

Planetary destruction, ecofeminists and transformative politics in the early 1980s

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Abstract

This paper aims to bring back a piece of history. It tells the story of thousands of women who gathered in peace camps and parades in the early 1980s in order to stake a feminist claim against nuclear warfare and the capitalist economics of destruction. It takes a close look at the first ecofeminist gathering in Amherst (1979) and the ensuing Three Mile Island Parades ('80), Pentagon Actions in Washington DC ('80 & '81) and San Francisco ('81). It also examines women's peace camps, in particular those of Greenham Common near Newbury, England ('81-'87), of Puget Sound, Washington and of Seneca, New York (1983). Rather than arguing the importance of these protests, the paper describes them. The paper draws on the protestors' testimonies using their own published writings and archival data to show how ecofeminism is above all an innovative, transformative and life-affirming way of doing politics. The paper emphasizes emotions, not only of anger and fear but also of joy, and shows how these emotions fueled the protests. It revives the enthusiasm of crowds and small groups resisting together while paying attention to the clever organizing that allowed these women to gather in the first place. In sum, the paper excavates and details the story of the ecofeminist camps and parades so that we may learn from them for political action today.

Keywords

Ecofeminism, activism, peace camps, nuclear power, Cold War, 1980s, ecology, anti-capitalism, anti-patriarchy.

¹ This paper is based on research done in following archives: GA - Glamorgan Archives & Women's Archives of Wales in Cardiff and GTU - Graduate Theological Union archives at Berkeley. I would like to thank the Fund for Scientific Research in Belgium (FNRS) and the Belgian American Educational Foundation (BAEF) for their financial support. I also would like to thank Vinciane Despret, Isabelle Stengers and Lionel Devlieger for their encouragements and insightful remarks, as well as Lesley Wood for the great editing. Last but not least, I would like to dedicate this paper to Ynestra King and Gwyn Kirk who said so eloquently why the ecofeminist protest mattered.

To affirm life in dark times (a deed rather than a theory)

[W]e are not weak, we are not meek, we are very, very angry people, angry on our own behalf and on behalf of the entire planet Earth. (GTU St 13-15a)

Our success should be measured by whether or not we are stronger when the action is over. (GTU St 16-15a)

The beginning of the 1980s was depressing. Recession hit the West, unemployment was high and national deficits went skyrocketing. Ecological disasters kept piling up: acid rains, massive deforestations, ozone depletion, animal extinctions, industrial wastes and oil leaks had all become part of the big picture, and this only very recently. Moreover, as if the Rome report and the oil crisis of the early seventies hadn't been enough to bring the message home that consumerist progress and Keynesian politics wouldn't hold the key to humanity's salvation, the first signs of the terrible African famines started trickling in. Soon the images of starving Ethiopians and of the hundreds of thousands of hunger dead were on everyone's retina, depressing beyond telling. These were structural problems, most knew. There was a growing sense that the entire system was based on the wrong fundamentals, both ecologically and ethically.

The beginning of the 1980s were also frightening. A new generation of nuclear weapons - NATO's Cruise and Pershing II missiles - was deployed all over Europe (Blackwood 1984, 101, 114-117; Cook & Kirk 1983; Coll 1985, 13-15). Authoritarian and belligerent leadership was proclaimed by the 1979-elected British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and by the 1981-elected American President Ronald Reagan. Nuclear war was no longer presented as a remote risk but was taken on the government's agenda. For instance, in the UK, local councils were drilled and in 1980, the 'Protect and Survive' Campaign instructed each household - through leaflets first, then through radio and television - how to get organized in the event of a nuclear attack: how to whitewash windows, unhinge doors, and retreat in confined spaces with tinned food, a lot of water and a transistor radio, before re-emerging in some post-nuclear wasteland (Cook & Kirk 1983, 21; Roseneil 2000, 40-41).

An activist recalls how she became aware of the nuclear threat: "Rather than making us all sleep easier in our beds, assured that the government had our security interest at heart, 'Protect and Survive' served to bring home how seriously the government was taking the possibility of nuclear war." (Roseneil 2000, 41) At the time, activists also wrote that "National polls show that Americans now believe that a nuclear war will occur within their lifetime. [...] Many of us feel there is little hope that the world will survive into the 21st Century unless there is a drastic reversal of present trends." (White & Van Soest 1984, p. i) Then and now, reporters have stressed the worrisome nature of the eighties' political rhetorics such as "Reagan's announcement that he believes that Armageddon will come in his generation" or his use of *Star Wars*' phrasing

(Blackwood 1984, 41; Kramer 1999).

The beginning of the 1980s were definitely apocalyptic times. Popular culture obsessed about nuclear war. Television drama such as *Threads* or *The War Game*, BBC docudramas on nuclear war and its horrific aftermath, were hardly felt to be science-fiction. Local groups and schools watched *If You Love this Planet*, Helen Caldicott's video on the impact of nuclear war as suffered by Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors (Cook & Kirk 1983; Giosseffi 1988; Koen & Swaim 1980; Roseneil 2000; White & Van Soest 1984). Other apocalyptic icons of the era include films such as *Mad Max* and *A Day After* - stories of nuclear war and post-apocalyptic times - and protest songs aimed at the Cold War or at nuclear warfare such as Nena's *99 luftballons*, Orchestral Manoeuvre in the Dark's *Enola Gay* and Sting's *Russians*, to mention but few of today's popular reminiscences of the then felt fear. These were dark times. The end of the planet was palpable.

