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THINKING OF BHOPAL: WOMEN'S BODIES AS WASTE-SITES

Jennifer Scurro

Between December 2 and 3, 1984, a Union Carbide chemical plant released twenty-seven tons of *methyl isocyanate* in Bhopal, India. This disaster has now devastated the area communities for generations, including and specifically women and children, causing birth defects and chronic illnesses. Twenty years later, without remedy or reasonable compensation, Dow Chemical Company, which bought Union Carbide in 2001, takes no further responsibility for the extensive consequences of this industrial accident and yet only continues to profit from its acquisition.¹

In response to this, after years of leading the protests against the continued exposure to chemicals in the water supply and the deterioration of generations of Bhopal victims, Rashida Bee, upon receiving the Goldman Prize for Environmental and Human Rights in April 2004, argued in her acceptance speech that:

Dow and other corporations are causing slow and silent Bhopals all over the world. Mothers everywhere in the world carry chemical poisons in their breasts.... We are not expendable. We are not flowers offered at the altar of profit and power. We are dancing flames committed to conquering darkness and to challenging those who threaten the planet and the magic and mystery of life.²

This standpoint contains the seeds of an important feminist critique as well as a point of resistance to global and industrial mechanisms around the world. The growth and development of economic globalization has not only been uneven, but, as it has been argued, creates a particular vulnerability in the lives and living conditions for women. The cost of these unsustainable practices is levied on both women and the poor and the burden of this toxic

legacy is unevenly shared, maintaining an economic and political gender bias. A particular feminist discourse has emerged in order to minimally identify this newer kind of gender-based vulnerability, but also, perhaps to establish a new and appropriate discourse of resistance.

The work of this sort of feminist politics combines the traditional questions of patriarchal power and unqualified masculine agency with the more newly-emerging concerns that have come about with the growth and promotion of the Transnational Corporation (TNC). With economic deregulation, the size and scope of capital accumulation and market development have established the means and the method of employing unsustainable, if not also, toxic practices on both human and ecological resources. With the rapid development of economic globalization, these practices have become the dominant form of international exchange.

Vandana Shiva, in her book, *Biopiracy*, situates her work within a third wave anti-colonialism. First, she argues how, in all three waves of colonization, piracy and exploitation are the *modus operandi*. After outlining the first two waves of colonialism, she describes this third-wave by outlining the new terrain for plunder: "Capital . . . has to look for new colonies to invade and exploit for its further accumulation—the interior spaces of the bodies of women, plants and animals." In her effort to demonstrate the connection between the vulnerability of biodiversity with the vulnerability of women's bodies, she adds, "the seed and women's bodies as sites of regenerative power are, in the eyes of capitalist patriarchy, among the last colonies" (Shiva, B, 45). The seed in particular becomes Shiva's symbol of political contest and resistance to exploitive practices that usurp the regenerative power of biodiversity.

This particular form of argument is indebted to the work of Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring* (Carson, while meticulously demonstrating the flaws and ultimate failure of employing chemical solutions for ecological problems, passed away from breast cancer).³ This legacy that I am outlining here links some of the critical work in the philosophy of science, the insights of feminist-marxist critique of globalization as well as (and most obviously) ecological feminism. This legacy links economic and political forms of exploitation imposed upon the natural world with the dominance of patriarchy and the male-centered interests that have scripted the conditions of women for generations.

The relatively new form of gender-based vulnerability described herein is linked to traditional patriarchy and to a more

phenomenological description of female body experience. Iris Marion Young argues that:

Women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned and objectified. As lived bodies we are not open and unambiguous transcendences that move out to master a world that belongs to us . . . (Young, 42)

Although Young did not include the globalized practice of unsustainability in her analyses, what can be discovered here is the way in which women's bodies have taken their position as sites which most bear the chemical load⁴ of globalized market growth. Growth for growth's sake, the questionable and unjustified principle behind this movement, deforms and disables the body in gender-specific ways.

