

Watersheds in Marxist Ecofeminism

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By

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Watersheds in Marxist Ecofeminism, by Pamela Odih

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Dedicado a Río Virilla, porque el espíritu del río ha inspirado orgullo reflexiva en mi propia imaginación sociológica

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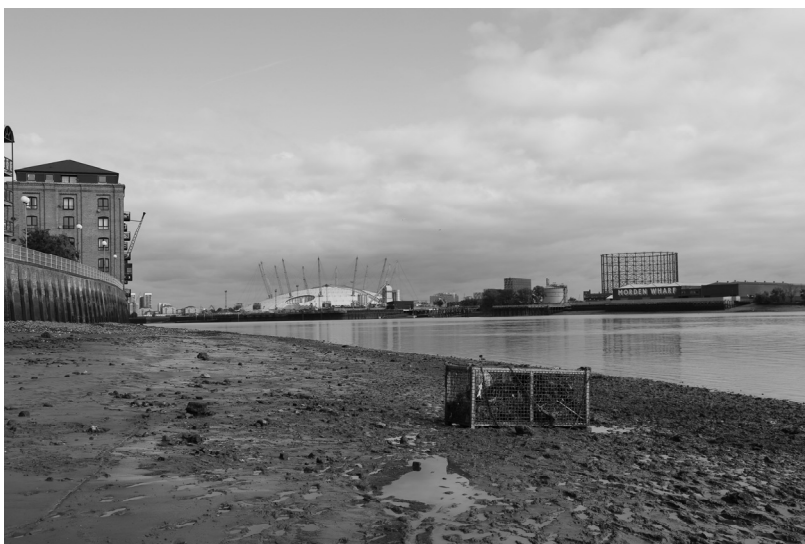


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PREFACE

Interviewer: *Can you tell me about it? [The river restoration project]*

Interviewee: *The project is to improve the river after the flood defence work they done about forty years ago now, where they straightened the channel. In the late sixties, it all flooded and there was this knee jerk reaction to put this sort of flood defence in, which doesn't really work.*

Interviewer: *What was the flood defence that they put in, in the late sixties?*

Interviewee: *You're looking at it now, this straightened channel which all it does is push the water down quicker and creates bottle necks everywhere else and floods other places. So, erhm, but we can't change this, so all we are trying to do is improve the channel by putting structures in the river, so the river meanders within the channel; and by doing that you create better habitat, for the fish, for the bugs, for the birdlife.*

Interviewer: *Why did they put in straight channels before, in the sixties?*

Interviewee: *This was the thinking of the time, was if you had a big straight channel then the water would run through very quickly. What you have to understand was that Lewisham was underwater by a meter, back then, it rained hideous amounts over the period of a week and this entire place was flooded up to street level; above street level. So they thought, just straighten the channel; stick it all in concrete and shove it out as quickly as they can down to Deptford.*

Interviewer: *Where in Deptford?*

Interviewee: *Deptford Creek into the Thames, that way... But the thinking now is to actually hold the water back and let it come out slowly, more so than throw it all out.*

Interviewer: *And what's inspired that thinking; the change in thinking towards the meandering?*

Interviewee: *Because it doesn't work. The system they thought was the solution is not the right solution. In terms of its, kind of, not conservation as such the bio-diversity of the river is completely ruined, by the aspect of doing this kind of structure, these concrete works. It doesn't work, it just creates more problems in terms of flooding; and they've slowly worked it out; this costs a lot of money; this concrete only has a limited life-span on the river. So in twenty, thirty years time this will all have to be broken out anyway, so the idea now is to have a more sustainable system. And use the*

parks where the rivers can naturally flood and hold the water up and then, you've got a, you know, you've got a more natural flood defence system that was always there in the first place, which was flooding fields, which is quite natural.

Interviewer: And how is the project sponsored? And organised?

Interviewee: *I work for [River Conservation Charity Three], I'm the project manager. We get, we get all sorts of funding from loads of different people really. Erhm, some from the borough, some from landfill taxes, lottery money - years ago...So there's grants and applications, you put in applications in for grants, funding.*

Interviewer: What about the Environment Agency?

