of the environment is indicative of our soul, divided, separated, alienated from itself. I believe Western society and religion ... devalues the feminine, views it as weak or out of control or wild... [so that it] needs to be plundered and managed, much like they do the environment ... I believe the key to our environmental crisis is a shift in consciousness to the feminine, or at least to a more balanced, holistic approach.

In her use of the term "feminine," Diane Wilson is clearly referring to a socially constructed archetype—a metaphor, not an essential or biological attribute. However, it is just this kind of talk about the feminine, a constellation of values, which has caused ecofeminism to come under attack.

³¹ All long indented quotes are from the author's interview with Diane Wilson at Seadrift, Texas in 2004.

³² Spretnak, *op.cit.*; Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1988); Carol Christ, *Laughter of Aphrodite: Reflections on a Journey to the Goddess* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1987); Starhawk *op. cit.*

³³ Downes, *op. cit.*, p. 420.

Diane Wilson does not read this unsympathetic academic literature. But when asked about the relationship between feminism and ecology, her reply could well be directed to it, for she regrets how we "have separated ourselves so much from who we are." We "take the male thing to the limit." She knows perfectly well that socialization creates the gender difference. She is not saying that ontologically women are "closer to nature" than men are. As she sees it, women's ability to identify with the environment comes from their being socially allowed to experience the nurturing part of themselves.

Nevertheless, in recounting how her challenge to capitalist patriarchal practices began, Diane Wilson admits how, initially, she felt in a typically "feminine way" that she was not the right person to organize a local ecology movement because of her shyness, lack of formal education, and leadership skills. Nor was she exposed to feminist or Marxist thought in her small Texan hometown. However, she now recognizes that she was, in fact, the perfect person to lead because of her passion.

When I started this, I was really the wrong person. I didn't have an education. I was not... a natural leader. I was so shy I would hide under the bed to avoid people ... But eventually I realized I was perfect for it, as it was my passion... And nothing stopped me, because its like if you got a kid you dearly loved and someone was doing something to torment it, I mean there is nothing—there ain't nothing that's going to stop you. And that's the way I felt about it. It was very personal. The bay was real—she was my family, she was family.

Moving from personal to political is a basic tenet of feminism. The identities of mother or wife or woman can be, as Noel Sturgeon notes, "analyzed as useful parts of a theory of resistance."³⁴ It is such supposedly essentialist—and therefore politically incorrect—identities that guide many women as they take up political struggle.

These "inadmissible" roles can also give women social credibility in the political landscape where they seek to make change. By Stephanie Lahar's analysis of ecofeminism, "social projects [have] to be both deeply personal and political to render transformative changes."³⁵ Diane Wilson's activism transformed her from a shy, anti-social, married mother-of-five, shrimper, to an outspoken, divorced, intensely committed mother-of-five, effective political ecologist. And this trajectory is echoed in the many stories of other women who have followed similar paths as mothers, wives, or women embedded in harsh material conditions.³⁶ In fact, Celene Krauss remarks, the very earliest community activists in toxic waste protests were white, working-class women coming to politics out

³⁴ Sturgeon, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

³⁵ Lahar, *op. cit.*, p.7.

³⁶ For other examples of women's eco-activism, see Rod Bantjes and Tanya Trussler, "Feminism and the Grass Roots: Women and Environmentalism in Nova Scotia, 1980-1983," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 36, 1999, 179-197; Giovanna Di Chiro, "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environmental and Social Justice," in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground* (New York: Norton, 1995); Gabriel Gutierrez, "Mothers of East Los Angeles Strike Back," in Robert Bullard (ed.), *Unequal Protection* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994); Temma Kaplan, *Crazy for Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Sandra Morgan, "It's the Whole City Against Us!" in Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgan (eds.), *Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988); Mary Pardo, "Mexican-American Women Grassroots Community Activists," *Frontiers*, 11, 1990, pp. 1-7; Sasha Rosencil, *Disarming Patriarchy* (London: Open University Press, 1995); Joni Seager, "Hysterical Housewives' and Other Mad Women," in Diane Rocheleau, et al. (eds.), *Feminist Political Ecology* (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 271-286.

of personal necessity.³⁷ Even Joni Seager affirms that "women are the backbone of virtually all environmental organizations in the United States."³⁸