Borrowing from Carolyn Merchant, Vandana Shiva argues that even the progress of scientific innovation does not protect or promote either women's reproductive health or their socio-economic standing. She claims that "the images of mastery and domination created by the Baconian program and the scientific revolution removed all restraint, and functioned as cultural sanctions for the denudation of nature" (Shiva, B, 47). And she continues,

The new reproductive technologies have provided contemporary scientific rhetoric for the reassertion of an enduring set of deeply patriarchal beliefs. The idea of women as vessels, and the fetus as created by the father's seed and owned by patriarchal right, leads logically to the breaking of organic links between the mother and the fetus. (B, 59)

The loss of appreciation for the organic and autopoietic,⁵ enforced and regulated by what Shiva calls scientific reductionism,⁶ is an approach to, or interpretation of, the body as a site of mechanical relations which compartmentalizes individual biological systems without regard for the cooperative biological and ecological interdependencies.

The question of harnessing the regenerative power of women's bodies and commodifying the capacity for reproduction and development is one that goes beyond most forms of gender mainstreaming policy.⁷ It is pointed out that women's bodies (as reproductive and autopoietic) have not served as an indigenous power belonging to, and regulated by, women, but have become a handicap for women in their capacity to develop a sustainable social and political standing in a globalizing economy. The language of human rights

and the promotion of an equality of access to the global marketplace and work force do not begin to address this gender-specific vulnerability. Rights and equality discourses as they stand still cannot resist the dominance of economic globalization over women's bodies. In this way, as Sylvia Walby argues in her description of gender mainstreaming, "Human rights discourse might appear to allow for the expression of many of the equality concerns across a range of forms of structures social inequality... [yet,] historically the human rights approach has been more concerned with minimum standards than with full equality" (459). Globalized economic development,⁸ in fact, continues to render women's bodies more vulnerable despite the attempts to build socio-economic equality; specifically women's bodies become sites of industrial waste and are stripped of their regenerative powers.⁹

As we replace human labor and subsistence agriculture with technological solutions, the regenerative power of the female body readily becomes a tool for consumption and capital. The dominant productive forces that are being instituted socially and politically make it more and more permissible to exploit the female body for its reproductive and regenerative power. That the female body may house toxicities that disrupt its natural systems comes with little cause for caution; perhaps, considered a trade-off among other forms of cost-benefit calculations (i.e., to live in a society that provides conveniences and luxuries, one expects and permits a certain amount of risk and cost). But these kinds of calculations are short-sighted and short-term insofar as they do not calculate the greater but less obvious costs deferred onto non-advantaged groups and they do not consider long-term impact and consequences. In the case of Third world women, the impoverished socio-economic standing of women is combined with those particular vulnerabilities already housed by the female body; it is these women who are further exploited and rendered vulnerable. As a particular example, after the Bhopal disaster, women of marriageable age became *unmarriageable* as gas survivors. They carried the distinct burden of life-long medical problems, sterility, or likely to give birth to children with severe birth defects and deformities. And, as Rashida Bee described it, "... no parent wants to marry their son to a girl from Bhopal."¹⁰

The idea of the body as a site of regenerative, autopoietic power changes the language assigned to individual autonomy. Traditionally, the body is viewed as a site passive to rational determination or as merely a set of natural (if not also gender-neutral) conditions. To this day, the regenerative power of the female body does not translate as a form of economic, social, and political pow-

er; rather, even with the socio-economic promises of globalization, a young woman's reproductive power continues to make her a site of passivity and negotiation. The idea of maternal power is null in the face of scientific progress and economic growth.

If, as Shiva has argued, the new colonies are to be found in the bodies of women, plants and animals, what are the new and not yet evidenced consequences of these efforts?

