

## **“Can’t See the Forest for Her Tree” – Activism, Celebrity & Julia “Butterfly” Hill**

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Treesitting is a form of non-violent direct action used by “forest defense” activists that involves physically occupying trees in danger of being cut. From platforms a hundred feet or more high, treesitters both protest and prevent forests from being felled. Radical environmental groups have used this tactic for over a decade, and treesits are scattered throughout the forests of the Pacific Northwest and northern California.

Undoubtedly the world’s best known treesitter, Julia “Butterfly” Hill spent two years in “Luna,” a 1000-year-old redwood threatened by the chainsaws of Pacific Lumber Company on land they owned in Humboldt County, California. Hill’s brave act of civil disobedience generated much media attention for the destruction of the ancient redwoods – only 3% of the original redwood ecosystem remains. But Hill’s story also generated much attention for Hill herself, and as all too frequently occurs in the world of “news entertainment,” in what situationist Guy Debord called “the society of the spectacle,” she was exalted into celebrity stardom. In the media spotlight, the plight of the old growth forests became the story of one tree; the efforts of Earth First! and other radical environmentalists became the struggle of one woman. As the story of Julia “Butterfly” Hill and her tree gained access to the mainstream media and to popular culture, her relationship to the radical politics typically behind treesitting became strained, if not severed.

At the 2000 Public Interest Environmental Law Conference here at the University of Oregon – less than three months after her descent from Luna, Julia “Butterfly” Hill gave a keynote address that many audience members described as “mesmerizing.” In contrast to her presentation of serenity and triumph were two interruptions. The first was a staged walkout by local forest defenders who had scrawled “Julia sold out” across their torsos; the second interruption was a more lengthy and vociferous confrontation with a young woman who harangued Hill, demanding an explanation for Hill’s “deal” with Pacific Lumber. Although this young woman was not a treesitter, the sustained disruption was a dramatic and unsettling display of the divisions between Hill and radical forest activists. The confrontation was a vivid performance that encapsulated the dueling ideologies: Julia “Butterfly” Hill – her hair coiffed, in a long, hemp silk dress dissolved into tears; two burly steelworkers rushed to her aid, towering ominously over the other young woman who yelled and yelled, not stopping to listen; agitated audience members shouted at her to “shut up” and threatened to throw her out. The disruption was shocking to many present as they had not considered Hill as anything less than a heroine.

This paper grows out of that event and explores some of the rhetorical and performance dimensions of the break between forest defenders – namely Earth First!ers and Eugene-area treesitters – and Julia “Butterfly” Hill. While she has performed the radical tactic of treesitting, her accompanying “image” and narrative – expressed to the media and in her autobiography *The Legacy of Luna* – are very different

from Earth First!ers. I suggest that her “legacy” becomes problematic as popular culture endorses her and only her, appropriating the radical tactic but silencing the radical critique.

In conjunction with monkeywrenching, road-blockading, and guerrilla theater, the tactic of treesitting has been used by the radical environmental group Earth First! to simultaneously defend the ancient forests and draw attention to their destruction. As rhetorician Kevin DeLuca notes, these political actions cannot be reduced merely to “attention-getting devices,” for they are “crystallized philosophical fragments, mind bombs that work to expand the ‘universe of thinkable thoughts’” (1999, 6). DeLuca characterizes the performances of Earth First! as embodied critiques, invested with symbolism and ideology. For example, treesitting creates an “ecocentric community,” for by dwelling in the trees, activists reside “in Nature” and therefore live in harmony with their own philosophies about wilderness and, in turn, about civilization. In a treesit, ideally one lives with the flying squirrels, the owls, and the spiders, not with the trappings of consumer America. DeLuca argues that treesitting is a significant symbolic performance in so far as it “challenge[s] the anthropocentrism of Western culture and proffers[s] the humble thought that other [creatures] have a right to live and have intrinsic value, not merely economic value” (1999, 6). Treesitting also demonstrates a rejection of “rational” political discourse – the very rationality that Earth First!ers blame for environmental destruction. The “irrational” decision not to participate in the mainstream forum for environmental struggle – the legal system – corresponds then with the “irrational” decision to place one’s life in danger on a 6 foot by 8 foot platform, 180 feet up in a tree.

Julia “Butterfly” Hill’s 738 days in a giant redwood were marked with danger and risk. Winter temperatures dropped to below zero; El Niño winds tossed her about her platform. Moreover, she was threatened by the intimidation tactics of Pacific Lumber, who cut ropes to nearby trees, buzzed her in helicopters, and set up security forces around the tree in an attempt to starve her out. Hill’s treesitting performance demonstrated her endurance and her resolute commitment to saving Luna. While the constant attention to her cell phone and beeper suggest a life quite different from solitary contemplation of the natural world, Julia “Butterfly” Hill’s treesitting does coincide with much of DeLuca’s analysis of Earth First! performances.

