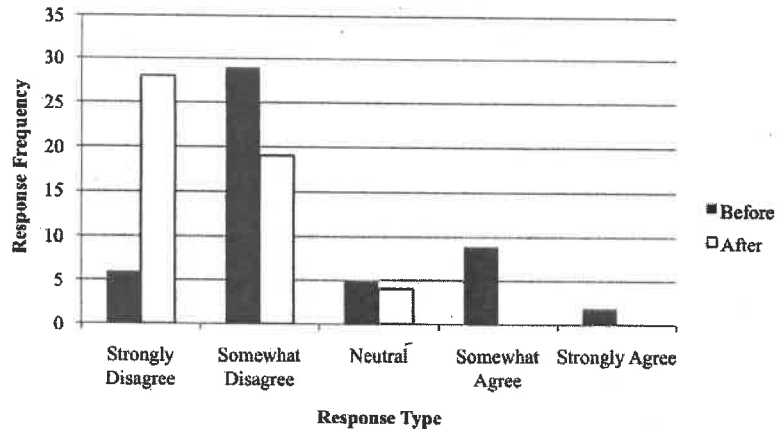
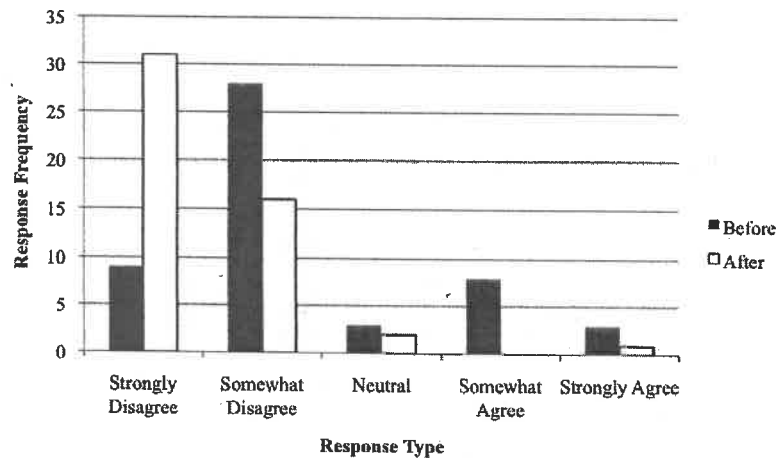


14. Able-bodied women with children under the age of 3 should be required to work thirty or more hours a week in order to receive welfare payments.



22. Almost anyone in the U.S. who works hard enough can eventually move out of poverty.



Mothering and Cancer

The Awakening of an Ecofeminist

HEIDI HUTNER

The most alarming of all man's assaults upon the environment is the contamination of air, earth, rivers, and sea with dangerous and even lethal material.

—Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*

Every time I look at you, I think, now I cannot die.

—Sandra Steingraber, *Having Faith*

THE CANCER MEMOIR IS WELL known: Audre Lorde's *Cancer Diaries*, Sandra Steingraber's *Living Downstream*, Zillah Eisenstein's *Manmade Breast Cancers*, Susanne Antonetta's *Body Toxic*, and Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*, are brilliant examples of personal and feminist accounts of cancer, death and environmental degradation. These authors and narrators expose their histories as their bodies are exposed to the politics of a patriarchal world (medical, political, pharmaceutical, global, racist, heterosexist, technological). Each of these stories links cancer, feminism and disease in some way with the degradation of the environment.

The awakening of my eco-feminist consciousness occurs in the conjoining of my own cancer and mothering experiences. When I became pregnant, my concern about my own and my family's cancer history propelled me into paralytic fear. How could I protect my fetus from my own history, from my genes? In time, I began to think my cancer might be related to environmental degradation, and that my daughter's future and the future of all children would be (and is) imperiled and violated by toxic pollution. This shift from cancer orphan, to cancer patient, to mother, to

environmental scholar and teacher, took place over many years. My story takes place both in and outside of the body, family, home, academia, the classroom, "nature," and the culture at large. The history of these assorted rivulets and tributaries all ultimately conjoin in an ocean of what I call an "ecological, feminist, and mothering awareness."