Identity and Change

Studies of grassroots working-class women fighting against local pollution show how a change occurs in the way women think about themselves in relation to the public sphere. Equally, a change occurs in how family members and communities see them. Ariel Salleh explores this deep interior shift when she talks about such women as "broken on the contradiction that has them closer to nature." Identity is never a fixed or static essence, rather it is continually forming and reforming in the wider matrix of social relations. Linking external and internal realities in a dialectical way, Salleh argues that experiences of deprivation and violence are what provoke the transformative process and the drive towards political action: "It is through crisis and moments of non-identity [disintegration] that subjects glimpse new meanings, a hidden historical potential behind what is given."³⁹

What may begin as a focus on family safety can end up challenging this very same maternal role and the social ideology that creates it. Many married women engaged in activism have incurred a husband's resentment, resulting in divorce. Diane Wilson's husband responded to her announcement that for the first time in her life she actually liked herself, with "I don't even know who you are."⁴⁰

A notable exception to this pattern is the case of Mexican-American women whose political work in Los Angeles garnered "tremendous support from their husbands and children."⁴¹ Here, the identity of "mother" was expanded to include even women who did not have children. This revealed the link between ideologically learned essentialist identities and newly constructed ones in a way that defies the typical Anglo academic contempt for "womanly virtues," which in turn, highlighted both the profound ethnocentricity and classism of such academic attitudes.

Women who have been marginalized from public life as mere domestic labor often embrace their "new-found political power."⁴² They find themselves questioning not just toxic waste but also government, corporations, and the whole system of capitalist patriarchal oppressions—including marriage. They soon gain a "feminist consciousness," acutely aware of the world of invisible power structures around them.⁴³

This is certainly true in the case of Lois Gibbs, who in organizing the Love Canal Homeowner's Association in 1978 discovered the politicians of New York State were not the least bit interested in her community's toxic waste problem but only in "corporate interests and profit."⁴⁴

³⁷ Celene Krauss, "Challenging Power: Toxic Waste Protests and the Politicization of White, Working-Class Women," in Nancy Naples (ed.), *Community Activism and Feminist Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 130-150.

³⁸ Seager, 1996, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

³⁹ Salleh, 1997, *op. cit.*, pp. 171-73.

⁴⁰ Diane Wilson, Address at Texas A&M International University, Laredo, April 2003.

⁴¹ Gutierrez, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

⁴² Bantjes and Trussler, *op. cit.*, p.183.

⁴³ Roseneil, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

Diane Wilson recalls how she felt in 1989 when she read the article that declared her county the most toxic in the U.S.:

I couldn't believe it ... See I consider myself very ordinary [and] average, very very average. And I am what the average person gets. ... I believe there are times in everybody's life when they get information, you cannot hold them back. And if you do, you compromise some part of your soul.

Her response was to call a meeting, which catapulted her into the middle of a political and economic battle.

Diane Wilson was approached by politicians, businessmen, and the bank president, all wanting to find out who she was working for: "They couldn't believe a woman—a fisherwoman to boot—could cause this much trouble."⁴⁵ Nor could she.

But when the issue at stake was a \$1.5 billion expansion of Formosa—one of the largest producers of PVC in the world—not to mention an increase in jobs for locals, things got serious.

From knowing nothing about environmentalism, she went on to filing legal briefs, working with lawyers, speaking to large audiences, attracting media attention, standing up to the EPA, going on hunger strikes, having her boat sabotaged and her dog shot from a helicopter, to attempting to sink her own shrimp boat in the bay as a form of protest and chaining herself to the top of a 70-foot chemical tower. In short, Diane Wilson became an activist to be reckoned with. When she began her activism in 1989, she formed a group with other concerned local women called the Calhoun County Resource Watch. But due to family and community pressures, all had quit within three months—all except Diane.

It became so difficult after four years of fighting Formosa, both opposing their expansion and demanding a "zero-discharge" commitment, that she tried to kill herself.

I had every member of my family against me. The county was doing petitions against me. My lawyer had joined the other side. My brother, who had been one of my board members, quit and started working for the company. ... I was breaking up with my husband. My sister said I needed counseling. My other brother fired me from the fish house from my job. I had no money. ... I was fighting Formosa. ... So I got so down, but I couldn't quit. I was alive. If I had breath in me, I couldn't quit. But I couldn't go on, so I tried to kill myself.