Amidst the threats and fears, because of them, in order to resist the end of the world and start working at civilizational change, i.e. change of the states of minds and ways of doing across the continents, ecofeminism was born. It all started in Amherst, Massachusetts, where a dozen women who called themselves *Women and Life on Earth* convened a meeting which was attended by six hundred women: "Ecofeminism in the Eighties" (Caldecott & Leland 1983, 6). The Three Mile Island nuclear meltdown - the forerunner of the Chernobyl and Fukushima disasters - was the trigger. The conference's scope, however, was much larger than that. It was concerned with militarism, nuclear tests, chemical dumping, toxic wastes, industrial food, strained agriculture, selective health care and women's oppression. Unlike many other movements of the time, it presented unusual tools for change including - besides lobbying and factual knowledge-making - collaborative art projects, collective reappraisals of nurturers' values, and expressions of women's experiences as well as mythic story-telling, womanly rituals and earth-based spirituality (Caldecott & Leland, 1983; GTU Sp 1-1a and b).

Some of these tools were enacted during the three-days' meeting. They seem to have been quite successful. A participant reported: "[The art project] was essential, a divergence from the ultra-logocentric dullness of politically-oriented gathering; a validation of the integrity and tenderness women are trying to bring to all the work we do." (GTU Sp 1-1a) Indeed, ecofeminists did not only connect the oppression of women and nature by pointing to the common roots in the logics of capitalism and modern science - which is still a powerful premise (Thompson 2006) - but they also emphasized more joyful and transformative ways of doing politics. They've called it a political "style" (Roseneil 1995, 101; see also Blackwood 1984; Dejanikus & Dawson 1981; Laware 2004; Liddington 1989) which, many of them seem to agree, was "life-affirming" (Cataldo & co. 1987, p. 53; Kirk 1989, 121; see also King 1989; UTA FF 1).

The contents and effects of this "style" is what I would like to investigate further. What kind of politics did the ecofeminists invent? How different were their political ways from other movements? What can we learn from them,

practically, that will help us to shape our states of minds and means of action as we face planetary peril today? In sum, how can we take on their legacy?

Actually, the focus on “style” and the questions on practical legacy already hint at the stance taken by this paper. I am following the approach of two ecofeminists, Ynestra King and Gwyn Kirk, for whom ecofeminism was foremost a means of action, a way of engaging in politics. For them, in order to remain relevant, ecofeminism had to avoid becoming a nicely abstract idea (Kirk 1989, p. 274; Cook & Kirk 1983; King 1983; King 1989). King and Kirk admired the ecofeminist protests of the early 1980s in which they took part. They tried to keep ecofeminism practical even when ecofeminism increasingly became an academic and theoretical endeavor, especially after *Ecofeminist Perspectives* - the seminal conference organized by the University of Southern California in Los Angeles in 1987 (Diamond & Orenstein 1990; Plant 1989). For instance, at the end of the eighties, King and Kirk attempted to establish the *WomanEarth Institute* with other ecofeminists such as Charlene Spretnak and Starhawk, (GTU St 3-13a, 13-15b, 13-21, 14-14). The institute was meant to work as a clearinghouse for women who wanted to go against the destructive nature of patriarchal capitalism by setting up social and ecological projects that fostered self-reliant communities. Such projects included permaculture, squatting empty lots, cleaning toxic dumps, etc. Although it received an enthusiastic response, *WomanEarth*, in part for lack of funds, never got off the ground. To the great regret of its founders.

I think history has proved King and Kirk right. They were right to fear nicely abstract ideas. Today, books on ecofeminism leave us with many moral insights, ethical claims and self-righteous arguments, but with very few tools for actually engaging in our lives and starting to change things. One of the exceptions is Vandana Shiva whose books reveal, and remain connected to, ecological struggles led by women all over the world. But she’s quite unique in this. Another exception, of a different kind, are the precursors of ecofeminist literature. Griffin’s *Women and Nature*, Daly’s *Gyn/ecology* and Merchant’s *Death of Nature*, are books that inspired women to act. They were all published at the time of Amherst and they are all now classics (Daly 1978, Griffin 1978, Merchant 1980). Those books avoid ethical claims and self-righteous arguments in favour of stories and history. They present empirical investigations into memory and modern myth-making. They are *part* of the transformative politics because they allow women to draw uncommon practical genealogies and subversive sisterhood alliances.

In other words, the writings of activists, amongst them King and Kirk, and more generally archival research have led me to believe that ecofeminism, perhaps in contrast to other subversive ideologies, doesn’t lend itself well to programmatic outlines and theoretical considerations that are merely prescriptive. That it’s often weakened by non-empirical ethical papers. Ecofeminism, if we want to take it on, needs description and story-telling.

To offer such detail, I’ll describe key ecofeminist actions. I’ll tell their story and investigate their life-affirming style. In particular, I’ll look at the Three Mile

Island Parades ('80), the Pentagon Actions in Washington DC ('80 & '81), the West Coast Pentagon Action in San Francisco ('81) and the Women's peace camps of Greenham Common near Newbury, England ('81-'87), of Puget Sound, near Kent, Washington ('83) and of Seneca, near Romulus, New York ('83). Although few protesters felt the need to call themselves ecofeminists, they all claimed the crucial role of women and of alternative caring ways of doing politics in order to address the destruction of humanity and the Planet. They wrote letters, visited and traveled from one protest to the other and they proudly commented on these protests as being part of a new movement (Cataldo & co 1987; Coll. 1985; Linton 1989; UTA FF 2; White & Van Soest 1984). Some of them called this movement ecofeminist (Caldecott & Leland 1983; GTU St 13-13b; King 1983); others didn't; but all of them felt they were part of a new beginning.