Let me begin here: I went back to college at age 25, after living several years in New York City as a struggling actress and singer. The pleasure I found in reading, writing and research was immense. I was a voracious reader and active personal journal writer, yet studying in a focused and scholarly way was new to me. Feminist and racial debates in my political science and anthropology classes were intellectually thrilling. My beloved professors and mentors guided and encouraged me to go to graduate school and become an English professor. I flew through and completed my undergraduate English degree, then immediately entered a doctoral in English program at the University of Washington.

In Seattle, I loved the bodies of fresh water, the tall evergreens, the mossy stone gardens, the flowers, the bike and walking paths, the many bookstores, the strong coffee, and the snow-peaked Mt. Rainier that emerged periodically above Red Square. The grey sultry days suited me just fine. My time at the University of Washington was intellectually intense, rigorous, and productive. In my first year at least, it was an exquisitely disciplined life—simple, focused, clear. It was a sublime balance of books, writing, and nature. Compared to living, studying and working in Manhattan (where I lived in a four-flight walk up, worked two jobs, and struggled to make ends meet, all the while studying for my BA), graduate school in the emerald city was a vacation. I could not believe they were *paying* me to read and write and teach, and to live in such beauty! In graduate school I found a "niche" in eighteenth-century studies, with a focus on women writers, colonial discourse, and race. Soon after the completion of my doctorate, I landed a tenure-track teaching position at Stony Brook University. My (academic) life appeared to be a great success.

However, several personal tragedies occurred during those years. At the end of my first year of graduate school, when I was twenty-nine, my father died from metastatic brain cancer related to two earlier melanoma diagnoses. One month after my father's death, my father-in-law passed away from colon cancer. A year or so later, my mother was diagnosed with lymphoma; she also had emphysema (from smoking), heart disease, and was frequently hospitalized for pneumonia. Five years after my father's

death, my mother died from complications post-open heart surgery. Each of these deaths was traumatic beyond words. I had never known anyone close to me die, and to lose both of my parents at such a young age was devastating. Yet another blow came with my own cancer diagnosis one year after my mother's passing. My illness came at the tail end of my second round of job interviews and fly-backs for teaching positions.

Somewhere in between each of my parent's deaths, I married. In the early years of my marriage I wanted to have children immediately, but my (then) husband wanted to wait. My desire to be a mother consumed me. I did not need to hear the cultural, medical, and anti-feminist messages about the biological clock ticking. I heard the bell clanging loudly in my head every minute of the day. I was the kind of childless woman who passed a pregnant woman, baby carriage, or toddler, and wept. When friends became pregnant (everyone seemed to be getting pregnant), I would cry inconsolably. Losing my parents only made things worse—I wanted and needed to build my own family.

Then, at 35, I was diagnosed with the cancer—Hodgkin's Disease. The prospect of my never becoming pregnant because of the chemotherapy treatment I would undergo hit me very hard—more so than the prospect/possibility of dying. There was no time to extract eggs or freeze embryos. I was in the late stages of my disease and I had to begin treatment immediately. I made my husband promise that when the treatment was over, if I survived, we would have a baby. He agreed. I then went through six months of a grueling and debilitating chemotherapy treatment. It was, to put it mildly and succinctly, hell. I had 12 rounds of ABVD¹ every two weeks. The chemo knocked me out, and just as my body would begin to recover, the next cycle came around again. With each cycle, my body became weaker, more susceptible to the chemicals, and by the last month, I was barely able to walk. At the end of six months, I was declared cancer free. It was now time to heal.

A little over a year after my cancer diagnosis, the plan was for me to go back to work. I had accepted a tenure-track faculty position at SUNY Stony Brook (strangely, my diagnosis and job offer came simultaneously). Returning to the highly charged and competitive world of academia was scary after all I had been through. I was afraid to tell my new employers that I had been sick, for fear they would view me as unworthy or damaged. Teaching graduate seminars and large undergraduate courses for the first time would be challenging under any circumstances, but doing this

so soon post-cancer was especially daunting for me. I was physically and emotionally frail.