Diane Wilson couldn't go on, but she couldn't quit either. Then teaming up with Jim Blackburn, an environmental lawyer from Houston, she embarked on "four hunger strikes, two of them over 30 days and dangerous enough to land her in the hospital."⁴⁶ Her strategy was one of not playing by the rules, drawing upon the teachings of Gandhi, and what she calls "soul power." As she says,

You have to follow your vision and maintain your integrity. You create action. You create events. Once you cross the commitment boundary,

⁴⁵ Claitor, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Carl Frankel, "Clean Water: What's it Worth?" *Yes! Magazine*, Summer, 1998, pp. 1-4, online at: www.futurenet.org/6RxforEarth/frankel.htm.

miracles start to happen. When you can smell your fear, you're on the right track.⁴⁷

Diane Wilson sees everything connected to everything else. As a mother and as a fisherwoman, she has learned that

there are no seas with lines and divisions. Similarly, if there is a border that separates me as an American from the anguish and sorrow of my sisters and brothers in Bhopal and their fight for justice, then that line is a false and lying one.

Against mainstream Western culture and its language of divisions, this ecofeminist sense of relationality describes a dynamic regenerating force *between* seemingly static substances. But the social constructionist splits between women and nature, theory and praxis, and academic theory and grassroots politics are further manifestations of this impoverished mindset.

Relational or dialectical thinking makes connections, and it allows for fluidity between socially constructed identities, subjects and objects. Vandana Shiva, former quantum physicist turned ecofeminist, adopts a relational approach to overcome reductionist, dualistic epistemologies.⁴⁸ For Shiva, a materialist, no divide exists between our bodies and our ecosystem, making it logically impossible to essentialize it as a false connection. Ironically, reductionist essentialisms are indispensable to the very critics of ecofeminism who call it essentialist.

Against their would-be rationalism, Diane Wilson finds power in spontaneity. And she would no doubt agree with Charlene Spretnak that "we live in a participatory universe ... Each minute part of us is a link within a vast network of creative dynamics."⁴⁹ Turning this into strategy, Kate Rigby, another cultural ecofeminist, conjectures that "it may be the return to the Goddess will turn out to have been ... characterized by a certain playful, makeshift quality, emphasizing openness and spontaneity, rather than a dogmatic fixation on particular forms and procedures."⁵⁰

Political Outcomes

After five years of tireless effort on the part of Diane, Formosa finally signed the 1994 Wilson-Formosa Zero Discharge Agreement. The agreement aims, in the long term, to reduce the plant's discharge into the San Antonio Bay to zero, but begins with a first stage reduction of 32 percent, or 2.6 million gallons a day. The second part was to come into effect with a sustainable agreement. In the words of lawyer Jim Blackburn, "I tried the legal process and failed ... She goes on a hunger strike ... and that works."⁵¹ Now Diane Wilson had leverage with other plants such as Alcoa, which was responsible for the first underwater Superfund, a mercury dump. She went straight into Alcoa's executive office and asked: "Do we sign a zero discharge agreement, or do we go the other route?" Knowing what the other route meant in terms of bad publicity, they quickly signed.⁵²

⁴⁷ Diane Wilson, "Writings from her Hunger Fast – 2002," in "Bhopal Net," online at: www.bhopal.net

⁴⁸ Vandana Shiva, *Closer to Home* (Philadelphia: New Society, 1994); Salleh, 1984, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Rigby, *op. cit.*; Spretnak, *op. cit.*, p.22.

⁵⁰ Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 42

⁵¹ Claitor, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁵² *Ibid*, p. 3

In addition to zero discharge for wastewater, the sustainable agreement added discharge reductions for air and land and included worker and community empowerment measures. However, when the workers at Formosa tried to unionize, the company brought in union busters. Wilson was outraged by the devious way company officials used the agreement to postpone implementing the commitments they made. So she and Blackburn resigned in protest, saying the sustainable agreement was a fraud, and Formosa wasn't going to be able to use it to keep her silent (the agreement had conditions that she would not fight their permits). As a result, the plant's output has still only been reduced by 32 percent. And so the struggle goes on.

On another front: Diane Wilson had become involved with the survivors of Union Carbide's catastrophic—and totally avoidable—leakage of 46.3 tons of the poisonous gas, methyl isocyanate, on December 3, 1984 in Bhopal, India.⁵³ This poisonous gas killed approximately 8,000 people in its immediate aftermath. Its long-term effects would take at least 12,000 more lives. Statistics on the number of people injured or living with a serious disability vary from 60,000 to 500,000. More than 150,000 people still suffer chronic problems, and many are too ill to work.⁵⁴