To sum up: examining the ecofeminist protests of the early 1980s means that I'll dive into the period before ecofeminism grew into an academic and theoretical body, i.e. before *Ecofeminist Perspectives* established ecofeminism for good. In a way, one could say that this paper tries to unearth the roots of ecofeminism when the term stood for political action, but that's too easy. The emphasis rather lies on the powers of life-celebration. Indeed, choosing such an empirical and historical focus means that I'll dive into dark times, when an apocalyptic civilizational mood triggered a lot of fear and also much anger, feelings without which many of these women would not have acted. I'll dive into the protestors' accounts who've told us, then and now, what life celebration meant in face of such darkness and why these actions were, therefore, so special. For, and let's not forget that crucial point, it is the darkness of those times that triggered the life-affirming style of ecofeminist protests.

To enact and dramatize (not a nicety but a necessity)

We must plead, harangue, protest, demand - all kinds of things! [...] make (oh, horrors! oh, embarrassment!) a fuss, then a bigger fuss; then a bigger fuss again. (Carter 1983, 155)

The way we went about it spoke to the word "Future". (Paley 1998[1983], 155)

At the first gathering in Amherst, future actions and strategies were discussed. There was much talk about "creative protests" (GTU Sp 1-1a; Gyorgy 2007) a term which loosely referred to the unusual tactics taken up by anti-nuclear demonstrators such as the Vermont Spinsters who had woven a web of life at the gates of the Yankee Nuclear Plant, or Women Strike for Peace who, in the sixties, had sent their baby's teeth to the Senate and circled the Pentagon while chanting their disgust with radioactive politics (Caldecott & Leland 1983; Liddington 1989). It was also quite clear from the outset that the actions and strategies were to involve a large dose of stubbornness, of intractability, of trust

in one's sense of fear and one's emotions for pointing out the political issues. This had been convincingly argued by speakers who had taken part in Women Strike for Peace but also in the ongoing struggle of Love Canal, a struggle involving toxic dumps, miscarriages and the authorities' refusal to relocate the, by then, furious inhabitants (Gibbs 1982; GTU Sp 1-1a; Swerdlow 1993).

To be intractable, fussy and unreasonable, meant that official talk had to be translated into tangible reality: words such as 'cost-benefit ratios' or 'acceptable risks' were to be replaced by material descriptions of deformity, loss and disease (Caldecott and Leland 1983; see also Cook and Kirk 1983; UTA FF 1; Mies and Shiva 1993). It also meant that no expert's contempt would any longer deter any woman from learning her science and, at the same time, from trusting her intuition when she felt that something was going terribly wrong - the Love Canal mothers had taught the ecofeminists that much (Paley 1998[1984]; see also Hamilton 1990). Finally, it meant the refusal of trade-offs. All causes were connected.

One of the most heartening things about the gathering was the assumption that all this was, of course, about a huge transformation. No one was particularly interested in working toward a world free of nuclear reactors but full of violent men; or free of male brutality at the expense of the third world people; or free of racism, but full of the same old poverty and unshared opportunity. (GTU Sp 1-1a)

In other words, at Amherst, the 'governmental' version of reality was countered by a more bodily and connective version of reality. This was well put by the organizers themselves:

We're here to say the word ECOLOGY and announce that for us feminists it's a political word - that it stands against the economics of the destroyers and the pathology of racist hatred. It's a way of being, which understands that there are connections between all living things and that indeed we women are the fact and the flesh of connectedness. (Caldecott & Leland 1983, 6)

It was this other version of reality, this fleshy and ecological way of being, that lent its creative edge to the ecofeminists' protests. The idea was to "speak [our] truth to power", a Quaker slogan which here meant that the protests were to enact ecofeminist practice (Paley, 1998 [1984], 159; Starhawk 1982, 169). And so they did. The parades of the first anniversary of Three Mile Island, just some weeks after Amherst, and the Pentagon Action in November 1980 - both planned for at Amherst - were connective and celebratory.

The Three Mile Island Memorial Parade of San Francisco - the only one I found any trace of - was a street theater performance within which 5,000 participants took part (Starhawk 1982, 169-72). The first act presented survivors of Hiroshima, Native Americans against uranium mining, and mourning women; all chanting and wailing. They were followed by nuclear experts, a life-devouring cooling tower (baby dolls were thrown into it), and a medieval plague cart that called out the future dead. In contrast, the second act was uplifting. It was introduced by a rainbow colored banner with drawings of landscapes and ecological connections. This was followed by contingents of people representing water, air, fire and earth, using puppets and sketches, dragons and goddesses.

At the end of the parade, the cooling tower was destroyed. While some people stomped on the remains, others chanted for a new era to begin.

No speeches were made. Only a booklet with data on nuclear power was handed out. As one organizer recalled: "The Parade was designed to speak the language of things - to convey its message in sensual, creative and funny ways" (Starhawk 1982, 170). A similar approach was used in November when activists at the Pentagon Action purposefully avoided speeches and merely allowed the declamation of a collectively elaborated Unity Statement. Phrasing was dramatic. The women expressed the desperation felt at the bellicose US policies and summoned their Government: "We have come to mourn and rage and defy the Pentagon"! They stated their agony as well as the desires they carried for a better world. But besides that, they hardly spoke. Instead they staged "a two-thousand women theater of sorrow, rage and defiance" (Paley 1998, 127).

First, the women walked silently through the military burying ground, after which, at the Pentagon, they raised a second cemetery for other victims of oppression. All participants could place a tomb stone. One remembered:

The most memorable tombstone was brought by a California housewife who had never been in a political action in her life. She traveled alone from California with her tombstone on which she had written, *'For the three Vietnamese women my son killed'*. (King 1989, 288)

Then, four processions were held, each led by a giant puppet and its corresponding score: a black puppet for mourning, with women keening and wailing; a red one for rage, with women shouting and beating drums; a golden one for empowerment, with women waving scarves and encircling the building; a last one for defiance, with women singing, pushing and weaving the Pentagon doors shut.

