‘In My Mothers’ Garden: Memories and practices of Greenham Common Women’s Peace Camp’

Nick Beech

Introduction

The following work was first produced for a seminar convened at Birkbeck College, London in June 2016.[i] The seminar included presentations from women who had participated at the Peace Camp in the 1980s sharing their memories and discussing their understanding of their lived political practice.[ii] The seminar was chaired by Sasha Roseneil, then Director of the Birkbeck Institute for Social Research, who had herself lived at Greenham, and who has produced two powerful studies of the Peace Camp in *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and political action at Greenham*, and *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The queer feminisms of Greenham*.[iii] The seminar was followed by a screening of *Carry Greenham Home*, directed by Beeban Kidron and Amanda Richardson, in 1982, and edited in collaboration with the women at the Camp.[iv] Anyone unfamiliar with Greenham Common and the Women’s Peacecamp would do well to start with the film and Roseneil’s historical and critical work.

The seminar and screening were convened as spaces of testimony, and a number of women shared their experiences of Greenham, and brought with them the textiles, and print media produced for particular political actions. The practice of non-violent direct action (NVDA) as that was developed at Greenham, was elaborated and refracted through discussion on consensus decision making, sexed, sexual, and gender politics, economic relations, political actions, representation and mass media, developments of feminist thought, and the deeper life histories of the women themselves.

My own contribution at this event was to share a selection of my memories, as an eight-year old, living at Greenham with his mother during school holidays. I have been sharing these ‘little Greenham stories’ for many years—at home, with my

mother's friends, with family, and with peers and colleagues at conferences—though often only after a few drinks and as a means to answer that question that begins to bubble up after the work themes are exhausted—'so, who are you?'

However, conscious that what I might remember, and what I may have been told, may not tally with what others remember, and what others have told about Greenham, I worked hard over the months leading up to the seminar, on the memories themselves.

Rather than construct, embellish, or craft a narrative, I sought to disentangle the the history that I 'knew'—the names and dates of particular actions and events, of locations, motivations, arguments and justifications—those elements that I have subsequently read about or have picked up in conversations with my mother and others. And, in that disentangling, I thought I might be able to tease out the images, objects, landscapes and figures, and affects and narrations of my eight-year old self. The result is a fragmentary, impressionistic, quite funny, and in certain places acutely painful, text. Indeed, Sasha Roseneil alerted me to the possibility of considerable emotional distress—whilst it had not occurred to me that this might be the case (I had, after all, spent many years recounting these memories as stories), inhabiting the memories again, in voice, proved alarmingly emotive and frankly compromising.

I subsequently presented the work at the conference 'Architecture & Feminisms: Ecologies, economies, technologies', held in November 2016.[v] There I spoke in a formal conference panel, alongside papers that explored the contradictions, possibilities, and limits of various spaces and places of conflict.[vi] At the conference I suggested that my voice (and I emphasised the vocalised, embodied, spoken quality of the work) could be understood in three ways. First, as an historical 'artefact', not in the terms of the 'heritage' or 'culture industries'—a fetishised and stabilising object, a repository of empirical 'truth'—but in the terms set out at the 'Architecture & Feminisms' conference by the design collective MYCKET—as a disruptive, potentially combinatory, and unstable 'object/subject'.[vii] Secondly, that my voice could be considered as a 'dialectical image', as that has been read

by Jane Rendell in her *Art and Architecture: a place between.*[viii] That is, an image that operates with specific temporal intent (punctual, ruptural, and futural), but encompasses contemplative and empathetic acts and experiences without losing political purchase. Finally, I asked that the audience at the conference consider my voice as speaking, not only from the body of a 40 year old man, who stood before them as a lecturer/researher/scholar, but as speaking from the body of a seven year old, pre-pubescent boy. In that respect I made reference to two discourses that might help in making sense of the material. Close to hand (for the conference) was a conversation between Peg Rawes and Doug Spencer concerning 'affect' and 'rationalism'.[ix] From that conversation I proposed that it might be worth considering my 'voice' (as spoken by a seven year old boy experiencing Greenham Common) as a 'front line' in the neo-liberal project of a western European social democratic state in the early nineteen-eighties. I invited the conference to remember that 'neo-liberalism' does not only designate the dominance of 'the market', but designates a particular mode of subjectivation[x]—and that if a trauma is detectable in my voice, that this trauma is the product of that mode at work. On the other hand, I suggested that such a project occurs within a specific assemblage of technologies, techniques, discourses, and extra-discursive (or non-discursive) practices: that is, following Michel Foucault, a specific apparatus (*dispositif*), further designated 'bio-power'.[xi] I understand the history of Greenham Common as providing terrible insight into the nature of that apparatus.