Union Carbide still claims the leakage was an "accident." But Diane Wilson says it was "the result of over 66 hazardous violations that Union Carbide, in fact, knew about."⁵⁵ Her assertion that the disaster was due to cost-cutting is confirmed by numerous scholarly articles.⁵⁶ This negligence constitutes "mass murder at worst, or corporate manslaughter at best." It is compounded by the fact that, eager to escape their financial and human responsibility, Union Carbide "negotiated a secret deal with the government of India, mysteriously bringing the government's multibillion dollar demand down to a measly \$470 million. Most survivors received less than ... \$500 eight to ten years after the disaster."⁵⁷

Meanwhile, Union Carbide's plant near Seadrift—considered the safest plant in Texas—suddenly blew up in 1991, killing one worker and injuring 32 others. Diane Wilson learned from a classified document that Union Carbide had known about these potentially deadly hazards for 20 years.⁵⁸ As a result of her long-term commitment, she was invited to India by the people of Bhopal to attend the People's Tribunal on Human Rights and Industrial Hazards in 1992.

In 2001, Union Carbide merged with Dow Chemical, claimed that the Bhopal case was now closed, and they were not responsible. However, Union Carbide has left behind thousands of tons of toxic wastes and obsolete pesticides as well as contaminated groundwater resulting in high rates of birth defects and traces of poison in the milk of mothers there.⁵⁹ Even with ample evidence of dangerous negligence in terms of "the design, maintenance, and operation of the Bhopal plant, ... no

⁵³ Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* (London: Zed Books, 2002), p. 29.

⁵⁴ Nityanand Jayaraman, "Dow Chemical: A Rapsheet," *Ecologist Asia*, December, 2003.

⁵⁵ Diane Wilson in Jackson Allers, "Seadrift Woman Speaks Against Dow Chemical," *KPFT News* (full title unavailable), Houston, 2002.

⁵⁶ Maureen Bent, "Exporting Hazardous Industries: Should American Standards Apply?" *Journal of International Law and Politics*, 20, 1988, pp. 777-792; Chandana Mathur and Ward Morehouse, "Twice Poisoned Bhopal: Notes on the Continuing Aftermath of the Worst Industrial Disaster" *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 62, 200, pp. 269-75; Frank Pearce and Steve Tombs, "Bhopal: Union Carbide and the Hubris of Capitalist Technocracy," *Social Justice*, 16, 2, 1989, pp. 116-145.

⁵⁷ Jayaraman, *op. cit.*, p. 2

⁵⁸ Wilson in Allers, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁵⁹ Jayaraman, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

Indian government has pushed for [criminal] proceedings to begin, or sought the extradition from the U.S. of Warren Anderson, the CEO of Union Carbide at the time of the disaster.”⁶⁰

To get Dow Chemical to admit liability for Bhopal, three Indian activists went on a hunger strike outside the Indian Parliament in New Delhi in June 2002. They knew that their government was considering reducing charges against Anderson, apparently as a result of political pressure from the United States on behalf of Dow. The hunger strike lasted 18 days.

Inspired by their commitment, Diane Wilson started a hunger strike of her own at the end of July 2002 in front of the Dow plant near her home. She camped out in her pick-up truck with banners proclaiming "Dow Responsible for Bhopal" and inspired dozens of other solidarity strikers, including members of Unreasonable Women from eight countries.⁶¹ According to her account, about 1000 people joined the strike. She remained in her truck fasting for 29 days, and then on the last day, August 27, she scaled a 70-foot tower at Dow's Seadrift plant, unfurled a 12-foot protest banner, and chained herself to the railing.

In a short time, police helicopters were called in, and a SWAT team brought Diane Wilson down. She was bleeding where they dragged her out of her chains. In January 2004 she was sentenced to 120 days in jail for trespassing and has been out on bail since then. The result was sufficient pressure on the Indian government to seek Anderson's extradition.

I am a big believer in the power of people ... the political will of the people. I have no faith in the politicians. I mean you might have someone in office with integrity, but the way the system is set up, they lose it...⁶²

In June 2004, Diane Wilson and three other Bhopal activists engaged in a six-day, no-food, no-water strike to again try and force the Indian government "to submit a statement to the New York District Court in the Bhopal contamination clean-up case."⁶³ The Indian government agreed. According to an Indian woman in the protest (unfortunately unnamed in the report), this submission brings them closer to an order by the U.S. Court directing Union Carbide to clean up the over 20-year-old toxic contamination left in Bhopal. If this happens, it will set a precedent to make multinational companies accountable for their actions, including disposing their waste—wherever it is located.