There are little to no intergenerational studies of the impact of the chemical load on reproduction and future generations.¹¹ I think a special illustration can be made of the problems surrounding the quality and control over breast milk—how it can be particularly vulnerable to chemical contaminations, that it houses the potential to transfer toxicities to infants and children (another vulnerable population), and that it can be controlled, commodified and replicated by the paternalistic efforts of Transnational Corporations. The immunity-building properties of breast milk, as a form of regenerative power given only to the female body, do not consequentially confer it a socio-economic power.

There is little room in science and biogenetic technologies that seek the effects of multi- and cross-variable contamination. This holds true again specifically in the case of breast milk. As argued by Solomon and Weiss,

Data on xenobiotics in breast milk are influenced by choices in sample selection, sample pooling, analysis and reporting. In addition, most studies have focused only on a small panel of persistent organic pollutants, despite indications that a wide range of additional chemical contaminants may also enter breast milk.¹² (Solomon and Weiss, A339)

The arguments that can make this connection between contaminations from chemical created only within the past fifty years and their propensity to pollute the female body in particular *are being made*; the consequences *are observable*. In 2005, Francesco Massert et al. state in the *Journal of Perinatology* that,

Contamination of human milk is widespread and due to decades of inadequately controlled pollution by toxicants, persistent pesticides or chemical solvents. These chemicals tend to degrade slowly in the environment, to bioaccumulate in the food chain and to have long half-lives in humans.¹³ (Massert et al, 282)

This vulnerability to contamination, particularly as it is housed in the female body, transcends socio-economic conditions, affecting women in the First, Second, and Third World. Yet we can still add

to this that the majority of the exposure to the toxic effects of capital accumulation and market growth—from its pollutants to its waste-products—is allotted to the global poor, especially in areas of political instability or sustained poverty. These conditions provide no protection for the sustainability and regenerative power of the human body in general, and the female body in particular. And it is with irony that out of the regenerative power of the female body, women, especially women in poverty, then become the most vulnerable to biological and ecological toxicity.

Teresa Brennan addresses this particular issue in her book, *Globalization and Its Terrors*. The structure of socio-economic development through the conduit of a globalizing economy creates a condition that essentially stresses the systems of a biological organism. She demonstrates how the rhythms of natural systems are disrupted by the stresses of the modern pace. The speed with which we accumulate, use and dispose of resources disables natural body systems such that, as she states it, "What is being done to the human body in terms of using resources at a pace that exceeds their regeneration parallels what is being done to the planet... It is rooted in the squeezing of nature, as well as human beings" (Brennan, *GT*, 30). The pace of economic productivity and development moves at a speed that has little time or space for the rhythms of the natural body and the time it needs to regenerate. She continues to argue that,

Given that the business of substituting speed and spatial expansion for reproductive time has now spanned five centuries, it would also be interesting to pursue facts suggesting that the economic position of women as mothers has deteriorated consistently with capitalism, and now globalization... The comparative and historical work on the feminization of poverty has only begun. (107)

The work that has outlined the feminization of poverty includes the argument that, in the wake of economic globalization, *the laboring body is a vulnerable body*, passive to masculine desire and potency. In this way, there is a strong link between domination through capital accumulation and the exploitation and vulnerability of the human body in general, and this is explicitly the case for the female body according to Brennan:

the exploitation of the living energy of human beings is what makes the common cause between the vast majority of women everywhere, neocolonial peoples, and people in disadvantaged race and ethnic groups (insofar as this disadvantage is a matter

of economic class)—and common cause between these groups and other endangered species. (109)

This exploitation is promoted through international policy and deregulation of markets and is not necessarily out of the machine of economics itself. In other words, this exploitation is not a necessary consequence of economic developments and progress but of active decision-making and selective irresponsibility in the dealings of the global marketplace.

