

2013

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Poe, Danielle, "Mothering Against Norms: Diane Wilson and Environmental Activism" (2013). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. Paper 14.

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Mothering Against the Norms

Diane Wilson and Environmental Activism

DANIELLE POE

THE FIRST TIME I heard about Diane Wilson was through a colleague who recommended her book *An Unreasonable Woman: A True Story of Shrimpers, Politicos, Polluters, and the Fight for Seadrift, Texas*. Wilson's story of taking on a huge chemical company who was buying the favor of local people, local and national politicians, and even the Environmental Protection Agency both inspired and terrified me. She inspired me because she is fearless in her pursuit of justice and ultimately successful both on a personal level because she never wavers from her path even when success seems impossible and on a practical level because she gets two of these imposing chemical companies to agree to zero admission in their plants.

Her story terrified me because if she can take on these companies and be a force for justice, then what sacrifices should I endure? What sacrifices should my children endure for the sake of a just world? After all, Wilson is a mother of five, when she began her activism two of her children were young enough that she describes them as "babies," and one of those babies was autistic. I remain terrified of the prospect of being as fearless as Wilson who has been on many hunger fasts, been arrested numerous times, disrupted Senate hearings, and chained herself to a Dow Chemical oxide tower, but I tell her story as often as possible as an example of mothering at its best because her story reveals the interconnection of all children and the interconnection between all people and the environment.

Diane Wilson is a mother and an environmental activist, two roles that challenge common perceptions about what a mother is and what her obligations to her children are, and roles that challenge common stereotypes about environmental activists and the focus of their acts. Her story reveals the ways in which mothering is always practiced in a context and sometimes in order to work toward a society in which her children can thrive, a mother may have to challenge the context itself and take time away from her children. When

Wilson engages in questioning, challenging, and changing the world, she faces pressure from local and state politicians and international business leaders. Her refusal to cooperate with business interests at the expense of people and the environment leads her to acts of civil disobedience, which leads to jail time.

WILSON AS MOTHER

To think about Diane Wilson as a mother, I will start by analyzing her descriptions of mothering relationships. As with every mother, Wilson's story as a mother begins long before she has her children; it begins with Wilson the daughter and granddaughter. And, her story as a mother is broader than the human relationships she has, it includes the bay, which she describes as a grandmother.

While it is useful for explanatory purposes to consider Wilson as a mother and then Wilson as an environmental activist, I want to stress that the two are always intertwined in Wilson's descriptions of herself. Throughout her memoirs, Wilson describes her actions as though her path is destined. First, she seems destined to be a shrimper, and later she seems destined to be an environmental activist. In order to understand the connection between shrimping and environmental activism, we should notice that the genealogical descriptions that appear in Wilson's memoirs are about her literal genealogy—her blood relatives both maternal and paternal—and her metaphorical genealogy when she describes Lavaca Bay as a grandmother.

As a shrimper, Wilson traces her relationship to the bay back to her paternal lineage. Although fishing is primarily practiced by men—who consider a woman on the bay at best unusual and at worst courting disaster—Wilson inherits the tradition and takes it up in spite of any pressure for her to stay on the shore. She describes how inevitable it is that she is an exception to the rule that only men fish, “everybody knew I was on the bay ‘cause *my* daddy was on the bay, and my daddy was on the bay ‘cause *his* daddy was on the bay, and *his* daddy was on the bay ‘cause *his* daddy had pitched him over the side of a homemade fishing skiff and said, ‘Sink or swim. Swim or drown. Make up your mind, boy!’” (*Unreasonable* 2005: 49). While she acknowledges that it's unusual for women to fish, her descriptions remind us that she feels only a continuity between herself, her family, and the bay.

Her descriptions of fishing and the bay teem with the relationship between generations, both the ways in which fishing is passed on from one generation to the next (*Unreasonable* 48–54), but also the way in which there's a familial relationship between the water and those who fish. In his foreword, Kenny Ausbel captures the rich sense of relationship that Wilson has to Lavaca Bay,

"Growing up, Diane said the bay was like her grandmother; she spent endless hours in private conversation with her. She took the destruction of the bay very personally. Call it family values" (*Unreasonable* 11). Wilson says, "I could see the bay as an old grandmother with long gray hair and a dress made of matted foaming seaweed flowing out with the tide" (*Diary* 9). The description of the bay as a grandmother is not simply a nostalgic description of the environment, it calls to mind the reality that human life depends on forces beyond us that create the conditions for our lives. In her family, their existence relied on the presence of the bay and the health of the bay. For all of us, our physical being is only possible because of our human grandmothers and our mothers. But, beyond that our physical being depends on the environment in which we live. Our particular lives are shaped by the histories and the stories of those who come before us. For Wilson, her love of the bay, of fishing, and of silence are all shaped by her ancestors, some were immigrants, others were Native American (her father's father is Cherokee), and all of whom are shaped by the environment.