Materialism not Essentialism

Essentialist assumptions are not necessarily involved when connections between women and nature are employed strategically by cultural feminists. But there is a further level to the debate over essentialism, one rarely addressed in the North American academic context. Sasha Roseneil points to the importance of acknowledging "women's socially constructed material experiences"—in Diane Wilson's case, her life as a mother and shrimper.⁶⁴ By this, Roseneil means the conditions that shape women's daily engagement with food production, household chores, childbirth and care. These

⁶⁰ Mathur and Morehouse, *op. cit.*, p.72.

⁶¹ Claitor, *op. cit.*, p.2.

⁶² Wilson, 2002, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁶³ "Bhopal Net" online at: www.bhopal.net

⁶⁴ Roseneil, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

conditions are historical and social—not mere effects of biology—and they are critical in forming most women's political consciousness.

Materialist ecofeminists like Maria Mies in *Patriarchy and Accumulation*, Mary Mellor in *Breaking the Boundaries*, and Ariel Salleh in *Ecofeminism as Politics* examine this socially reproductive work under capitalist patriarchal domination as a unique form of labor exploitation. And they analyze constructs like "closer to nature" as metaphors promoted by those with power to hold class, race, and gender relations in place.

From Biblical times women were subject to men's control, but the global expansion of capitalist patriarchal practices reinforces hierarchies of every kind. The association of people of color and white women with adjectives like "natural" and "animal"—read as "negative" and "primitive"—has become common. White women, people of color, all children, and animals are still often deemed to need white men's control, just like unruly nature "herself."⁶⁵ As Silvia Federici shows in *The Great Caliban*, this denigration has enabled the capture and exploitation of a vast pool of labor power—one that is often invisible.⁶⁶

Contrary to the judgment of many social constructionists, the materialist ecofeminist analysis does not endorse these essentializing constructs; rather it exposes them as the ideological tools of a ruling ethnic-gender class. Ecofeminists like Ynestra King and Andy Smith, and materialists in the international literature like Mariarosa and Giovanna Dalla Costa or Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill, for example, each address race and colonialism in ways that are emancipatory.⁶⁷

But given that this transnational ecofeminist approach tends to be either ignored or misunderstood by much of the U.S. academy with its heavy focus on textual analysis, it is not surprising to encounter Dorceta Taylor's view that potentially essentializing woman-nature metaphors do not illuminate the experiences of women of color.⁶⁸ In reality, white mothers, black mothers, and environmental justice activists all address material nature in their daily battle for bodily survival against the assaults of industrial capitalism in the form of "lead and asbestos poisoning in substandard housing, toxic waste incineration and dumping, and widespread unemployment."⁶⁹

Moreover, while women's socially reproductive labors under capitalism are oppressive to varying degrees, these labors also impart valuable kinds of knowledge, regardless of race or class differences between women. There are many positive aspects to the woman-nature link, not least a profound epistemological challenge embedded within it. This is where feminists in political ecology need to focus their politics—before debating the rights and wrongs of descriptive categories in potentially de-politicizing ways.

⁶⁵ Delores Williams, "Sin, Nature and Black Women's Bodies," in Carol Adams (ed.), *Ecofeminism and the Sacred* (New York: Continuum, 1993), pp. 24-29.

⁶⁶ Silvia Federici, "The Great Caliban: The Struggle Against the Rebel Body," *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 15, 2004, pp. 7-16.

⁶⁷ King, *op. cit.*; Andy Smith, "Ecofeminism Through an Anticolonial Framework," in Warren, 1997, *op. cit.*; Mariarosa and Giovanna Dalla Costa, *Paying the Price* (London: Zed Books, 1995); Terisa Turner and Leigh Brownhill, "Gender, Feminism and the Civil Commons," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies*, Vol. XXII, 2001, pp. 805-818.

⁶⁸ Dorceta Taylor, "Women of Color, Environmental Justice and Ecofeminism," in Warren (1997), p.62.

⁶⁹ Di Chiro, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

Carolyn Merchant uses the word "earth care," and she envisions a new society built around this ethic.⁷⁰ In the global South, domestic labor extends to farming and gathering using ecologically sound traditional ways of provisioning communities. Maria Mies' and Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen's practical "subsistence perspective" dovetails with these models of local autonomy and sustainability.