Two years into my job at Stony Brook, at long last, I became pregnant. I hid the pregnancy from my colleagues and students for a long period of time. I feared their disapproval of my “motherhood”—as with the cancer, it seemed like anything corporeal would, in their eyes, mark me as less scholarly and lacking in commitment to “the profession.” Like many women in the (academic) workplace, I feared that motherhood would diminish or mar my reputation. The general recommendation was to ‘wait until you get tenure’ to have a baby. I could not wait. I was old. I was a damaged cancer survivor.

Susan Griffin writes, “When we awaken, there is a child given to us. We are mothers. We feel a pain where the vulva has been cut. We are mothers. We feel the skin of the child is soft. The face to us in sleep is beautiful. The small body lying against our body is vulnerable. The cries move us. . . . We love this body, because we are a part of this body. We are mothers” (74). Now she was inside of me: a little fish swimming in my salty sea. Yet with that pleasure came fear about her future. I worried greatly, at first, about the genes she carried. All of her grandparents had had cancer, and only one lived through it (her paternal grandmother). Her mother was a cancer survivor. I felt guilty. What right did I have to give birth with my body, a polluted body, a damaged body that had coursed with chemicals? What right did I have to give birth to a child, when my life span was so unpredictable, when I might die *at any moment*? What right did I have to give birth to a child when I would pass along cancer genes?

How could I protect my fetus? This question sat heavily with me. At first, the only protection I could think of was my own diet during pregnancy and while nursing. So I ate only organic food, took loads of vitamins, and cut out anything processed or refined. This was not hard to do as I had changed my diet completely when I was diagnosed with cancer.

My mode of protecting my fetus through a healthy “diet” was, of course, a good one, but it was rooted (in part) in an ideology I now have trouble with. This belief system is one I came away with from New Age cancer healing approaches I had learned about from my father. My father believed that we bring cancer upon ourselves and that we hold the power to heal ourselves from any illness, be it physical or emotional. His philosophy was based in the self-healing models advocated by Louise Hay, Dr. Gerald Jampolsky, Dr. Bernard Seigal, and Norman Cousins. In the “I caused my

cancer” and “I can fix my cancer by healing myself” movement, cancer functions as a private, individualized and personal issue. My problem with this belief system is that it often divides and isolates the patient and the illness from larger socio-political, economic, and environmental contexts, and lays the blame for cancer on the victim. Obviously, there are benefits to these self-help philosophies (better immediate health and well being), but I worry about the narrowness of this discourse and its potential to preclude social and political environmental activism. The laying of the responsibility for cancer (both getting and curing it) on the victim shifts the focus away from what more and more evidence shows us to be the likely cause of our cancer epidemic: toxics, chemicals, radiation, and other forms of pollution. In the view of many environmental cancer activists and scientists, *we* are sick because our environment is poisoned. Our environment is poisoned because we live in a capitalist and patriarchal system based on economic greed, domination, and the exploitation of nature (and many human beings) by a privileged few.

At some point, an alarm went off during my pregnancy, and something substantially shifted in my thinking about cancer and human health. I began to see the disease less as my own personal cross to bear and solve (something I could simply eat away), and more as a larger socio-political and ecological problem. This awakening happened one night while I was reading the book *A Civil Action*. What could be more terrifying to a pregnant female cancer survivor than a story about a cluster of children with leukemia in a town with contaminated water? At first I became terrified for my own unborn child: what if I lived in a cancer cluster like Woburn? What if, no matter how much organic broccoli I ate, the air, the soil, the water were so contaminated that this poison would enter my body anyway? What leaks and spills might be in my water and soil that remained hidden from public knowledge? My mind raced to my corporeal environmental history—what had I been exposed to during my life? Maybe my own cancer had been caused by toxic pollution?