The Pentagon Action reverberated. Left and feminist journals discussed the new political aesthetics (Dejanikus & Dawson 1981; Linton & Whitman 1982). Protesters recounted their experience - even of jail (139 women were arrested) - with fondness: "Some of our most moving moments came when we re-energized our group by singing songs of wimmin [sic] love and protest." (Dejanikus & Dawson 1982, 29) Soon, the Unity Statement was translated into Spanish, French, German, Italian and Dutch, attracting many Europeans the next time round (King 1989, 287; Gyorgy 2007). The following year the Pentagon Action doubled its numbers - from 2,000 to 4,000 participants - and was echoed on the West Coast where, the same day, in San Francisco, three hundred women wove a web and placed tombstones at the façade of an exclusive male club that was involved in military decision-making (GTU St 16-15b; Starhawk 1982). There also, the atmosphere was invigorating, remembered a protester: "Chanting and drums created a powerful background to the weaving of the web" (GTU St 16-15b).



West Pentagon Action 1981. Press clipping from It's About Times - Abalone Alliance newspaper, December 1981 - January 1982, p. 14. Source: Graduate Theological Union Archives, Berkeley. Starhawk collection. Box 16 "Political Activism", folder file 15 "Diablo Canyon Nuclear Power Plant Protests 1981 (and other)".

What's the legacy? What's so fascinating? These protests show the powers of enactment. They show that politics can happen through performance and play. Indeed, in all of them, iconography was meant to bring women back to life. Grief and anger, but also elation and thrill, were to invade the public realm "thereby subverting the false tidiness of business as usual" (King 1989). All these emotions were part of the liveliness that was played out in the face of a deadly place. Protestors evolved in a drama where they could bodily, collectively, affirm

their desire for life and confront the darkness of their time. This is to say that life-affirmation was not just a theme. Rather, for these women, it was a necessity. They had to overcome a despair that was overwhelming. As one who'd just been arrested, explained: "It is like living on the edge of a precipice. I feel threatened at a very basic level." (Dejanikus & Dawson 1981, 3). The presence of despair and the need of a vitalist iconography as well as the inkling that resuscitation requires both chanting and raging, both celebration and critique, forged the common ground for all ecofeminist protests of the early eighties. "Fear is the starting point" women said at Greenham (Cook & Kirk 1983, 11). "We confront our fears" said others at Seneca (Cataldo & co. 1987, 65).

This is why, when the media finally covered ecofeminism and benevolently portrayed these activists as cheerful puppeteers and kind goddess-lovers, they couldn't have been more wrong. For they had missed the necessity. "We're here for survival, not the niceties of things!" (GTU St 3-13c) retorted an activist to the press. In other words, ecofeminists used puppets and goddesses as powers of enactment, i.e. in order to help them bring about a change of mind, their change of mind, in a hostile civilizational mood. They were channeling their fears into action, releasing their anger, and thereby performing their own revitalization.

In England, Greenham was no different. The peace camp started from a fit of anger. The woman who was to become the initiator of the march was home, putting newspaper clippings in files but;

That day, after the umpteenth 'Minister rejects inquiry findings' and 'radioactive leak denied' I sort of literally blew a fuse, and I think I started shouting. And I went to the under stairs cupboards and got out these rolls of old white wallpaper and unrolled them along that kitchen floor, got out a black felt tip. I wrote something like 'Nuclear power - poisoning our environment - nuclear weapons - more and more built every year', and something like 'This cannot go on. This must stop' - in great big letters, like a Chinese wall newspaper. And I made several rolls of this. (Ann Pettitt in Liddington 1989, 222)

She then put the banner up at the local shop of her Welsh village and with the shop owner they agreed to call a meeting. The ball started rolling.

From 1981 onwards, in the Women's peace camps, of Greenham Common, Seneca, Puget Sound and others, many more banners were made, puppets were carried, webs woven, keening done, gates shut and fences cut. Women simulated nuclear "die-ins": they fell dead onto nearby streets and obstructed traffic for several minutes. Or, in the manner of collaborative art projects, they transformed the military barriers into memorials for the living by placing belongings of their beloved in the iron mesh, or by weaving colorful landscapes into the mesh. Or they contained the aggression with mirrors, by reflecting the dark mood back into the military bases. Or they organized happy burials of missiles, laundromat sit-ins, etc. The ways of resuscitation were manifold, ... and they were effective.

Many women felt joy at finally cutting through numbness, at not putting up any longer with men's nuclear folly (Cook & Kirk 1983; UTA FF 2). They were invigorated by the powers of theatricality, as one of them - who had been at the

Pentagon and later went to Greenham - testified by telling this anecdote:

A woman walked up carrying a large puppet; an enormous woman's head with long red hair and brightly colored hand-painted robes. 'This is the Goddess,' she said. 'Right,' said [another woman], 'let's walk to Newbury.' We [all] set off, the Goddess in the lead, bright against snow-laden branches and clear sky. (Lynne Jones' anecdote in Liddington 1989, 236)

This is to say that puppets, goddesses, mirrors, and other so-called symbols brought the optimism of action. Women felt joy at getting out of the cerebral realm of words and arguments, and into the more corporeal realm of grief, anger and celebration: "It's a means of expression without words, without having to get tied up in various arguments, facts and figures, whys and wherefores. You can just show how you feel." (Jayne Burton in Cook & Kirk 1983, 65)

To put it concisely, rehearsing the above in just a few words, ecofeminist protests of the early eighties were special because they were places of drama where women could reclaim their sense of joy and hope for the future when all, in fact, seemed lost to them.