Of course to think about Wilson as a mother, we have to turn to her descriptions of her children and her descriptions of herself as a mother. Wilson's children are a constant presence in her life and her journey to becoming an environmental activist. They come with her as she works at the fish house playing in piles of ice, the older girls come with her to protest against a politician who refuses to take Wilson's calls or acknowledge the petitions that she has sent him, they move with her from home to home after she and her husband divorce, and throughout her memoirs Wilson describes her autistic son Crockett's particular ways of moving through the world (*Unreasonable* 53, 114, 176; *Diary* 25, 27). She writes about her turn from "reclusive fisherwoman with five kids to controversial hell-raiser with five kids" (*Diary* 14). I will return to this quote and the turn from recluse to activist in the following section, but for now I want to point out that her identity as a mother with five kids remains constant and shapes every aspect of her story.

Wilson does not detail her children's reaction to her as a woman who refuses to conform to social norms, first as a shrimper and later as an activist, but the pull between social norms for mothers and her actions as an activist are evident in several anecdotes that she describes in *Diary of an Eco-Outlaw: An Unreasonable Woman Breaks the Law for Mother Earth*. Wilson relates several incidents when her family intervenes and tries to get her to give up her activism. In one anecdote, Wilson's mother wants her to stop her activism because she's worried about what will happen to Wilson's children if she dies. Even when her girls are grown and have moved away, and Crockett is sixteen, Wilson's mom tells her that "Kids never grow up" (*Diary* 43), implying that Wilson is a negligent mother for jeopardizing her health. Later, Wilson describes her aunt's attempt

to get her to give up a hunger fast and threatening to bring Crockett to witness the fast. Because Crockett would be upset to see his mother fasting, the aunt hopes that Wilson will stop in order to spare Crockett. Wilson's observation is that, "If anyone ever thought that corporations brought in the heaviest gunfire on a hunger strike, they were sadly mistaken. Family and friends beat corporations by a landslide" (*Diary* 55). Of course, neither her aunt nor her mother is successful in getting Wilson to stop her activism, and I will argue that this makes her the best kind of mother.

The expectation that she will stop her activism if she sees that it is harming or could potentially harm her children comes from an understanding of obligations to one's particular children as distinct from obligations to prevent harms that happen to the environment or to other people's children. We have already seen, though, that Wilson does not see herself or her children as isolated from the environment and from other children. Hence, to be a mother to her children, she defends the environment and other children. This connection will be especially clear in the next section when she begins her fight for justice for the people of Bhopal, India.

WILSON AS ACTIVIST

The connection between Wilson, her children, the environment, other people, and places both near and far becomes explicit when she's invited to Bhopal, India to take part in testimonies against Union Carbide whose mismanagement and business practices led to explosions in Seadrift, Texas and Bhopal. The Bhopal disaster killed more than 3000 people and sickened many thousands (Zhang). While she is there, her experiences as a mother become part of her response to the suffering of other mothers and their losses. In *Diary of an Eco-Outlaw*, Wilson describes being on a bus in India as she prepares to give testimony about Union Carbide and the dangers that chemical plants pose to people and the environment. While on the bus, a man throws in a handkerchief that contains photos of ten dead babies, laid out on white sheets covered with blood. She comes to find out that, as a result of the deadly poisons released in the explosion, those babies were spontaneously aborted by their mothers as they ran from the Union Carbide plant in Bhopal. She writes that after seeing these pictures and entering them into evidence against Union Carbide the connection between those babies and her own children haunted her, "All I knew was that those dead babies with their frail arms flung across the white sheets seemed a whole lot like my own sleeping babies in their cribs at night and when I got back to Texas, those tiny fists pounded me in my dreams and railed against me forgetting" (23). The memory of her own children as vulnerable babies reverberates in her response to seeing the babies who were never

born, not because they were unwanted but because of the toxic effects of the chemicals of the Union Carbide plant. Rather than ignoring the connection between those babies and her own, Wilson directs her considerable energies toward getting other people to remember as well calling for the people of Seadrift, Texas to think about Bhopal and to see connections between Union Carbide's practices in India and Texas, which calls attention to the way that human and environmental needs are connected everywhere.¹