Interviewee: *They give us some money. They give us a bit of money every year to play with, and they're quite happy.*

Interviewer: What are you supposed to do to actually enable sponsorship from the Environment Agency? What performance indicators do they require?

Interviewee: *Erhm well the structures are paid for by the [Environment] Agency that we've been putting in, so all the berm structures; all the low level shelves and all that sort of stuff. That ticks boxes in terms of wildlife. Erhm we have something called the WFD, which is the Water Framework Directive coming from Europe; and that requires every water body in this country to be of a 'good' ecological standard. And one of the key indicators of measuring that is fish; and at the moment we don't have a lot of fish. By putting these structures in we are creating havens where fish can hide and you know keep out of the flow a little bit; you know when the flow's too high. By creating a more meandering river in that sense, not only do you slow the waters down a little bit. But you also create a habitat, for, a refuge if you like, for fish.*

Interviewer: You said the Water Framework Directive: How does that directly impact on this project again? So the European Water Framework Directive: is that through the Environment Agency that it impacts, or is it directly impacting on the project?

Interviewee: *No, the Agency [is] the delivery agent for the Water Framework Directive, which is... it's quite a task. In urban rivers it, you know you've got a lot of problems in urban rivers. We're not ever sure we're ever gonna reach that standard. Although this one is reasonably ok, the Ravensbourne and the River Pool is 'good'. Erhm, so that one ticks the box, whereas this one doesn't [the latter is the Ravensbourne and the former is the River Pool]. This is the Ravensbourne and that's the River Pool.*

Interviewer: *Over there, oh the two of them meet?*

Interviewee: *Yeah, so they confluence here [pointing to a meeting of the rivers]. So from here onwards it's the Ravensbourne, so the River Pool is from here up to there. It's all the same system it is the Ravensbourne catchment. They are slowly trying to improve the river in a sense. You can see what it is like, it is all concrete and rubbish really. But further down there it's all gravel bed and further up here, it is gravel so this is concrete for a mile up to Bellingham and there's no fish in there. There's fish in that one [pointing to the River Pool].*

Interviewer: *So to actually be able to achieve a 'good' in terms of the Water Framework Directive, so are the rivers actually meeting that? Is the objective to achieve a 'good' or is there a bigger objective?*

Interviewee: *I think 'good' is where they're gonna stop at. You know I think there's 'bad', 'good' and 'excellent', I'm not quite sure what, I can't remember what all of them are. But 'good' is the minimum standard they wanna get to. Like I said, in London, in any urban river, it's going to be very difficult because a lot of the storm [water] run[s] off the roads; that just brings pollutants into the river and erhm you know that's always going to hold you back. So you can never ever get it, you know like an 'excellent' river. I defy anyone who can have an excellent river, you know, in modern times; because even if you was in the country you're getting diffuse pollution off the land, you know you're getting all the, you know all the fertilizer phosphates nitrates, that drains in. So you got to talk to the farmers about changing their practices because it's affecting the quality of the river. You know, you've got things like this sort of stuff: you can stop the cattle... damaging the river by putting a fence up, that makes a difference quite quickly. You know, so there [are] things you can do in the country, you know, you can do that. But you know in a city, you'd have to change every single drain and divert that water somewhere else. And in some places they are doing that, they're called SUDs: Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems. Where they chuck the water into a lagoon; and it all settles out; and it trickles out, you know; and you can put reeds in that and it'll remediate the water, and the soil and all that and you could do that. But then again there's not a lot of places where you can put the SUDs really, so there's one or two we can put along here but we don't know who owns the land and we would have to divert the water into it; not the river just the drains. If we could do that, that would be great, that would take out a lot of the silt and the filth, a lot of it is from rotten tyres and stuff like that. It's not just the oil of the engines off cars; you know break-pads, I've been told on cars all that dust that come off that, you know, that all ends up in the river.*

Interviewer: *So if the objective is not to achieve the ‘excellent’, what is your main motivation?*