Raising womanly powers, or how to undo the nuclear twists of mind

[The dreams] make me feel as if I should be listening to them in some way and I just don't know in what way. (Wendy in Cook & Kirk 1983, 21)

All [our] actions recognize the validity of personal experience, feelings and ideas. They involve starting where we are now and building on what we can do. (Cook & Kirk 1983, 63)

When running through the records, one feature cannot fail to draw the attention: the nuclear flashes and nightmares. Many women who got involved in the life-affirming actions of the early eighties had suffered from daytime flashes and recurring dreams of total annihilation. They had felt either paralyzed or obsessed by them, and at any case ridiculed when voicing their concern to fellow men. More even, some women had started having flashes and nightmares when they became pregnant - incidentally, this launched the group *Babies against the Bomb* (Cook & Kirk 1983, 44). A Greenham woman confirmed: "This sounds exaggerated; it is only as exaggerated as th[is] imag[e]: a mother crying alone in a room because she is suddenly intensely aware that she might not be able to protect her child from a hideous nuclear death" (Liz Knight in Cook & Kirk 1983, 86). And this image draws from many wells at once, of zeitgeist darkness of course, but also of housewife-blues and motherly worry. This is to say that the motives of ecofeminist protests also laid in - at the time - mostly womanly concerns of care, fostering and emancipation.

Greenham Common started in motherly fussy fashion. Late summer 1981, some thirty women who called themselves *Women for Life on Earth* (Caldecott & Leland 1983, 6-7; Cook & Kirk 1983, 84; GA DWLE 8; Liddington 1989, 226; Spretnak 1991) - soon to merge with the American-English network *Women and Life on Earth* (GA DWLE 5-2) - walked, with children and strollers and a handful of male supporters, for nine days from Cardiff to Newbury to protest against nuclear war. They took the lead from the other, more attended, peace march that had gone from Copenhagen to Paris that same year. They handed out leaflets and made speeches. Their rallying cry caught local attention: "Women invest their work in people - and feel a special responsibility to offer them a future - not a wasteland of a world and a lingering death!" (Roseneil 2000, 44-5; see also GA DWLE 1-92) But the national press didn't cover the march, not even as it arrived. Some women, inspired by the suffragettes, then decided to chain themselves to the fence of the military base and demanded an interview with the State Secretary of Defense. When the latter failed to arrive, the women stayed.

What was meant to be a short-lived march became the mother of all peace camps. Greenham Common inspired people all over Europe and the US to raise dozens of camps (Cook & Kirk 1983, 33; Kirk 1989, 276). It remained large until the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty of 1987 and then continued with fewer campers until the base of Newbury was finally dismantled in 2000 (Cox 2000; Laware 2000). Of course, the longevity of the camp cannot be attributed to the initial WLOE only. Word had spread quickly. The hikers had been joined by many other women, some of whom had been at the Pentagon Action, others who had been part of the peace movement and others still who - without previous political experience - had felt attracted by the commonsensical, motherly and rebellious nature of the camp (Cook & Kirk 1983; Kirk 1989b; Liddington 1989, 219). Participants themselves said that their different horizons met by ways of "gut reactions" (Lesley Boulton in Cook and Kirk 1983, 84). These women shared a sense of foreboding. Ecological devastation, social injustice and warfare, just to name their prime concerns, worried and angered them greatly. They had no ready-made answers, but they knew two things.



March to Greenham 1981. Photo. Source: Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff. Women for life on earth records, 1981-2002. Photographs of the march from Cardiff to Greenham Common, and of marchers at Greenham Common. DWLE/7/22. Copyright owner unknown.

First, women of Greenham, Seneca, Puget and other camps, knew that change had to involve the entire system and that it could happen by fostering powers of care, regeneration and nurture. As one explained, when stating her reasons for being at the camp: “[Before coming] I sensed this sick mentality all around me that was motivated not by the sacredness of life but by fear that was feeding the arms race.” (Sarah van Veen in Cook & Kirk 1983, 29) Secondly, these women knew that other ways of doing politics were required, ways that were more attentive to the involvement of small groups, to the stimulation of local initiatives, to letting everyone take the floor and to accounting for women’s experiences. This is why camps put up deliberative methods, rotating leadership structures and “feeling checks”. Fears and hopes were shared. So too were flashes, nightmares and obsessions. One such nightmare, recorded in a camp’s logbook, is intriguing:

I was in a jeep driving through a very wasted landscape. It looked like a desert but I knew it was a long time after a nuclear war. I was going away from one area to somewhere safer. [...] There was some trouble with the jeep, and it seemed fairly unlikely that we would get to our destination [...] My friend was driving, and I was holding between my knees a giant piece of ice. Inside the block there was a fish, and this was the last fish, which I had to get to London, which was the last place where there was still some clean water where the fish could survive. [...] The heat from the engine was starting to melt the ice, and I had to keep shifting it, and try to steer by non-existent stars. When I woke up - still on the journey - I felt quite calm. Noa. (Cook & Kirk 1983, 17).

There’s a good chance that Noa felt calm *because* she was at the camp, actually doing something about the nuclear problem. In more general terms, women’s camps undid the nuclear twists of mind. The camps loosened fear’s grip. They broke the apocalyptic spell. This is one of the big achievements of the ecofeminist protests of the early eighties: women got out of the end-of-time paralysis; they stopped running against time and started working at change for the long run.

How did they do this? How did they break the spell? It’s hard to tell, as collective causality meanders, but the rituals definitely played a major role. Indeed, at the camps, all kinds of rituals were set up, all meant to raise constructive womanly powers against the powers of planetary destruction. This was no easy feat. Rituals are demanding. They require a consecrated place, a cosmology and a community of their own, if not authentic ones, at least effective ones. Only when those requisites were met, could the rituals truly take hold and the spell be broken.