Derrick Jensen describes Wilson's activities as directed toward delegitimizing corruption and dismantling injustice (*Diary* ix-xii). By planning disruption, organizing protests, and encouraging others to stop cooperating with injustice, governments and corporations are unable to sustain corrupt practices. But, convincing people to stop cooperating with unjust practices is an incredibly difficult proposition. One of the first things that Wilson's actions reveal is that corporations that pollute the environment spend much time and money in convincing people that they are good for communities because they bring jobs, provide tax revenue, and give charitable contributions (*Diary* 81). The corporations that Wilson faces, such as Union Carbide, Formosa Plastics, and Dow Chemical, are multi-national companies with enormous power and long histories of acting as though laws do not apply to them. For example, when Warren Anderson, CEO of Union Carbide and the person ultimately responsible for the Bhopal disaster, is wanted on a warrant for murder by the Indian government, he is able to flee India and live in the U.S. because the U.S. government refuses to pursue extradition. Frequently, people ask Wilson what she could possibly hope to accomplish against this kind of power. In the face of these obstacles, most of us cannot imagine risking embarrassment, harassment, and imprisonment in order to challenge business as usual. For Wilson, though, every action disrupts the illusion that these companies are all-powerful, cannot be challenged, and their actions are inevitable.

Wilson's story of becoming an activist provides a model for how others might also move past being intimidated by these enormous corporations. One reason Wilson is such an inspiration as a mother and environmental activist is that she initially comes to this life reluctantly; she is not born into a life of outspoken activism. The descriptions of her early life depict her love of silence and solitude. She shaped the rhythms of her life with the rhythms of the bay, and when these rhythms were disrupted she finds her love of silence and solitude transformed and begins to walk a new path.

As someone who inherited the life of fishing, Wilson is keenly aware of changes to the conditions for fishing. Even before she knew about the pollution happening in Calhoun County, she knew that the shrimping in Lavaca Bay had changed. She describes a time before the pollution when shrimpers could find places that hadn't been searched and netted, and she contrasts that

with the signs of pollution she's observed: red tide, brown tide, green tide, dead dolphins, empty nets (*Unreasonable* 18-19). As I stressed in the previous section, for Wilson not only is the bay a source of livelihood, but it is also a source of life. Even when fishing becomes almost impossible from the pollution Wilson describes the need to keep fishing that characterizes the people who fish, "They couldn't quit. But if one did, he never fully recovered. He was a dead man walking" (*Unreasonable* 19). When Wilson calls a fisherman who quits fishing "a dead man walking," she reminds us of the devastation inflicted on the whole community. The destruction of the bay destroys the way of life that had been passed on between generations and destroys the conditions for nurturing life from one generation to the next, which is precisely the work of mothering.

Wilson inadvertently discovers the cause of the changes in the bay while working at her brother's fish house, when a fisherman comes in with a newspaper article, which states that Calhoun County has more land toxins than anywhere else in the U.S. This statistic became available because industries in the U.S. were now required to report all of their emissions (*Unreasonable* 36). Initially, Wilson responds in the way that most of us respond to news that seems too awful for any individual to address, "So I did the only thing you can do after winning something like that. I pretended I never saw the newspaper. It could lie down alongside the rest of the bad news that lined up so well in a dying town" (*Unreasonable* 27). Unlike most of us, Wilson does not stay in a state of denial, she responds to this bad news by taking one step after another to find information, to pass on that information, and to act in response to the information. She describes the day that turned her into an activist, "That day is good as any at explaining why my life turned 360 degrees from reclusive fisherwoman with five kids to controversial hell-raiser with five kids" (*Diary* 14). This description calls us back to the point that I want to make about Wilson's work, which is that even though her activism will sometimes take her away from the daily tasks of mothering, it is a life-giving part of her work as a mother. The conditions of her community have undermined her children's possibility of becoming the next generation of fisherwomen and the conditions of the world are undermining the possibility of the next generation to live healthy lives and to find meaningful work.