I then read everything I could get my hands on at the time—*Silent Spring*, *Living Downstream*, *Our Stolen Future*. Later, after my daughter was born, Steingraber, whose daughter is about the same age as mine, published her book *Having Faith*. This book traces what happens to the fetus in the womb, when the mother’s body is assaulted with environmental toxins and these toxins cross the placenta, and later pass from breast milk to the baby and child. I read ecofeminist theory and women’s environmental

history, such as Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*, and I came to understand that the exploitation of nature and the domination of women are "twin oppressions" (Warren x). Ecofeminist philosophers and historians (among others) helped me to see that cancer (and other diseases) and the degradation of the environment are integrally linked and that throughout our lives, even before we are fused as sperm and ova into embryos and fetuses, we are assaulted with toxics, chemicals, pollutants and radiation. Our bodies, all living bodies, are linked with the earth's ecosystem, and this ecosystem is polluted. Our earth is sick and so we are, too.

Cancer was the end of innocence for me, the end of safety or trust in my body, nature, life, and family. It was my exile from Eden, so to speak. My pregnancy was a moment of great change. I was happy, I was filled with life, but I was afraid: another being lived inside me. My death would be her death, and my illness would be her pain and suffering. A polluted earth would (and does) harm both of us, and all of us. *How can I protect my fetus?* This question led and leads me here. These problems drive me in my research, teaching, writing, and life. I want to be part of the 'waking up' from this fugue state of ecological unconsciousness. *A mother's womb is the earth's womb. My child is every child. I must care for my own biological child, as well as for all children, all people, all living creatures.*

The Awakening of an Ecofeminist And Mothering Consciousness in the Classroom—How It Begins:

Seven years after starting my job at Stony Brook, I received tenure. Needless to say, I breathed a tremendous sigh of relief. During my pre-tenure years, all of my scholarship and teaching had been focused on the eighteenth century—the field I had been hired to teach in. Tenure allowed me the opportunity to step back and consider my research and teaching future, to look beyond my original academic concentration to see what else might speak to me. Maybe it was time to tackle what had become so central to my life as a mother and cancer survivor: the relationship between cancer and environmental pollution? I had always been referred to in teaching observations as a "maternal" professor; now that maternal method would include bringing into the classroom a concern for the health and well-being of all living creatures.

My first attempt to shift directions was a six-week elective course on Ecofeminism that I taught in the summer of 2004. We discussed ecofeminist

theoretical essays by Merchant, Warren, and Charlene Spretnak; work by Carson and Steingraber; films like *A Civil Action* and *Erin Brockovich*; and novels such as Jean Hegland's *Into the Forest*, Tempest Williams' *Refuge*, Barbara Kingsolver's *Animal Dreams*, and Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*. My students (many of them first-generation college students from Long Island or New York City) had little knowledge of or interest in environmental issues before taking my class. They were shocked to hear about the connections between diseases like cancer and our poisoned earth, and many left the class frightened and despairing. Realizing that my students needed a sense of hope and strategies for confronting environmental problems, I created a semester-long course on Ecofeminism that gives students opportunities to both learn about and engage in environmental activism.

This course, which I teach yearly, draws heavily on what I've learned from both feminist and mothering theory—that "the personal is political, and the political is personal." I bring my own cancer and mothering history into the classroom, telling the story I have shared here—of my parents, of my own cancer, of my fears for my daughter. I talk about my concerns for our poisoned and degraded earth, and I name my friends, neighbors and family members who have died or who are ill and currently in cancer treatment. I talk about my birds and flower garden, and my sense of connection to the natural world. I ask my urban and suburban students to turn off their computers and cell phones and walk outside at night—to gaze at the moon and stars and listen to the sounds of nature in the dark. We take hikes in local preserves. We look at birds and plant life.

In effect, my maternal pedagogy is based on a deliberate blurring of boundaries: between the personal, the political, and the scholarly, between the environment(s) of classroom, home, natural world, and social/public space. And I am no longer the nameless professor who lectures impersonally at the blackboard—grading, judging, and imparting "higher" knowledge to empty minds. Instead, I am a cancer survivor, cancer orphan, mother, teacher, and feminist environmentalist with a passionate cause that comes from both direct personal experience and study. The destabilization of my traditional role as professor enables the students to position themselves differently as well. Students become active and highly engaged participants. They work in groups and grade and evaluate each other. They are touched by my stories, just as I/we become touched by theirs. When I enter the classroom, the chatter is so loud, the conversations so lively, that it is hard for me to interject and start the class in an official way.