The requisites’ value was well understood by the Seneca women. In the summer of 1983, following Greenham Common, they opened the camp with these words: “We pledge allegiance to the earth, And to the life which she provides, One planet interconnected, With beauty and peace for all.” (Cataldo & co. 1987, 21). They then reclaimed the land around the nuclear arms depot by planting rose bushes and by decorating the fence with tokens of life’s beauty. Last, they

declared their connection to the Iroquois women who in 1590 had assembled in Seneca Falls in order to stop warfare, and to the women of the Declaration of Sentiments who in 1848 had gathered there to demand equal rights and the end of slavery. The camp's song said no different: "We are the old wimmyn, We are the new wimmyn, We are the same wimmyn, Stronger than before." (Linton 1989, 242) As one participant and former organizer of Amherst recalled: the camp was, from the start, embedded in "Herstory" (Paley 1998[1983], 149).

The same was true for other camps. At Greenham Common, women took much time and effort to construct collective pasts (Roseneil 2000, 13-37). The suffragettes were often called upon. Woolf's *Three Guineas* - a 1938 feminist essay on women facing the upcoming World War II - allowed for further connections between the young and the old. Many campers also read feminist historical accounts such as Daly's *Gyn/ecology* or Eihrenreich and English's *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*. Through this, they connected to the Diggers of the 17th Century - agrarian communists before their time - and to the prosecuted witches of Early Modern Europe. This, in turn, led them to take interest in pagan earth-based religions. And let's not forget that the Greenham women had socialist and Marxist roots too; that they explicitly linked their struggle to the civil rights movement, the gay movement and the women's liberation front, amongst others. Their genealogies were plural. Women's camps were multi-faceted. And this was not considered a flaw.

In making pledges, consecrating spaces and telling stories, women didn't aim at taking a univocal stance but they aimed at sustaining the camps. They opened up another civilizational time-frame, away from the planetary apocalypse and into *herstory* or history-making. As one put it: "We cannot alter the course of the world if we are paralyzed by fear." (Julia Park in Coll. 1985, 112) In such a civilizational time-frame, all kinds of rituals could then be held. Pagan and seasonal celebrations, witches' and dead's commemorations, women blockades and lesbian rallies, spiral dances and chain-making, Halloween and 4th of July parties, night-watches and anger rites, ... all fitted in, and all raised womanly powers. As a camper said about the Puget women stomping their feet and dancing circles until one of Reagan's Seattle meetings was over: "The energy we raise is phenomenal" (Cynthia Nelson in Coll. 1985, 79; see also GTU St 14-31)

Many rituals could be described that way. But two stand out. Two raised powers so phenomenal that they gained world-wide acclaim. Both happened at Greenham Common during the winter of 1982-'83. One is known as "Embrace the Base"; the other as "Silo Dance".

On December 12th 1982, 30.000 women encircled the base's nine miles' perimeter. They decorated the fence with belongings of the living, of children and grandchildren, and, at set times, while holding hands, sang songs which they had learned by heart. "It felt like a reclamation of life." (Liz Knight in Cook & Kirk 1983, 86) Another woman recalled how the ritual went beyond the given:

I'll never forget that feeling; it'll live with me for ever. The lovely feeling of pinning the things on; and the feeling, as we walked around, and we clasped hands. It was even better than holding your baby for the first time, after giving

birth - and that is one of the loveliest feelings you can ever have. When your babe's put in your arms and you give it a cuddle. Because that is a self-thing - selfish thing really, between you and your husband, isn't it? The baby. Whereas Greenham - it was for women; it was for peace; it was for the world; it was for Britain; it was for us; it was for more. (Mary Brewer in Liddington 1989, 244).



Embrace the Base 1982. Postcard with printing: "USAF Greenham Common, 12 December 1982. Photo (c) John Sturrock/ Network. ACME Cards".

Source: Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff. Women for life on earth records, 1981-2002, Correspondence, draft articles, and news-cuttings relating to activities at Greenham Common peace camp 1982-1984. DWLE/6/10. With permission from John Sturrock.

Three weeks later, on New Year's Eve, at midnight, forty-four women climbed onto a missiles-sheltering silo. They danced for more than an hour. Police was slow to react and the secretly invited press had plenty of time to take pictures. Those pictures went around the world. People were impressed. Women had dared to challenge the military power in what seemed an almost suicidal act at the time. One recalled:

"In my mind I saw [the silos] as revolting man-made boils on the earth's surface, full of evil. I wanted to let out the feelings I have about the threat of nuclear war - the fear and the dread. And I wanted to concentrate on the future, to feel optimistic and get strength and hope that we can stop it. I kept thinking about celebrating life. What actually happened was that I did just that. When we got on the silos, even though we were so excited, I stood quietly for a few minutes, with

my eyes closed, and let it all drain out of me. After that I just kept thinking about being alive!"(Juliet Nelson in Cook & Kirk 1983, 54-55)

Greenham women and other campers made history. Thatcher cursed them many times over. Gorbachev hailed their influence. They strained international relations when some of them even visited the USSR. They had succeeded in being a nuisance. In the UK, after the Newbury base was dismantled, land was returned to the commons - a rare victory indeed. In the US, the anti-nuclear protests - of which some were ecofeminist - that followed the Three Miles Island meltdown led the country to stop building domestic nuclear plants for many years. In retrospect, it seems that these victories are based on the understanding that extraordinary times call for extraordinary means, rituals included, and that the end of time has to be replaced by the long run. As one ecofeminist stated: "We need no new [post-apocalyptic] heaven and Earth. We have this Earth, this sky, this water, to renew." (Keller 1990, 263)

To sum up: the ecofeminist protests of the early eighties were places of tales and rituals where women gained a sense of power, where they knew that they could and would make a difference.