In order to understand why her actions pose such a challenge to her context, and qualify Wilson as a "controversial hell-raiser," I turn to analysis from Vincent J. Miller in *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in Consumer Culture*. As part of his analysis of the difficulties of critiquing and changing unjust social structures, Miller analyzes how people's desires are shaped by consumer culture, particularly the way in which the media's portrayals of suffering become a spectacle that conditions us to respond passively. The media uses suffering

to incite emotion, but the lack of analysis of causes and context encourages viewers to accept suffering as inevitable, an opportunity to feel shock rather than an opportunity for action (130-137). Miller emphasizes that our response to suffering that we observe on the news, read about in newspapers, and even see around us is not a selfish, unsympathetic response. Instead, the response may be quite sympathetic, and we are frequently moved to do something. Miller draws the conclusion that even when we sympathize with others, the structure of consumer culture tends to paralyze our ability to respond because we remain ignorant of the causes of the suffering. If we cannot understand the history, then the inequity and suffering seems inevitable. This inevitability paralyzes our ability to imagine different circumstances, which would lead us to act. Consider how different Wilson's actions are as compared to how most people would act upon hearing about the disaster at Bhopal. Most of us, upon seeing pictures of the spontaneously aborted fetuses of women exposed to chemicals would feel heartsick and wish that the explosion had never happened. But, Wilson links those children and their well-being to the well-being of her own children and she continues to find ways to draw attention to their plight and the fact that the man responsible for the disaster is being protected by the U.S. government.

When we further apply Miller's analysis to the impact of Wilson's activism, we can see why her actions challenge the status quo. When she reads the newspaper article about the pollution in Lavaca Bay, she asks questions, looks for the context, and looks for causes. At every step she continues to ask questions and to seek out answers in spite of being told that she won't understand the answers, that she's jeopardizing investment in the area, and that she needs to go back home. She discovers that the difficulties that shrimpers have finding shrimp is not some mysterious, uncontrollable, and unlucky twist of fate, but that the change in shrimping conditions is directly related to pollution in the bay. Even when she discovers the link between fishing conditions and pollution, politicians, business owners, and lawyers for industry pressure her to consider the pollution an unfortunate consequence of "development" and "jobs," suggesting that fishing is outdated and fishers need to find jobs in the chemical plants. Rather than accepting these perspectives, Wilson continues to investigate until she traces the pollution back to its source, Formosa, an international corporation that systematically violates environmental protection laws around the world. She researches their plans to build a plant in Seadrift, Texas, researches the relevant laws for permits that Formosa needs to build its plant and the laws that could be used to challenge their plans, and she calls meetings to educate people who would be effected by the plant. Ultimately, her persistence leads her to press for zero-emissions, and they agree to this demand, even though they first try to claim that no such technology exists.

Another helpful perspective comes from Judith Butler's book, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable*. Butler analyzes the frames through which people, especially U.S. citizens, view the world. She reveals the perspectives that allow people to grieve some deaths and to overlook other deaths. Butler uses this analysis to critique American militarism and to provide the means to look beyond the frames that we take for granted in order to live more justly. Her methodology is applicable in many situations where the frames that we take for granted perpetuate injustice. I will use Butler's methodology to reveal how Wilson's activism disrupts unjust frames and provides a means to construct just ways to live. The point that Butler makes is that we have to consider the ways in which narratives are framed such that questions about justice cannot be asked. For Wilson, we have to consider how corporations, such as Formosa and Dow Chemical, present themselves and how Wilson disrupts that narrative.

Wilson describes the opposition from corporations when she asks questions about their destructive practices. The opposition reveals that these corporations frame their business practices using the language of investment. By highlighting jobs provided by the plant, these companies portray themselves as good for the community because the workers would otherwise be unemployed and without healthcare. They also portray themselves as responsive to the concerns and needs of the community by giving one town a water purifying plant, hosting town picnics, and giving college scholarships. Finally, they control their public image through campaign contributions. The effectiveness of the companies' framing is evident when friends, family, politicians and business leaders beg her to stop her petitions, her meetings, and her protests because they are afraid that she will scare away the supposed investment in the community.

The willingness of politicians, workers, and of course the owners and managers of these chemical companies to accept this framing makes sense: they have a financial interest in building a plant that produces PVC (*Unreasonable* 156-157); further, they can continue their work most easily by remaining ignorant of the effects of that production on the environment, the health of the workers, and the health of the community. One of the most striking and disheartening aspects of Wilson's memoirs is that in spite of an abundance of evidence of corporate wrongdoing (deliberate dumping of toxic chemicals, hiding the quantity and kind of chemicals released in the ground and in the air, hiding information about the toxicity of chemicals to which workers are exposed), officials with the EPA, OSHA, and the courts refuse to enforce the laws which have clearly been broken.

Undaunted, Wilson continues to collect evidence and testimony from inspectors, managers, and workers. And, in spite of enormous pressure to be silent, she finds ways to speak out and to get information from governments and corporations who are not accustomed to being questioned, much less defied.