Interviewee: *What we would like to see is a more natural river system, the pollution we might have to live with I think. I think realistically if we can restore rivers to a semi-natural state by removing all the concrete, putting bends back in and having little... lanes in the parks and all that I think that’s a good place to start. Then slowly, slowly you never know we might run out of oil and might never use our cars again and we’ll never pollute our roads; and that won’t wash into the rivers so. I think, I think that will be a good start. Restore the rivers to what they used to look like; put bends back in; hold the water up; catch the water and just let it out gently and then you know, you’ve got a nice green corridor. One of the good things about this river is it’s got a very good cycling track along; because it’s a flat, it’s a flat landscape. All the rivers should have cycling tracks along, keep the cyclists off the road put them along the rivers...*

Interviewer: *And the Environment Agency’s helping you to achieve this?*

Interviewee: *The Agency well, we help the agency in a sense. My job, yea, they’re not helping us, we’re helping them.*

Interviewer: *In what way?*

Interviewee: *By doing the structures; by keeping the rivers clean; we pull out a lot of rubbish you know things like that, so by building these structures and creating refuge for fish and stuff like that; so that should help them meet their targets. You know, from my perspective as a [River Conservation Charity III] operative is to get people involved in rivers. That’s where we come from as a charity. You know, for much of the time people are just disengaged from the environment especially rivers; and we provide an opportunity for people to go in, play and erhm and go and do something good in it really. First thing pull out the rubbish; then maybe build one or two structures; do some water quality testing. Basically educate people about rivers. You know for years they have been behind fences and that’s all being ripped out. You go down Ladywell now, it’s fantastic down there. All the kids can just run straight into the water...*

Interviewer: *So they actually built concrete banks? And it was because it was meant to just straighten the river? And that’s what they wanted to do? But it’s like over forty years now and so it hasn’t broken down?*

Interviewee: *Not yet, but some of it is looking a bit shabby. They’ll probably keep the bits by the bridges, but the rest of it they’ll probably take out eventually. They’ve widened it as well you see, so what you could do is leave that in there and just build a new bank inside it, you could leave that structure in there and then soften the edges. So one of the things you don’t get in there: you don’t get marginal vegetation along the river’s edge, so the fish don’t hide. So that plant there was along the river’s edge, all the way round, like that one over there say, so that’s where all the fish are they*

hide in there. You come down here sometimes you see a white egret, it looks like a heron... anyway they pop along and they go along there and you can see them using their foot to actually scare out the fish. If [you] sit here long enough you see a King Fisher.

Interviewer: And so you are building these natural systems to actually rise and slow down the river?

Interviewee: Yes to slow down the river and actually to speed up the river in the summer; because they are low flow structures, so as I was just saying: since we built these structures we've had nothing but rain. But in the summer there'll be half this much water. And the idea of the structures is to narrow the river down so the water during the summer goes through there much quicker because it's much narrower.

Interviewer: And that's what motivates you to want to work with the charity; because you want to actually to address these issues?

Interviewee: Yea and one of the other things that [hasn't] been done down here; there's been no maintenance. So forty years ago they came in [and] straightened everything. And just let things grow. And what happens is now, there's so much tree down here it's actually what makes it too dark in the channel and you're not getting the growth of plants around the edges where you would like; because it is too dark. So we've been taking out a lot of the trees, cutting them back a bit to get some more light. Not all of them, just some. But you know, you need to manage trees, you can't just leave them. You can't just think, I'll plant a tree, you know, they need a lot of management. For years, it's only in the last fifty years we've not managed trees in this country. For 2,000 years before that we did. We didn't kill them we just cut them down for fire wood and let them grow again. They call it pollarding, you know they chop the top half off and then use that for your firewood, but they won't kill the tree and then it grows again and they come back and chop another bit off. You know and that's what they used to do; and this is what pollarding is and that's why you never used to get trees falling down, but now people don't do that any more; and they just let trees grow thinking it's the natural thing they should be doing, which it probably is; but in the landscape we are living now it's not good, they just get blown down... We lost one of the big poplars over there recently, we lost a lot, a few trees come down. Surprised we ain't lost a tree; no one said we got a tree down at the moment. Couple came down over Christmas they chopped [them] up. You got to manage these things.