My support for this argument rests with other authors who have demonstrated the new possibilities that come with the birth of the Transnational Corporation. The boundaries of corporate and industrial production have been traditionally established by law and the binding-power of a home-nation. Corporate power has been deregulated to the point in which, through international policies of free trade and patent rights, they can co-opt the resources of natural systems and commodify without boundary or qualification. Complementary to this unbridled form of manipulation is the capacity to control and shift the conditions for accountability, as in the case of Dow after the acquisition of Union Carbide.¹⁴

Although I would argue that the sheer scope and scale of the Transnational Corporation gives it a sustained *unsustainability*, supported by a philosophy of the ever-growing marketplace—growth for growth's sake. Brennan argues that it is in the *speed* of the consumption where the real biological toxicity lies. This is how the newest efforts of globalization can be described as *exhausting*—literally depleting the ability of natural bodies to self-regenerate, replacing the autopoietic with the allopoietic at every turn. The erosion of regenerative power, through exhaustive practices, in a novel way has become a radical form of toxicity and this dumping of this toxicity is disproportionately distributed. To quote Brennan at length:

From [this perspective]... the reproduction of labour is the perpetually odd element out in production... because the socially necessary labour-time required to reproduce... is fixed in part by nature. It is fixed in so far as socially necessary labour-time includes the reproduction of children and thus the next generation of labour-power. While the time necessary for the reproduction of nature, even of animals, can be short-circuited, that of labour-power cannot, on the face of it, be speeded up... such reproduction is potentially out of step with capital's consumption-for-production, in which all things have to move faster and faster.²³ (*EM*, 141–2)

This is not to exclude the capacity for human reproduction as it may be rendered vulnerable for either gender (the causes and effects of low sperm count, for instance). Yet, I am looking to establish an exception for the bodies of women because I think the distinction rests in those forms of disability and dismemberment that have been instituted and legitimated by everyday business. These exhaustive practices render a heavy tax on the natural body, but make the female body an exception in usurping its power to self-sustain and reproduce.

In outlining this form of feminist political discourse, I am actively avoiding the appeal to the essentialist arguments of maternal power. Even Shiva appeals to the power of the mother and the maternal body as having an original and even natural standing (B.43).¹⁵ Yet, if this new terrain of political discourse is to be adequately mapped, I think it must be out of the critical awareness of limits of all essentialist discourse and claims on the essence of nature. So, this project is much more conservative in the sense that I am limiting this terrain only to point out the ways in which the appendages, the components, those gendered aspects of the female body that have become more adversely—and for the long term—impacted by a series of unjustified, institutionalized, short-term decisions, benefiting only those who never bear any real costs benefiting only those who never bear any real costs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is thus simultaneously an ecological and feminist political project which legitimizes the way of knowing and being that create wealth by enhancing life and diversity, and which delegitimizes the knowledge and practice of a culture of death as the basis for capital accumulation. (Shiva, DEW, 302)

The forms of resistance that I have found to come out of these critical positions have been both creative and non-violent. Out of the mission behind feminist politics, there has been no call to revolution, but rather to reformation. Vandana Shiva has established seed banks in India. Carolyn Merchant defends an argument for phasing out the communist/capitalist dichotomy over economic systems, calling for a steady-state economics—literally, a low-growth or no-growth economy. As long as our economy is rooted in inorganic rather than organic forms of energy, it will be fundamentally unsustainable and consequently unjustifiable (Merchant, 37–39). Teresa Brennan describes a renewed commitment to a prime directive in which, in light of violence and exploi-

tation, we have the power to reverse course for the sake of a more livable, sustainable world.²⁷

Insofar as there has been an effort to seek out the interests and acknowledge the inequities of stakeholders over shareholders to qualify the exponential efforts of Transnational Corporations, there is room to recognize the vulnerable groups who unevenly bear the burden of capital accumulation, distribution and expense. It is the particular way in which women's bodies have come to bear this expense that I have sought to outline here.

