

## Essentialism and the Semantics of Resistance: A Rejoinder to Jesse Goldstein

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My objective in writing about the ecofeminism of mother and fisherwoman Diane Wilson was to celebrate her political work and to show how theory devoid of direct connections to everyday material practice can be a dead weight. Jesse Goldstein's commentary "Ecofeminism in Theory and Praxis" supports my position that the "immateriality" of most postmodern theory perpetuates an "elitist theoretical perspective." And although he is a Marxist, Goldstein affirms that the activism of Wilson—and a myriad of other women like her yet to be recognized—constitutes "a way of seeing how non-capitalist productivities ... can translate ... into anti-capitalist struggle." However, I disagree with Goldstein's suggestion that centering my analysis around a particular group of ecofeminist thinkers who are historical materialists constitutes a sleight-of-hand. Yes, he is correct that after reviewing theoretical debates within ecofeminism as a recognition of its heterogeneity, I focus on ecofeminists whose work is based on historical materialism. The reason I do so is because their work best contextualizes the experiences described by Wilson in my interviews.

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### **Materialism is Not Essentialism**

My defense of works that are poetical or metaphorical—and as Goldstein recognizes "most vulnerable to critiques of essentialism"—is connected to this kind of ecofeminist theory. It rests on how Wilson herself has come to express her material situation. The use of metaphor, in Wilson's case, or poetry or song or even dance, provides the "motivation and inspirational strategies for progressive action." Such use of language as with the terms "woman," "mother" ... etc. does not deny and should not discount the fact that the root of all human experience is material. Thus, when Goldstein writes that "some ecofeminist work may indeed be rightfully critiqued as essentialist," I counter that when the materiality of all human experience is recognized as fundamental, and that materiality is constantly changing, and thus changing the "experiencer," then any claims to essentialism are moot. At least Goldstein does go on to agree with me that the actions of Wilson do demonstrate materialist ecofeminism and that my reading of her position is not fundamentally essentialist in a naïve positivist way. And this for me is the most important point he makes.

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Moreover, Adorno's concepts of "negative dialectics" or "non-identity," as I understand them, imply, much as Foucault came to argue, that regardless of the level of oppression, there is always space for resistance that allows for alternative identities and struggles to be articulated and actualized. As I state, and reinforce with a quote from ecofeminist Noël Sturgeon, "The identities of mother or wife or woman can be....'analyzed as useful parts of a theory of resistance.'" Thus, what might seem semantically essentialist in terms of reflecting the everyday need to label and categorize may—when put into political practice in terms of organizing and articulating struggle—prove to be highly subversive, fluid, and distinctly non-essentialist in challenging unjust material relations. Goldstein confirms as much in relation to the ways in which Wilson constructs her highly successful brand of anti-capitalist struggle. So I appreciate his thoughtful reading of my article and thank him for providing an opportunity to further clarify "the semantics of resistance."