Interviewer: And what sorts of things hinder the management of these things? What sort of things facilitate and what sort of things make it more work?

Interviewee: Money [he laughs]. Money really; and with cut backs, you know what do you do?

Interviewer: *What types of cut backs are affecting you?*

Interviewee: Loads; lot of the councils, and they put everything to contract, so they want to get as much as they can out of their contract time and things like that. But there's a limit what you can take out; ultimately, in the end, if you ain't got people to do the work then it ain't ever going to get done. One of the, one of the first things that, know when you have a recession and things like that, one of the first things that happens is they cut back on the environmental services. I mean we're very fortunate in Lewisham I think they are being very good so far. Not sure what's going to happen this year. But the team ain't very big, in the council, which is a bit of a shame. You've got to look at; they've got their bio-diversity department and things like this sort of stuff; that's really important. What ever you do you want to try and maximise all you have, without doing too much for it or doing enough for it. It's very difficult; cutting down trees and getting a tree surgeon down for a day is a lot of money. All I have to do is give them a saw and they'll just chop it down anyway [referring to the volunteers] ... There's a lot of interest in rivers, we do community events, advertising you can get anywhere between half a dozen people to sixty, depends on the weather; depends on the time of the year. You know just by going through it every so often, just keeping it clean. That's a bonus. A lot of people think they're just rubbish; I mean we used to pull out shopping trolleys, motorbikes, everything out of these rivers; but because we've been doing it for so long a lot of that big stuff doesn't come back anymore. Rubbish begets rubbish. So if people don't clear it out then that's what happens. The funny thing about rubbish in rivers is, no one has to take it. There's no law in this country that requires any authority to have to take rubbish out of a river. That's why we set up as a charity... [Working alongside other civic initiatives] cleaning rivers in London, because no one had to clean them. Years ago we'd do an event for two hours, you'd be astonished the amount of rubbish, you know van loads, van loads. You'd be lucky now to get a quarter of a van load in a day. Over then in two hours, with twenty people or so, you'll easily take out two or three van loads. Just you know, that's how much less there is now.

Interviewer: *So it's really important to work with communities then I guess?*

Interviewee: That's what all these are; all these are volunteers all local...

Interviewer: *I was really interested in what's happening; because the Environment Agency's been [in the media] rivers over the last couple of weeks have been a big thing?*

Interviewee: People have woken up. You know; it's like, I think, I saw, I missed the Panorama programme; I'll get it on my Ipad later. I only caught the end of it; and they said you've got to be frank. You can't just tell these people everything's going to be ok, because it's never going to be ok. You know, they've got a new type of flooding now: saturation flooding.

Which is fantastic you know, never even heard of it before. With the water's coming up underneath their houses; you know that's not rivers bursting its bank. You can't mitigate against that; there's nothing you can do about that; apart from move your house! [laughter] ...I think because we've not had flooding in this country for such a blemming long time people don't know. All the[se] thing[s] about the Somerset Levels, what's that about? I mean that's been flooding ever since King Arthur was down there, got buried down there; that's Avalon isn't it? You know; you know, it's nuts. It's just a marsh landscape that used to be the sea, two thousand years ago, that was under water. You know, what do they expect? I mean for goodness sake, you know it's below sea level guys, work it out! You know, you can't blame the [Environment] Agency for that amount of water. It's just bonkers; you know all these people in Staines who live along the river banks, up the river: well yes you live on a floodplain. It might be a very nice place to live and you want to spend a million pounds on your house; but it's going to flood. You know; and that Panorama programme just said to them: if you can not cope with the fact that your house is going to flood then you need to be thinking about where you live. Right? And I think this is a wake up call for many people frankly; because they are consistently, consistently building on floodplains. You know the Agency put a flood protection scheme right; all of a sudden the developer says we can build on that land now. Right; and the Agency will always say to them 'no you can't'. Or say 'you can't', 'we don't recommend it'. They can't say no 'you can' or 'you can't' that's not their job right. The recommendation from the Agency is do not build a house on a floodplain. They'll say we've got a flood defence system engaged here; but that's only for a one in five year flood or a one in twenty year flood. It is the magnitude of flood; the floods we are looking at now [referring to the winter floods 2013-2014 in England] is a one in a hundred year flood. Right that's how rare they are. But it might not be, you might get another one of those ...or two of those one hundred year floods back to back. So then the magnitude of the flood has changed...So it's only based on an assessment based on the current weather conditions right? So they don't know what the weather's going to do next year right? We know for a fact we are going to get more rain, that's what global warming really means. Global warming really means more heat, more water in the air and that's just going to transfer into rain we know about that right? ... It's interesting people don't get it. Actually working in places like this, people have that debate, will talk about it and people understand. By working in the river I think you understand what a river system is; and people just don't get it. I was talking about Lambeth, the other day, about breaking out the [river] Effra, Brixton High Street you know. There's a river underneath there you know; get it out! You know it's going to happen one day, eventually, you know. You have to understand that you know, I remember seeing a map of London; if that was a map of London [he places one glove on the raised concrete bank] right and that was a map of the river system [he places the other glove on top of the first]