As a result, I would remind readers (as I reminded listeners) of my voice to bear in mind that they are witness to something which is neither innocent nor 'past' but is constitutive—that is, it is a record of subject formation in process, and as such, though it 'occurred' in the past (when I was seven years old) I would ask that it be remembered that it is still being *lived* in the present.

All that I would finally add, in case any alarm bells are ringing (which I suspect they should be): in no sense do I propose that my voice provides *privileged access* to Greenham, or the women's movement of the early 1980s (good God!).

In My Mothers' Garden

History

Greenham Common is an area of land covering roughly 3.5 square kilometres in Berkshire near the towns of Newbury and Thatcham (about 90kms from London). Common land for a thousand years, Greenham was requisitioned by the British government for military purposes in the Second World War when it was used as a staging post by the United States Army Air Force to launch military campaigns in North Africa and mainland Europe.

In 1951, the airbase was given to the United States Air Force (USAF) as a 'Strategic Air Command' base. The original airstrip was demolished and in its place one of the largest airstrips in Europe was constructed (about 3 km in length, east to west) extending the base beyond the original requisitioned common land.

By 1975 North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) members, led by the US, had begun agreements that would lead to the deployment of nuclear cruise missiles in western and northern Europe. In negotiations, Britain agreed to provide land for the siloes and launch facilities for 160 Gryphon Ground Launched Missiles (widely referred to as Cruise). In June 1980 it was announced that 'RAF Greenham Common' would become a site for 96 of these Cruise Missiles.

On 27 August 1981, a small group, led by women, though including children and husbands, 'Women for Life on Earth', left Cardiff in Wales to walk 193 kms to Greenham Common. Arriving 10 days later, they camped outside the main gate, delivering a letter to the Airbase Commander, stating 'we fear for the future of all our children and for the future of the living world which is the basis of all life', demanding that the Commander meet with them to discuss dismantling of the base. The Commander refused. The Women for Life on Earth initiated an indefinite camp and their first action: four women chained themselves to the fence. By February 1982 the Peace Camp had become women only, their husbands asked to

leave. Subsequent actions—including blockades and occupations—led to numerous arrests.

In the autumn of 1982, the women of Greenham utilised a ‘chaining’ letter writing method—in which an initial letter was sent to 10 people, each recipient, copying and passing on to 10 more people in turn—to invite women to participate in a mass action on the 12 December. ‘Embrace the Base’ attracted some 30,000 women to Greenham, encircling the base with bodies holding hands. Some of these women stayed.

The Peace Camp grew—and continued to exist in a number of sites on Greenham Common, these sites named after colours of the rainbow (Yellow Gate, Orange Gate, Green Gate, etc.), developing different cultures, practices, politics and lived relations, attracting women from across the British Isles, and the wider world. Actions and ideas developed. I cannot provide an overview for you, even brief.

The last Cruise missile left the base in March 1991, following the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, between the US and USSR. RAF Greenham Common was returned to the British by the USAF on 11 September 1992. The Peace Camp disbanded in 2000.

Memory

I have no memory of my mother going to Greenham—of any conversation about it, of any packing. I don’t even have a memory of her absence.

I have no memory of going to Greenham myself—I don’t know how I got there.

I have memories of our car, a certain texture to the seats, a certain smell—musty, oily—and of the angle of the tilt of my head, looking out of the window, and of the frame of the car window, the metal, and the crumbling, fragile rubber strips, holding the glass.