Just as a central task of mothering is allowing children to develop their own talents and voices, Wilson finds ways to give voice to those around her. Her methods of breaking the frames depend on the relationships that she builds. First, her relationship with the bay itself leads her to investigate the pollution and the effects of the chemicals going into the bay. Second, her relationship to the other fishermen allows her to break the frame that these chemical plants are good for workers and jobs. The economic development does not apply to the fishermen; they are the ones who can no longer make a living from the bay. Instead of economic development, fishermen notice that the once plentiful fish are now scarce, once healthy fish and dolphins are now floating on the surface and washing up on shores dead, and they have to sell their boats and go to work for the chemical companies.

Yet, rather than listening to the testimony that they might offer, politicians blame the problems in the gulf on the fishermen themselves (*Unreasonable* 160), and Wilson must also draw attention to the frames which prevent the politicians from taking seriously the harm to the bay and to the fishermen. One way that she does this is to point out how much these companies' investments are costing communities. Formosa Plastics, for instance, wants to build an polyvinyl chemical plant in Calhoun county, but in exchange they want millions of dollars in tax subsidies and abatements (*Unreasonable* 143-148, 157) and no outside interference such as EPA studies of the impact of the proposed plant (165).

Finally, Wilson dismantles the idea that these chemical companies are good for workers by talking to the workers themselves. The workers seek out Wilson to provide her with documentation about forged reports, illegally hidden toxins, willful misrepresentation of leaks and spills, and effects of these chemicals on their health. She delivers this information to officials who are reluctant to act on it; nevertheless, she reveals the systematic choices that companies make to maximize profits at the expense of workers, communities, and the environment.

FIDELITY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCCESS

Throughout this paper, I have presented Wilson as a woman whose activism is directly related to her work as a mother and experiences of mothering. As a woman whose children participated in demonstrations with her, witnessed her suffering during hunger fasts, and suffered ill-treatment when they visited their mother in jail, many people might declare her a failure as a mother. These same people might also declare her a failure as an activist by looking at the targets of her activism who have escaped prosecution and enforcement for their parts in killing workers, ruining the health of workers and their families, and destroying the environment. Further, one could note that while people such as

Tony Hayward, the CEO of BP Oil responsible for the 2010 spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and Warren Anderson, the CEO of Dow Chemical—current owner of Union Carbide—responsible for the Bhopal tragedy in 1984 and wanted by the Indian government continue to avoid prison, Wilson has been arrested many times and spent time in jail again and again for drawing attention to their illegal actions. In response to those critics, the analysis that I have provided demonstrates her success as a mother and activist, and her fidelity to justice.

A common theme in the narratives of great activists—from Socrates to Wilson, from Dan Berrigan to Dorothy Day, from Cesar Chavez to Molly Rush—is that they work out of fidelity to peace, not by calculating probabilities for success. For some, the inspiration to act comes from religious commitment. For others, the inspiration is that the only possibility for creating peace is to be peaceful regardless of the outcome. These activists acknowledge that they can never guarantee that their actions will produce justice, but they can guarantee that doing nothing will perpetuate injustice.

Rather than choosing a path that she knows will be successful, Wilson stands in solidarity with oppressed people. She never knows as she protests, files lawsuits, and goes on hunger strikes, if her actions will lead to justice for workers, communities, and the environment. But, if she stays silent, then the companies and politicians will certainly continue to put profit above justice. While she has no guarantee that her actions will change these corporations' practices, the only possibility for change is breaking through the silence and frames that industries have created and bought for themselves.

Because Wilson acts when she could be silent, listens to those who have been silenced by politicians and corporations, and refuses to let the threat of prison stop her, she is a successful mother. Her example encourages us to make sure that our children understand the interconnection between all people and between people and the environment. She demonstrates that we are capable of much more than we ever knew, when we are part of communities and systems larger than ourselves. Truly acknowledging this interconnection allows us to create conditions in which all children can thrive. She encourages us to take risks and to become better. She rejects a calculus in which the only things worth doing are things that are guaranteed to work, instead she teaches us that what is just is worth doing, regardless of the consequences.

Because Wilson makes CEOs, companies, and politicians accountable for their actions, she is a successful activist. She is successful in her faithfulness to those who suffer from injustice. She will not settle for what seems to be the best offer simply to say that she accomplished something, instead she pushes companies to do more for workers and the environment. In some instances, her persistence causes companies to change as when Formosa and Alcoa chemical companies agreed to use zero-emissions at their plants. But, she is successful

because she breaks the frames that prevent others from seeing the harms that are being done to them and the harms with which we are complicit when we remain unquestioning and silent.

¹The hunger strike referenced in the previous section was done in support of Bhopal victims.

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