in London it's exactly the same. So that tells you doesn't it, people live by the river. You look at it, it's identical almost identical. Where the housing overlays the river system right, it just goes to show: it's not the river's fault that it's flooding. That's what it does. It's our fault for living next to a river. You've got to cope with it.

Interviewer: *Do you think there is a system that would be particularly able to manage the urban river? Is there a new way of thinking about it; a different way of thinking about it?*

Interviewee: *It's what you do with flood water isn't it. Yeah they are doing that. A lot of the parks are being converted into floodplains, yeah. So the floods will be allowed to flood and hold water and that's about it really; that's all you can do.*

...

Interviewer: *What did you think of all the hysteria around the recent floods?*

Interviewee: *Idiotic really you know. Like I said, I think it's people so disconnected from the environment, in which they live. I wouldn't blame the media because they had the right to report what they saw. I don't think the government helped. The press in particular were quite rubbish I thought; you know picking up on these stories about the Agency being rubbish and this and that; I mean them guys have been killing themselves for two months. You know, they want someone to blame don't they. It's deflection isn't it; government deflection? Blame the Quango, and I'm glad Chris Smith actually came out and actually stood up and said: well actually what we do is what you tell us to do; the guide lines that we work to are set by government not us, you know: protect life; protect property; farmland comes last; so don't tell us about the Somerset Levels why we ain't done nothing down there when we've got the whole rest of it. Only 5,000 houses got flooded, you think about the amount of rain that we had right; which was, is a fantastic amount...it was phenomenal. For that two months since before Christmas, and it's just a fantastic amount of rain. You know, and I just think, you can't mitigate. You can't do anything about that. But considering the amount; I mean it was country wide it wasn't just one area. I can understand it, if it was just one area; but it wasn't. It was country wide. And then, how much they could protect; if they protected one and a half million properties from flooding, five thousand got done...five thousand homes compared to one and a half million. To me that's successful. You've got to put it in perspective, you can't protect them all.*

Interviewer: *Should the rest be protected by insurance?*

Interviewee: *I don't know they can't get it now can they? Some guy on the radio yesterday, he had a small flood; it got paid out and they wouldn't insure him again. So now he's got twelve to fifteen thousand pounds to his property. There you go. (Project Manager, London River Thames Conservation Charity III, February 2014)*



Figure P.viii.a., “While Glory, nurs’d within her merchants arms, Shall blaze refulgent on a wond’ring world” (Ann Yearsley *The Bristol Marine Society*, 1787). Photographic Image, South London, River Pool, which flows through Lewisham and Greenwich into the River Thames, February 2014



Figure P.ix., "The present is not valu'd; restless man Lives for the past, and future, fix'd his eye On op'ning prospects that shall never end, Till, in the vast pursuit, the rover falls" (Ann Yearsley *Familiar Epistle to a Friend*, 1787). Photographic Image, South London, River Thames, September 2013