I have no journey that I can remember. And I don't remember arriving. I don't remember what I took with me, nor in what form of baggage. I do remember playing at Greenham with my favourite toy. Zrk the Destroyer.

Zrk the Destroyer is a mechanical, weaponised dinosaur in the form of a white and blue brontosaurus. It is made of plastic parts that you assemble following instructions, with a battery powered motor that moves its legs and neck. It makes a constant whirring sound—gshk, gshk, gshk. I play with it by the camp fire, and I am worried that Zrk might get too muddy.

I don't know how many times I went to Greenham. I don't know how long I was there for. A week, maybe two. I have no idea. I have no memory of eating, or sleeping, waking up, or washing. I have memories of my brother, 2 years younger than me, he must have been 5. What do I remember?

The fire. The fire grows and shrinks—sometimes it is big enough to allow everyone to sit around it at once, and it glows intensely, a great, embracing thing, but never 'wild', never roaring with flames—deep, red heat. Sometimes it is a shallow small ashy patch in the rain.

Sitting by the fire is grown up, and you are not a grown up if you run around trying to avoid the smoke, which gets in your eyes, and in your lungs, and on your teeth. A woman shows me how to tend the fire so that it does not go out, and keeps everyone warm, and boils the water, and cooks the food, and dries the clothes, but does not burn all the wood. A woman tells me that I can sit with her, through the night. I have a memory of feeling 'responsible' and cared for with this invitation. I can't remember who she is. She is fierce.

I remember playing with other children, but I don't remember their names and I haven't seen them since. We are not intimates, we are not friends. We are children of the camp. We run around playing games, some of which are playful, some of which are cruel. Some of the children get picked on. I don't remember who they

are. I join in. We play with sticks, stones, glass jars, mugs, wax, string, wool. I don't remember paper or pens or pencils at the camp. We play around the bushes and the copses and the fence and the tarmac of the main gate.

The tarmac of the main gate is a very big version of my friend's drive at home. A woman has made a go-kart or wheeled sled, and I use the big drive outside the main gate to play. I fall off it and scrape my shoulder which makes a lot of blood and a large scab. This is dressed at the camp. I do not take the dressing off and I tend the scab, rather than pick it, when I am at school.

I tell everyone at school that I have been shot by the army at Greenham Common. I tell this story in the lunch queue in the hall of the school, where the dinner ladies are serving custard from metal vats onto apple crumble. As I tell the story the scab comes off in my hand, and underneath my skin is perfectly healed, soft and clean.

Once, I am taken with three other children from school—two girls and one boy—to a special event in a town, where we spend the day making books from scratch—we write the books, we draw the illustrations, we make the covers, we bind the pages. I have strong memories of the smell of the glue and the texture of the material that we cover the books with. It is a day in which I feel very proud. A teacher—I can't remember who she is, maybe Miss Philips—a teacher drives us to the town where we make our books. On the journey the car radio mentions nuclear weapons. I say that we must get rid of nuclear weapons. The other boy says that I'm a traitor. I say that I don't know why we have nuclear weapons. They are just dangerous. He says that it's because the Russians want to bomb us. I say that's not true, why would the Russians want to bomb us? He says it is because they want the Crown Jewels.

We played along the fence. I remember telling a story about how another boy and I would run along the fence and cut, not holes, but 'doors' so that we could get in and out of the base. I remember thinking that this was very clever of us. But, I don't remember the feeling of the wire cutters in my hand, and I don't remember the feeling of the pressure of the wire as we cut into it. And I suspect that this is a

memory of a conversation we had as we ran along the fence. I do remember seeing a man on the other side, and it is misty, and he is in military uniform and carrying a very large gun. This man appears very scary to me and I do not want him to shoot me. I do remember holding the fence in my hands and leaning against it and looking in.

On the other side there are little houses, some of them are made of timber boards and some of them are made of brick. And there is a school which looks new and better than my school (which is old for the most part, but does have two temporary huts). And outside of the school is a court with small trees in it and a basketball hoop, and the children wear nice clothes, not uniforms, and they are American. And I remember a desire to be with them, and to be like them as I look through the fence. I remember seeing the film ET and the world of ET with the drives, and the roads, and the families, and the fridge full of food and the bedrooms full of stuff. And I remember wanting that very much and thinking that all of that was there, behind the fence.