However, Hill’s rhetoric and her image – her self-representation -- differ strikingly from the rhetoric and image of Earth First! and other treesitters. This distinction is important to note, for while the mainstream media has demonized Earth First! as “violent terrorists,” Hill has largely escaped this condemnation. In turn, Julia “Butterfly” Hill has done much more than media outreach. She has attained media celebrity as coverage of her campaign has appeared not only in the usual liberal fare like *The Nation* and *Utne Reader*, but in more “popular” forums like *Oprah* and *The Today Show*. She was named *Good Housekeeping’s* Woman of the Year. And one of her first interviews when she came down from Luna was with *Elle Magazine* – a photo-shoot in the trees in Central Park.

I would suggest that the following elements of Julia “Butterfly” Hill’s performance and rhetoric – some of the very elements that differentiate her from Earth First! – have contributed to her appeal to the mainstream media: her pacifism, her individualism, her spirituality, her agape, her femininity, and her rejection of Earth First!.

According to the movement's own narrative history, Earth First! was founded by a group of individuals frustrated with mainstream environmentalism's inability to protect the wilderness. According to co-founder Dave Foreman, "I came to realize that, because of the rules we were playing by, we were being lobbied, more effectively than we were lobbying" (1985, 17). Opting to remove themselves from the "legitimate" but largely ineffectual negotiations with government and corporations, Earth First! turned to the radical and "illegitimate" tactics of civil disobedience and direct action.

Unlike this well-known Earth First! narrative, Julia "Butterfly" Hill did not come to her ecological consciousness through a disillusionment with the mainstream environmental movement. She had never participated in any political activism prior to her stay in Luna. Instead, Hill's description of her entry into forest activism is structured as a series of spiritual conversion narratives, with the ecological "truth" revealed to her as she first walks into the redwoods, later, as she first sees Luna, after a savage winter storm, and so on. These narratives affirm that Hill's two years atop Luna were undoubtedly a personal journey of spiritual transformation.

While many Earth First!ers identify with the sacredness of nature, spiritual dimensions are not typically an overt aspect of their public persona. By contrast, Julia "Butterfly" Hill is deeply spiritual, relying on rhetorical strategies that bespeak her Christian roots as daughter of an itinerant preacher. She declares again and again her unconditional love – for timber workers, for the legendary "Climber Dan," dispatched to roust her from her perch, even for Charles Hurwitz, CEO of Maxxam Corporation, the parent company of Pacific Lumber. Hill's spiritual trope also includes a condemnation of violence. She writes in her autobiography,

I knew that if I didn't find a way to deal with my anger and hate, they would overwhelm me and I would be swallowed up in the fear, sadness, and frustration. I knew that to hate and strike out was to be a part of the same violence I was trying to stop. And so I prayed (2000, 66).

However, "striking out" is a central component of Earth First! tactics, and as religious studies scholar Bron Taylor suggests, for many Earth First!ers, "violence" in the form of ecotage "is the ultimate act of reconsecration" (1995, 110).

Julia "Butterfly" Hill also deploys a gendered image that distinguishes her from Earth First! – both in its male-centered, "redneck in the woods" origins and in its later, more feminist manifestations. Unlike Judi Bari, for example, Hill offers neither a feminist analysis of her experience in the forest campaign, nor an eco-feminist analysis of the destruction of the forests. She relies instead on quite a traditional notion of femininity, perhaps most evident in her use of beauty to "persuade" people of her cause. For example, while contemplating how to convince loggers to understand her, she asks herself,

. . . how can I get them to let go of their stereotypes of me? Because in their mind, I was a tree-hugging, granola-eating, dirty, dreadlocked hippie environmentalist. They always managed to say this word with such disgust and disdain! As I thought about this one afternoon, I remembered that I still had copies of one of the nicest snapshots ever taken of me, from my dear friend's birthday just three months before I'd come up into the tree. . . . Maybe seeing me

made up and dressed in a silk suit and heels would shake up their stereotypes of me! (2000, 69-70).

She proceeds to lower her photograph (with a baggie of granola) to a logger on the ground, encouraging the logger to “consume” the image – and the cereal – and rethink his position.

Damn!” the logger exclaims. “You really look like this!”

“Yeah.”

“Then what the hell you doing up in a tree?”

. . . The loggers joked that I had climbed into a tree simply because I hadn’t found the right guy” (2000, 71).

Hill insists this exchange made the logger receptive to her on a human level. However, it may be more accurate to say she reached him on a heterosexual level. Regardless, deploying “beauty” as a political strategy is not a typical tactic for eco-warriors.