As a final point, I would argue that the future of this feminist discourse lies in the critique of unsustainable practices complemented by a demand for sustainable practices. The work of policy would be the protection and preservation of those practices which are most sustainable. This is a feminist work because it explicitly must seek out the ways in which unsustainable practices are laden with gender-based inequities and disqualifications. Unfortunately, from the scope to the scale to the speed of economic globalization, the dominant investments of our resources as we have come to know, recognize and therefore legislate them, seems to fall back on a policy of short-term cost-benefit analyses. There was no systematic effort to recognize the sustained and long term effects of the toxic exposure on Bhopal victims. The women and subsequent generations of this disaster remain a site of waste and dismemberment, housing the toxic effects in *their bodies*, stripped of their regenerative power.

NOTES

1 This information is from an online article (www.bhopal.org/what_happened.html. Accessed Feb. 28, 2007) citing Lapierre and Moro, 2002. Union Carbide paid \$470 million in compensation in 1989 and, as of July 31, 2009, an arrest warrant has been issued for Warren Andersen, Head of UC at the time of the disaster. See the reprint of the Associated Press Report available online at www.bhopal.net/bhopalinthenews/.

2 Bee's speech can be viewed in the documentary, *Twenty Years Without Justice: The Bhopal Chemical Disaster*, produced by Sanford Louis (2004).

3 There is an arguable link between breast cancer and DDT, particularly in the way DDT has estrogenic properties. It is argued by the Breast Cancer Institute that, "Those with breast cancer were more than five times as likely to have detectable levels of DDT (above 0.5 parts per

billion) as the healthy women." For a summary of this link, please see "Is Breast Cancer linked to DDT?" (Posted online: <http://www.a-zbreastcancer.com/articles/addingDDT.htm>. Updated 7-61-06.)

4 On a program aired on PBS, *Trade Secrets: A Moyers Report* (2001), Bill Moyers made public the issue of the chemical body burden, described as, "a chemical fingerprint [that reveals]... evidence of hazardous chemicals in common use—as well as compounds banned for more than a quarter century." The "body chemical load" is also described as the ways in which the body houses a variety of non-biodegradable chemicals, chemicals only created and distributed over the past fifty years. The research from this program argues that, "The Environmental Protection Agency acknowledges that some groups of people are far more susceptible to toxic effects than others. Children are among the most vulnerable. It is known that women pass some of their body burdens to their children during pregnancy. Most scientists concur that exposures in utero and in early childhood pose far greater risks than exposures later in life" (Available online: <http://www.pbs.org/tradesecrets/problem/bodyburden.html#>, Accessed: March 1, 2007).

5 Shiva distinguishes between systems that are *autopoietic* as self-renewing/self-generating systems and *allopoietic* as mechanical and externally organized systems. The human body for science and for socio-economic discourse has become allopoietic such that it usurps the natural, autopoietic systems (B, 31).

6 She describes scientific reductionism as "the preferred paradigm for economic and political control of the diversity in nature and society... demoting the organism to a mere machine... In Richard Dawkins's terms, an organism is a 'survival machine'—a 'lumbering robot' constructed to house its genes, those 'engines of self-preservation' that have as their primary property inherent 'selfishness'" (29).

7 According to Sylvia Walby, "gender mainstreaming" is defined as a transnational "global initiative... not evenly developed globally. The implementation of gender mainstreaming is uneven even when led by a common political entity, such as the EU" (454). She identifies three modes of gender equality that guide policy: 1) equality based on sameness and the male norm remains standard, 2) equal valuations to differing contributions given by gender segregation and 3) a new standard for men and women to transform the gender relations. She describes the position that the third mode most likely "constitutes gender mainstreaming and has the potential to deliver gender justice..." (pp. 455–56).

8 Vandana Shiva discusses the meaning of development according to economic globalization versus the development of sustainable societies. The principle of exponential growth in economic globalization is least

likely to promote the conditions for a sustainable society. As she argues it, "While gender subordination and patriarchy are the oldest of oppressions, they have taken on new and more violent forms through the project of development... Development thus, is equivalent to maldevelopment, a development bereft of the feminine, the conservation, the ecological principle" (297).