Once, I was running along the fence, which was to my right, away from my mother's camp, which everyone calls 'Yellow Gate', or 'Main Gate'. I come to a small copse and there is a woman there. She has metal all over her face and her body, and she is wild. She is not fierce, but I am nervous of her and I want her to know that I am meek. I don't remember how our meeting ends.

My mother takes me, once, to a field, which is like the meadows where I am from in Somerset. It is on the other side of the Big Drive at the Main Gate and the grass is much taller and everything is much wider and more open. She has a kite for me to fly. This is a dragon. I do not often fly kites and this is very exciting. I don't remember flying the kite for very long. A policeman comes from the side of the field and walks very carefully and deliberately towards us. I don't remember the exact words he uses, but I remember feeling he was polite, but confusing. I remember, he tells me that I should stop flying my kite because it confuses an 'American air traffic controller'. I remember feeling emboldened and indignant—I cannot under-

stand how my new kite can possibly confuse an air traffic controller in America. I think I might have scoffed. I don't know how this encounter ended.

I don't remember any 'actions'. I don't remember the songs, and I don't remember any of the conversations. I do remember that many times voices are terse, angry. Sometimes a number of women will be arguing with my mother. I don't know what the arguments are about or why my mother is having them. I don't remember being comforted by the other women of the camp. Many of the women are stern. But I have some sort of memory that they always tell the truth, and that I can trust them. I remembering *feeling* that they are my mothers.

A man once approached me at the fringe of the camp. He is wearing a suit. He is younger than my father. He does not have a beard. He is friendly, and he offers me some chocolate. He has a tape recorder in his hand. He asks me a question, but I don't know the answer. My mother comes out of nowhere and tells me I mustn't talk to the man. As we walk away I tell her I wasn't going to talk to him, I was only going to try and get some chocolate.

One day my mother has to go to court in Newbury. Newbury is a name that makes me think of low concrete frame buildings with brick or asbestos panel infills. I don't know why.

I was left in the camp with the other women. They 'look after me', but that means they 'get on with things'. The day is not warm and it is damp, so it is grey everywhere. There is an anxiety everywhere that I remember and I am told that I will have to pack-up everything and move to the side of the road and that this will be easier if I start now and put what I can in the van. The van is a VW van which is off white and it has orange rust spots at the bottom. This is all about the Bailiffs. The Bailiffs will come and put everything that is still at the camp into the Muncher. I have not seen the Muncher. I remember deciding to be brave and believing that I will not be moved by the Bailiffs and that when my mother returns she will be very proud of me. I remember a confrontation with a woman who tells me I should pack everything away but I do not move. I don't remember the Bailiffs arriving. I am sit-

ting in the entrance to my mother's bender. It has blue plastic sheeting in the entrance and I am sitting there. There is a boot and jeans outside the entrance. There is a man who is not like the policeman. He says 'Get out or you'll go in the Muncher with it'. I am very frightened and I run out of the bender straight away leaving all of my things in it. I have a strong vision of the van, and bundles of benders and bedding, and kettles and pans and women and the other children by the side of the road. I run straight to them. I remember feeling ashamed.

I don't have a picture in my mind or in my memories of the camp as a whole. It is made of pieces—blankets, tarps, plastic sheets, palettes, ropes, wool, clothes, boots, mugs—endless mugs, mugs everywhere—big water cases, a VW van. The fire is the only thing that does not move in my memory of the camp.

A woman starts sharing my mother's bender. She gives me a cloak. It is the most wonderful thing. It is an orange brown and the material is thin, but it has a trim, a hood, and a fastener. It is long enough to reach my knees. It is magical. In my cloak I don't have to pretend—I *am* a Ranger, which is a very special type of person in Dungeons and Dragons, someone who can run, and track, and hide, and use herbs, and magic, and hunt. They are clever, and careful, and they can lead, but they are loners. They are better than knights or wizards. And I am one in my cloak.