Leaps of faith and tiny circles, or why the women kept coming (back)

"[F]or those of us who are trying to create these new politics, it is like a continual seeking of grace" (King 1989, 282).

"I'm looking for a group of people ready to jump into the void, into the unknown, to struggle for new ways to create reality, to be in the universe" (GTU St 3-13d)

It should be clear by now that the ecofeminist protestors of the early '80s were not martyrs, nor fools. They didn't sacrifice themselves but got joy and power. They countered the real possibility of planetary warfare and helped slacken the grip of nuclear energy. Their camps and parades should therefore, at the very least, be defined as a meeting-place of Cassandra's (while not forgetting that the mythical Cassandra was right!) Protestors connected because they felt relief at finally being understood. A woman conveyed this feeling quite well as she recalled her arrival at the camp:

Just talking to women that day and listening to the way they talked, I understood it because they were talking with the same passion that I was feeling, and nobody had understood it where I had been for the last nine months. They just understood it, and you weren't considered a lunatic if you gave voice to the despair that you were feeling. And women said, yeah, I know what that feels like. And that was such a relief. And things were never the same again. (Simone in Roseneil 2000, 57; see also GTU St 5-8)

Furthermore, camps and parades should be defined as places of "self-transformation" (Roseneil 2000, 55). Most women participated because it

changed them. They came back, over and over, not only to stop worldwide destruction but also to keep getting more confident. They felt stronger as they got to know and appreciate other women more. This is to say that lesbian politics and womanly love had a great impact (Krasniewicz 1992; Roseneil 1995; Roseneil 2000). Protestors reclaimed a transformed - sometimes ritually liberated - sense of sensual self. About a spiral dance performed in jail after one of the anti-nuclear Diablo Canyon Blockades in 1981, Starhawk says: "We dance, because this is, after all, what we are fighting for: this life, these bodies, breasts, wombs, this smell of flesh; this joy; this freedom - that it continue, that it prevail." (Starhawk 1982, 153). In other words, following King's and Kirk's conclusions, the ecofeminist protests of the early eighties were part of a new "transformative politics" (Kirk 1989b, 274), a "libidinal politics" (King 1989, 282).

These observations bring us back to the beginning of the paper, to the bodily and connective version of reality, to the fleshy and ecological ways of being, all claimed at Amherst. But the circle isn't closed yet. One element is missing: how was it possible? How was it possible for 30.000 women to embrace a base? For thousands to stage plays? For hundreds to stay at camps when they had lives to tend to? The easy answer is to list demographical facts: many protestors were either retired or jobless, or students with long breaks, or housewives who could shortly be missed at home, or mothers who brought their children along for the holidays. The dynamic answer, then, is that action is forever relayed. Degrees of involvement varied greatly, from writing an elaborate statement to placing a cardboard tombstone at the Pentagon, from walking nine days to giving shelter at one of the stops to Newbury, from filling logbooks to organizing full-fledged rituals, etc. The effort was spread over a crowd, and the crowd was never exactly the same.

Still, the answer eludes us. How did women get involved and actually start changing their lives? We must look at the connective media such as chain-letters, address books and press releases, and the simple call carried by these tools. For instance, one of the teenage founders of Greenham got involved after reading an advert in the *Cosmopolitan*: all that was asked of her was that she should walk with others who, like her, were fed up with the arms' race and the violent ways of society (GA DWLE 8-7). The same happened for "Embrace the Base" which resulted from a chain-letter sent by Women For Life on Earth, just some weeks before, that in substance said this: "Believe it will work and it will" (Cook & Kirk 1983, 107). At Puget, they found another formula for it: "We don't have options in how we live our lives until we behave like we do." (Coll. 1985, 86) In other words, women were not shy in circulating information widely, in calling for simple things, on modest common ground, and in inviting others to join them in a leap of faith.

Such leaping calls raised the prospect, not of endless meetings, polemical debates and membership dilemmas, but of action there and then. They allowed for easy involvement: women didn't need legitimacy other than wanting to do something about the darkness of their time; they didn't need more common

ground other than believing that nurturing, non-violent and caring ways made sense in such a time. There were many easy beginnings. Many women responded gladly to such straightforward invitations.

But there's more. The records also testify to responses made by affinity groups, i.e. small, local and non-hierarchical groups that meet regularly in order to plan action together (Cataldo et al., 1987, 65). These groups had various purposes of their own and were, in their turn, often triggered by simple calls. Just to name a few who took part in Greenham Common: *Babies against the Bomb* was raised by a woman who placed an advert in a newsagent's window asking for others to contact her if they also dreaded the arms' race; *Isle of Wight Women* was initially a branch of the National Housewives Register who organised discussions at home to keep updated and involved in societal matters (they became very involved indeed after inviting over a nuclear expert who blatantly lied to them!); *Chester Women for Peace* was born from an invitation of one mother to others, of the same school and neighborhood, in order to discuss their children's future; other groups were established in living-rooms or local clubs after seeing Caldicott's video; etc (Cook & Kirk 1983, 44, 99). In other words, the effort was spread over a crowd, and that crowd had many tiny crowds in it.

Affinity groups, as Liddington argues, were crucial to the success of camps and parades. They prepared the ground. Not only did they pre-exist but they offered ways of organizing protest. This organizational element will round off the answer given to the question of "how this was possible". It will complete the picture of how such exceptional protests were *made* possible.