The differences between Hill and Earth First! are not only restricted to narrative structure or rhetorical style. Hill explicitly states her distinction from Earth First!. In her autobiography, she claims to have never heard of Earth First! until she was down on the ground after an initial stint in Luna.

“What’s Earth First!?” I asked.

“It’s the group you’re a part of!” he answered.

“I am not a part of any group!” I retorted, somewhat indignantly.

“Well, they’re the ones who started this tree-sit.”

That was the first I’d heard of them.

“So you haven’t had any nonviolence or backwoods training?” he asked. “That’s against the regulations.”

I started laughing.

“You have to have rules and regulations to sit in a tree? I just came because there was no one else” (2000, 45).

Despite Hill’s repeated condemnation of the movement’s “rules and regulations,” Earth First! is hardly a bureaucratic organization – it is anarchic, grassroots, and affinity-based. Hill asserts, “Earth First! is a diverse group that operates under the rule of consensus. I didn’t abide by that. I didn’t ask anyone’s permission to stay in Luna, I just did it. Ironically, their opposition only encouraged me to continue on” (2000, 84). Early in her story, when local Earth First!ers decide to end the Luna sit and move resources to another endangered area, Hill is furious. “The thought of all these people sitting down there in a

circle talking about me and determining that I didn't have a right to be in Luna, as if they owned the tree, made me crazy" (2000, 87). Despite the fact that Earth First!ers found the tree and Earth First!ers named the tree and Earth First!ers built the sit, and despite the fact that, initially at least, Earth First!ers paid the bills and provided the ground support, Hill claimed that this was her tree.

Although the divisions between Hill and Earth First! became apparent during her stay in Luna, the circumstances surrounding her descent were the final blow to this already tenuous relationship. As speech communication scholar Jonathan Lange notes in his article on the rhetoric of Earth First!, the group's "motto, essential premise, and principal rhetorical stance is 'No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth'" (1990, 473). And Julia "Butterfly" Hill compromised. As part of the deal that Hill and her lawyers negotiated with Pacific Lumber, Hill paid the company a \$50,000 "fine" to save Luna and a surrounding twenty-foot buffer zone of trees. Interestingly, Hill omits this fact from her autobiography.

The "sale" of Luna caused outrage amongst many Earth First!ers and treesitters for obvious reasons. This compromise counters their view that the natural world should not be commodified as it recognizes Pacific Lumber as the "owners" of Luna. By paying Pacific Lumber not to log, the \$50,000 "fine" also sets an unfortunate precedent as an avenue for "resolution" of other treesit campaigns. At \$50,000 per tree, the protection of the last remaining ancient forests in North America would cost around \$3 trillion, more than three times the combined wealth of Bill Gates, Queen Elizabeth, and the Sultan of Brunei (Cockburn, B15). But even the sale of individual trees would come at a prohibitive price for most forest campaigns. While Hill's connections to California influence and celebrity made Luna's price tag affordable, for many who avow, "No compromise! Earth First!," Hill's compromise is an unforgivable affront.

Despite what many in the radical environmental movement consider as her "betrayal," Julia "Butterfly" Hill has become a popular environmental icon. Arguably, Hill has made "treesitting" a household word and allowed for a more positive portrayal of the ancient forest campaign, as opposed to the typical coverage of "eco-terrorism." However, what was in all certainty Hill's earnest desire to do media outreach was quickly appropriated and subsumed into the media spectacle. What began as a political resource – a platform for exposing the destruction of the redwoods – became a personal resource; as her autobiography is subtitled, this is the story of a woman and a tree. The radical environmental movement's struggle to save the Redwoods was reduced to Julia "Butterfly" Hill's "record-breaking" treesit. Unlike trees in other forests that continue to fall at an alarming rate, Luna was deemed worthy of saving – precisely because of a human's relationship to it. Rather than Luna symbolizing the whole forest, the whole forest and the whole forest campaign were subsumed for the protection of Luna. "Even if Luna had been the only tree left," says Hill. "She would have been worth it to me" (2000, 144).

This paper has outlined the rift between Julia "Butterfly" Hill and other treesitters, highlighting the conflict between an individual and a group. I believe this division is significant as the individual, Hill, has become a national celebrity while the group, Earth First!ers and radical environmentalists, remain a national threat – at least according to the FBI. The media have selected Hill from within a radical movement and certified her as the leader, the spokesperson. The fame of Julia "Butterfly" Hill reveals how the forces of the media spectacle appropriate and co-opt radicalism, removing explosive content

that critiques and subverts the capitalist order. Let Julia “Butterfly” Hill and the “Legacy of Luna” remind us to always consider why certain stories get told and why certain stories gain access to popular culture.

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