I have no memory of leaving Greenham or coming home—I don't know how I got there.
I have no journey that I can remember. And I don't remember arriving. I don't remember what I brought back with me, nor in what form of baggage. But I did bring back my cloak. And I remember that, after a bath, I can smell my cloak—that it has a rich, deep smell of sour mud and sweet smoke.

[i] The seminar was convened as part of the 'Radical Histories/Histories of Radicalism' conference,30 June–3 July 2016, Raphael Samuel History Centre (www.raphaelsamuelhistorycentre.com).

[ii] The seminar included presentations of material practice (with a particular emphasis on Non-Violent Direct Action), and artefacts (textiles, badges, letters) and included statements from Elizabeth Beech, Di Macdonald, Ele Carpenter, and Sasha Roseneil, among many other women who had lived or visited the Greenham Peace Camp.

[iii] Sasha Roseneil, *Disarming Patriarchy: Feminism and political action at Greenham* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995); Sasha Roseneil, *Common Women, Uncommon Practices: The queer feminisms of Greenham* (London: Cassell, 2000). For Roseneil's work more broadly, see http://sasharoseneil.com (accessed 7 November 2016).

[iv] Beeban Kidron with Amanda Richardson (directors), *Carry Greenham Home*, National Film and Television School (1983). Available through Concord Media, https://vimeo.com/ondemand/carrygreenhamhome (accessed 2 May 2019).

[v] Convened by Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, Helena Mattsson, Karin Reisinger, Meike Schalk, 'Architecture & Feminisms: Ecologies, economies, technologies' was the 13th International Architectural Humanities Research Association conference, the first to be held outside the UK (KTH School of Architecture, Stockholm). See https://architecturefeminisms.org (accessed 2 May 2019).

[vi] Chaired by Meike Schalk, the panel included papers from Hala Eid Alnaji, Shyma Naji and Haya Alnaji, and Aya Musmar. For the latter, see Aya Musmar, 'Environmentalising Humanitarian Governance in Za'atri Refugee Camp through Interactive Spaces: A posthuman approach', Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, Helen Runtig (eds), *Architecture and Feminisms: Ecologies, economies, technologies* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 181–91.

[vii] MYCKET—including (as of 2019) Thérèse Kristiansson, Anna Märta Danielsson, Ullis Ohlgren, Katarina Bonnevier & Mariana Alves Silva—is an art and architecture group initiated in 2012, developing artistic research from intersectional perspectives. See https://mycket.org/MYCKET (accessed 2 May 2019). MYCKET curated a number of exhibitions and events for the 'Architecture & Feminisms' conference, including a workshop that stimulated my proposal that my 'voice' could be understood in 'artefactual' terms.

[viii] See Jane Rendell, 'Allegory, Montage and Dialectical Image', *Art and Architecture: A place between* (London: IB Tauris, 2006), pp. 75–83 (p. 82).

[ix] See Peg Rawes and Doug Spencer, 'Material and Rational Feminisms: A contribution to humane architectures', in Frichot, Gabrielsson, Runtig (eds), *Architecture and Feminisms*, pp. 153–62.

[x] Here, I use 'subjectivation' following Michel Foucault, which I understand as the technologies and techniques by which the self is made subject to the self. See Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', in Michel Foucault, *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984*, edited by Paul Rabinow and others (London: Allen Lane, 1997–2000), III: *Power*, edited by James D. Faubion, translated by Robert Hurley and others (2000), pp. 111–33, and Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978*, trans. by Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 183–5.

[xi] Both of these concepts have attracted considerable attention, however, in regard to '*dispositif*' or 'apparatus' see Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?' trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, in Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And other essays* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 1–24; and, Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh', trans. by Colin Gordon, in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge:Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), pp. 194–228; Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge: The history of sexuality, vol. 1*, trans. by Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 133–59; Michel Foucault, *"Society Must be Defended", Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, trans. by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*; and, Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, trans. by Graham Burcell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). I have found helpful, for considering the broader genealogical analysis of biopolitics and biopower in relation to RAF Greenham Common and the Women's Peace Camp, Ben Anderson, 'Affect and Biopower: Towards a politics of life', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 37, no. 1 (January 2012), 28–43.