9 Sandra Steingraber makes the argument in *Having Faith: An Ecologist's Journey to Motherhood* that, "Of all members of a human population, fetuses are most vulnerable to toxic harm" (48). The connection between environmental pollution and birth defects has been made despite poor research and registry. Steingraber goes on to state, "studies in Europe [unlike U.S. birth defect registry data have been] making use of more trustworthy registries—ones that include, for example birth defects among stillborn and aborted fetuses—[and] have uncovered trends worth careful consideration... these studies indicate that the environment plays a significant role in shaping prenatal body parts" (90). There are also studies available that demonstrate that "as the distance between waste site and place of residence increases, the chances of birth defects consistently decreases" (91). The burden of chemical and industrial wastes that is unevenly placed on the reproductive body contain a special kind of alienation of power, especially if socio-economic conditions have already rendered populations of women vulnerable. Steingraber asks a provocative question on this point. While she notes that often pregnant women are told what to eat, how to behave, etc., they are reminded constantly of Voltaire's suggestion, "In ignorance, abstain" (105). The question arises however when the opposite approach is taken with the release and distribution of industrial chemicals, including what makes for a "safe threshold" and the regulations over the handling on toxic chemicals. In effect, we don't abstain in the face of our ignorance about the long-term potency and consequences of industrial production and waste; rather, she argues, "we adhere to the principle 'In ignorance and disregarding emerging science, proceed recklessly'" (112–3).

10 *Twenty Years Without Justice*, (<http://bhopal.strategicvideo.net>, 9:14–10:00).

11 Doug Fischer from the *Oakland Tribune* has profiled (and discusses the surprising results of his report) examining the chemical load of one family in California, over a three-part series, "A Body's Burden." Also see an interview of Fischer, "So much of science is based on controlling for a few variables. Yet issues surrounding our body burden present scores, if not hundreds, (of variables). In fact, I sense the seeds of a larger story here, one that examines whether the tools we have to protect public health—namely toxicology and epidemiology—are adequate when it comes to dealing with multiple, chronic, lowdose exposures to synthetic chemicals. The chemicals are out in the environment. We're

exposed to them daily. Do we know what it means? Not really" (Dunn, 2005).

12 In this paper, Gina Solomon and Pilar Weiss are able to demonstrate a lowering of the presence of PCBs from breast milk globally where the chemical is banned or regulated but an increase in PBDEs (polybrominated diphenyl ethers). Little has been done to also examine other metals and solvents in breast milk—either in causes or effects. They also suggest, in tune with other forms of global gender mainstreaming, that there should be improvements in global breast milk monitoring. They argue that it "would allow for more consistent data on trends over time, detection of new xenobiotics in breast milk, and identification of disproportionately exposed populations" (A339).

13 I think it is also worth noting the gender-neutral language of this analysis. Who produces human milk except women?

14 Although the CEO at the time of the Bhopal disaster and Union Carbide itself were indicted by an Indian Court as "fugitives from justice" by refusing to appear when summonsed, the response by the Dow CEO regarding this outstanding injunction stated, "India lacks jurisdiction over our company" (*Twenty Years Without Justice*, <http://bhopal.strategicvideo.net>, 6:27).

15 She actually references a passage from the *Rig Veda* that compares plants with healing properties to mothers (*Biopiracy*, p. 43).

16 Specifically, she explains the source of this idea, "The term . . . is borrowed from . . . *Star Trek*. . . . From the perspective of the twenty-fourth century, it will be plain that we either reversed course peaceably or had the reversal imposed upon us by the consequences of our own actions. In the *Star Trek* universe, we reversed on our own accord after a terrible war. As we did so, we built a world where poverty is unknown, where exploitation of humans and animals has been abolished, and where money does not exist. The prime directive here has similar ambitions" (Brennan, GT, 163).

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