Almost all the texts I assign in this cross-listed (English/Women's Studies) course address in some way the inter-connections between mothering and environmental degradation, as does the major course project.² Working in small groups, students conduct research on a prominent female environmentalist so they can better understand the varied ways in which women have engaged in environmental activism, and often as literal or metaphorical mothers. Through learning about activists like Winona LaDuke, Petra Kelly, Vandana Shiva, and Wangari Maathi, students become more aware of the global nature of environmental crises; they also learn that it is the world's women and children who are most negatively affected by environmental pollution and degradation—especially women and children of color and those living in poverty.³ Most significantly, students learn that a female activist and her allies can effect enormous positive change when addressing issues of environmental injustice. Central to this group research project is urging students to find a creative and effective way of sharing their information with others; presentations have included elaborate story boards, short films, children's books, the creation of class blogs and websites, and tree-planting projects. In addition to doing class presentations for their peers, students share the results of their research at *Earthstock*, Stony Brook University's annual *Earth Day* event. By giving these presentations to both their classmates and the larger community, students become empowered environmental experts and activists, and our classroom family crosses into the public realm.

This group project also reinforces a central tenet of ecofeminist activism and ethics: that environmental healing can only come about in and through *community awareness and equitable interconnection with all living beings*. No successful environmental activist does her work alone, and true sustainability requires that we do away with the binaries of separation and division. Thus working with several peers as a team, students learn to practice an ecofeminist ethic of care. Stony Brook is a huge institution with large and often impersonal undergraduate classes. Many students live at home, commute to campus, and hold multiple jobs; as a result, their exposure to the campus community is quite limited. The group project creates a sense of community, as it demands that students connect with one another and find a way to integrate their assorted academic styles, schedules, approaches, cultures, and personal differences. It also forces students to be accountable to those around them. Through the process of working as a team, students discover how an ethic of care requires

much negotiation, discussion, cooperation, and conciliation. Although occasionally tensions and disputes arise, the groups always find a way to work through these challenges to produce presentations that are impressive and inspirational.

Another significant assignment in this course is the environmental volunteer project. Working in groups, students must come up with an idea for, and then devote at least six hours to a volunteer project of their choosing. In my most recent class, one group of students worked on the *Campaign for Safe Cosmetics* (an anti-toxic body product campaign). Another group traveled to Washington, D.C. to attend Powershift, a clean energy and climate event sponsored by a coalition of fifty youth-led environmental and social justice groups. Perhaps the most notable result of this assignment was the creation of Stony Brook's organic garden by students in my first full-semester Ecofeminism class (subsequent classes have sustained the garden). Students tell me that working in the garden puts their bodies in touch with ideas encountered in class texts, fosters rich and complex conversations about course readings, and helps them grow closer to their classmates. Recently, I corresponded with Audra Vanderland, the student who spearheaded the creation of the organic garden. When I asked her what inspired her to build the organic garden, she replied:

I think that when we read about the fact of the way things are being destroyed, it can seem really distant. When we think about the topsoil disappearing or water being polluted, it seems very far away, or out of our control... By creating a garden, it brings all of those facts and stories into your life in a very real way. It becomes your soil that is being eroded, your seeds that are being hybridized. And yet, at the same time, you also can feel like you are, in a small way, fighting back.

Other students echo Audra's words: "I felt I was doing something good to heal the earth," writes one. Another notes that she "had great discussions about the novels while working with my class-mates, and I felt I was living out the words from our readings." A third student talks about gardening as a way of establishing a sense of community: "I became friends with new people, and I feel so connected to Stony Brook now. I'm a commuter and before this I never talked to anybody." As these comments reveal, volunteer projects like the creation of a community organic garden often

bring about intense pedagogical engagement with course material and with one's peers. And, notably, a good deal of this experiential learning occurs without my being physically present; my students teach and learn from one another, and they then instruct me in essays and conversations about their projects.