Against this international ecofeminist focus on the necessities of life, Sherilyn McGregor seems to take today's urban affluence as a given, seeing ecofeminists like Mies incurring too great a "political risk" and perpetuating traditional assumptions about women's care giving.⁷¹ Mies' reply is: "As women have nothing to gain in their humanity from the continuation of the growth model, they are able to develop a perspective of a society, which is not based on exploitation of nature, women and other peoples."⁷²

By this materialist ecofeminism, old ideas about women's oppression as mothers are less fundamental than women's socially reproductive labor, with its capacity to engage with, and ultimately transform, objective conditions. The materialist ecofeminist sees the academic fear of essentialism stemming from the critic's inability to move beyond existing cultural positions. The story of Diane Wilson is not so much about "Moral Motherhood" as an expression of Marx's proposition that the labor humans do is formative and changes the outside world as much as it changes a worker's subjectivity. For materialists, human consciousness develops in a dialectical way through sensuous bodily interaction with the material environment. Therefore, since we live in a world where women have more hands-on experience of material bodies and natures, it is predictable that they become ecopolitical activists *par excellence*.⁷³

Addressing a globalized future, Vandana Shiva writes that: "Survival becomes the juncture connecting different movements and women in different locations."⁷⁴ But the denunciation of ecofeminism as essentialist fixes women in the present. It also fails to grasp what ecofeminists like Shiva or Diane Wilson accomplish—*political outcomes*.

Dismantling oppressive ideologies does indeed involve the rejection of biologically determined, or ahistorical, or naturalized essences. But it is false to assume, as critics of essentialism do, that universal categories are immutable and never open to reinterpretation through political action. A strategic use of metaphor can be useful in activist organizing, but many women who are motivated to fight for justice may even believe in the value of some part of their "inadmissible identities" as mothers or housewives, as Diane Wilson does. The politics of judgments made by academics about working class activists like Diane, are highly questionable. Beyond this, Susan Griffin offers insightful analysis when she writes that:

Essentialism [does not] accurately describe any major trend in feminist thought. It is instead a kind of *bête*, a creature of dreams who contains the fearsome thoughts and feelings which belong to the accuser.⁷⁵

⁷⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁷¹ Sherilyn MacGregor, "From Care to Citizenship: Calling Ecofeminism Back to Politics," *Ethics and the Environment*, 9, 2004, p. 57.

⁷² Mies, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

⁷³ Salleh, 1997, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-139.

⁷⁴ Shiva, 1994, p. 2.

⁷⁵ Griffin, in Warren, 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

Valerie Bryson, seems to affirm this when she describes dismissal by essentialism as a display of elitism in the name of intellectual "purity." This elitism occurs as feminists, and sometimes socialists, reify theory, forgetting that there is always an uninterrogated "essence" somewhere. The issue is, at what point do we choose to encounter it—and why?⁷⁶ Susan Griffin judges that too much theoretical abstraction can lead to a crisis of language, an inability to say anything: "One defines words with other words, so by tautological chase, the definitive meaning of meaning is deferred to a future that can never exist solely with language."⁷⁷

An inability to say anything is also an inability to change anything. What is lost by this permanent deference to linguistic purity is the ability to take a stand. This can only bring comfort to the beneficiaries of global capitalist patriarchal institutions—including those who would rather theorize than *organize*.

Metaphorical manifestations of "nature" that sit in the text and do not lead to progressive social change are indeed problematic. But metaphors that call to action are empowering. Unfortunately, social constructionist feminists have made it a central point to deconstruct, dematerialize and theorize away the very meanings that are central to the motivational activism of women like Diane Wilson. As Kate Rigby writes, their intervention itself becomes political, because what it does is "entrench the divide between 'high feminist theory' and grass-roots feminist counterculture to the impoverishment of both."⁷⁸

So, how do we bridge this divide between theory and practice? Diane Wilson's answer is by transgressing, taking risks, making links, feeling as well as thinking, and taking things personally while analyzing them politically—in short, by "misbehaving"—hopefully in the academy as well as in the streets.

I believe that the game board, the rules, are made by the people in power, these corporations. Corporations like control. When you play by the rules, it's exactly what they want you to do. You spend your time filing your drafts, making your petitions, going to court, dealing with bureaucracy, and in the end they give you little scraps. Being rational, logical, and linear, working for more regulations isn't going to cut it. So you've got to *not* play by the game. If you don't, they won't know what to expect. If we play by their rules, we're not going to get anywhere. I believe you have to be unreasonable and go out for what you believe is possible...

Diane Wilson's current conception of what is possible focuses on testing the Vietnamese and Hispanic fishermen of Seadrift for endocrine disrupters, heavy metals and PCBs. Diane Wilson wants to launch "zero discharge" as a movement in the U.S. and abroad.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.6.

⁷⁷ Griffin, in Warren, 1997, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

⁷⁸ Rigby, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁷⁹ "Bioneers" online at: www.bioneers.org