Affinity groups were a legacy of the 1970s. In Britain, they were bequeathed by the women's movement who had advocated "small women-only consciousness-raising groups [that stood] in stark contrast to the formal structures of the political parties" (Liddington 1989, 198). In the US, they were bequeathed by the civil disobedience movement and, as a working method, had been adopted by peace groups, self-help groups, anti-nuclear groups, environmental groups, etc., ultimately becoming a favored means of organizing action in democratic fashion. By the early 1980s, affinity groups were available as a model for women who wanted to organize, to set out and to go about their protests.

For instance, the *Unity Statement*, or Pentagon call, was written collaboratively (King 1989, 287; Paley 1998, 127). For weeks, at meetings that were held in person or by phone, the text kept changing. Penholder and Amherst-organizer Grace Paley submitted dozens of versions to women who, for most, lived on the northern East Coast. Many women belonged to political organizations, often competing ones, but as a writing-group through collaborating they were able to shape a new coherence. Or stated inversely, all of their presences were required in order to tackle the several issues at stake: connections were made between ecology, patriarchy, militarism and racism while the group saw to it that the understanding of the connections kept its feminist groundings; the traditional lives and work of women was valued while drawing on feminist analysis and politics for doing so. The result was spectacular. As a reporter at the Pentagon observed, after talking to the protestors; "Many women said how the Statement

had inspired them to join the Action. *"It was like a light bulb flashing on."*
(Dejanikus & Dawson 1981, 3)

Already existing or ad hoc affinity groups were useful at the Seneca Peace Camp too. Seneca was to be a place of "ongoing protest" (Linton 1989, 248). General meetings planned regular activities, such as workshops, and one-time activities, such as rituals or blockades, for the entire camp to take part in. Affinity groups facilitated the success of these activities. For example, during blockades, the groups split into activists and supporters: activists blockaded while supporters kept the cause before the media, handled contacts with police and lawyers and, in case of detainment, kept the activists' homes and jobs running (Cook & Kirk 1983, 46; GTU 14-31, ii, 20). The rest of the camp life, beyond the general meeting's purview, was left to the full initiative of the groups. "Part of the plan was to provide time and space for the unplanned." (Linton 1989, 248) Lots of actions, more or less spontaneous, were taken by sometimes tiny groups: painting the tarmac, talking to passers-by, learning defense techniques, facing the military, etc. Together, all these actions turned the camp into a worthwhile experience.

Two letters testify to the importance of the affinity group. One is of a Seneca protestor, the other of a Puget Sound protestor, a camp which was similarly run by affinity groups:

I just came back from the [camp] over the weekend and am still feeling strong. I wanted to write just to let you know about my feelings about the future of the camp. I am 33, married 12 years, 3 kids, have been a feminist for 8 years. I came to the encampment with that background. I came home loving women, alienated from the culture in which I exist, empowered, depressed, struggling. Re-entry into my previous life is impossible so I struggle to find my own culture. It has been painful, lonely and strangely challenging. I have a close group of women friends, many of whom went to camp also this summer. My affinity group. They are my survival, my hope. (Krasniewicz 1992, 230).

I want to thank you all for all the spirituality I experienced here - positive energy, visualization. [...] I got burned out with my peace-work in Germany. We always 'organize' and 'refuse' and 'resist' and ... IT'S EXHAUSTING! With your 'living community' all these 'little' things are so important! The hugs, sharing, the tears, the conflicts, circles, check-ins... I found my way back to my roots, to my positive energy - to our positive energy, to our roots. I absorbed it deeply! And I don't know how to bring it back to my country, back in my everyday life. I hope that I have it in me, and I can call it by circles, check-ins... with my people at home! (Sonja in Coll. 1985, 51).



Greenham women climbing fence. Photo. Source: Glamorgan Archives, Cardiff. Women's archives of Wales. Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp Jill Stallard Papers. DWAU 13/04/02. Copyright owner unknown.

How difficult it was for women to leave the camps and return home isn't an issue for this paper. Suffice to say that a recent website into the lives and memories of Greenham Women suggests that these women did take it home and that they didn't forsake their camp experience (www.yourgreenham.co.uk). But what needs to be emphasized is that all the ecofeminist protests of the early eighties, camps and parades alike, were run by big, small and sometimes tiny circles. All relied on affinity groups which, without exaggeration, can be said to have provided the liveliness that was so typical of the early 1980s ecofeminist protests. Affinity groups kept the optimism of action going. They punctuated each action with a shared sense of, at least partial, accomplishment. This is probably why, as a practical support group, because effectiveness was part of the deal, they were able to avoid the typical activists' burn-out. And there's more.

The affinity groups cracked the holster of the nuclear family and provided close-knit of another, perhaps more existential, at least more worldly, kind. In and through the affinity groups, women did not only connect to other women, but they also connected to a larger movement. The visitors from other camps and protests, the media and letters of support or criticism reminded them of this. Perhaps, this is what can be called grace: a sense of connection to a changing world. Perhaps this is why women kept coming back, over and over again. They had found some part of politics, a graceful part, that they didn't want to let go of.

To draw a conclusion, then, ecofeminist protests of the early eighties are fascinating because they were places of self-transformation that understood the self to be an extension of the others, an expansion of the world and its changes. They can teach us many things, all connected to life-affirming politics: the importance of joy and power, of play and rituals, of existential close-knit and reclaiming the long run. They can also teach us to be wary of essentialist accusations. Any facet of our experience - that of motherhood, of housewife, or other - can be reconstructed and expanded in formidable ways. What of herstories, carer's revolts?! If this paper ended with an organizational element, it's not for the sake of managing revolt but for the sake of allowing us to grasp what it could mean to prepare the ground. Then. Now. The daily workings, the tiny groups, are part of what we can pay attention to if we want to start being, becoming, receptive to simple calls.

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