It is always hard to say goodbye to my Ecofeminism students. Today, as students in my most recent class stop by my office to drop off their final assignments, they speak of how much their views of cancer, the environment, mothering, and activism have changed with the awakening of an ecofeminist consciousness. I urge them to stay in touch, to work in the garden as they wish, and to keep their bodies and skin safe from carcinogenic products. I remind them that my *Ecofeminist and Mothering Ruminations* blog is available for all to read. We also speak of our Stony Brook Ecofeminism Facebook page, which functions as a kind of ongoing virtual classroom. Through these forms of social networking, I am able to maintain long-term, mutually beneficial relationships with both current and former students. I also maintain long-term close relationships with many outside and beyond the classroom. This summer, for example, I will be traveling with several students from my spring class to a special sustainability conference—and so the classroom extends, again, beyond its traditional temporal and spatial limits.

Conclusions

I am a mother tree. My classroom is a garden, a web, an ocean, a womb—a place to think of the future—a place of hope, of precaution, of action, of waking up. Last year, I took five students to a feminist women's conference at the Omega Institute. At the end of the weekend, after a long hike, the young women gave me a precious gift: a statue of a tree/woman with her arms/branches raised high in a circle above her head. My students handed her to me and said, "This is you, Professor." Tears came to my eyes. I am honored to be the tree woman.

Some of the most profound experiences in my teaching of ecofeminism occur in the quiet moments when individual students share their own cancer stories with me. I have had many such moving moments, but there is one, in particular, that stands out. After one of my first ecofeminism classes, a young woman approached me and asked if we could speak privately. The two of us sat together outside under a blooming cherry blossom tree and, with her hands shaking, she held out a well-worn photograph. She tear-

fully explained that this was a picture of her mother, whom she lost several years prior to multiple myeloma (a cancer of the plasma cells). The young woman spoke softly and hesitantly to me: "I grew up in Brookhaven, right near the leaking nuclear reactor you told us about. Before this class, I had no idea about that tritium leak. None of us did. I couldn't understand why my mom died at such a young age, why so many of our neighbors died from cancer." My eyes filled with tears as she spoke. I ached for her loss—it is a loss I knew and know only too well. Then, with sad resignation, she said, "Now, I understand."

So I ache and write for the motherless girl, for the fish and the birds in the poisoned Gulf, for the rivers filled with PCBs, for the polar bears and penguins, for the forests, for the people of Japan and Fukushima and the irradiated land and sea, for the post-nuclear bomb test sites in the Nevada desert, for the children of Chernobyl, for the sick and dying soldiers and people and land poisoned with DU, for Carl, Miles, and Pinkney who have terminal cancers, for my friends Pamela and Amy just recovering from breast cancer, for the whales and dolphins, for the wolves, for the panthers, for Molly in remission from leukemia, for the spirit of my parents and many more lost (too early) loved ones, for the blind horses, and for our blue, blue planet.

As a mother, professor, writer, and cancer survivor, I dream that my work and the work of the many environmentalists and ecofeminists who inspire me will stir my students (and readers) to fight for our earth and for the lives of all living creatures. Many of my students take what they have learned in one semester and share it with many others. Some pursue careers in environmental law, environmental business, environmental activism, environmental health; some spread the word by sharing books, films, and environmental education. Some build their own gardens. My students are my seedlings. I hope to cast them, and these words, far and wide.

¹ABVD is an acronym for the most common combination of chemotherapy drugs used to treat Hodgkin's Disease: Adriamycin, Bleomycin, Vizinblastine, and Dacarbazine.

²In addition to those mentioned earlier, writers in the expanded version of the course include Paula Gunn Allen, Val Plummer, Linda Hogan, Octavia Butler, Margaret Atwood, Starhawk, Susanne Antonetta, Toni Morrison, Luci Topahonso, Mary Oliver, and Joy Harjo, as well as such films as

Homeland, Rachel's Daughters, Children of Men, and Testament.

³Other activists on which students have conducted research include Julia Butterfly Hill, Rachel Carson, and Lois Gibbs.

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5. Motherlines

Recording, Analyzing, and Transmitting Maternal Pedagogies