

Ecofeminist Poetry as Living on Earth with Attention and Care

Esther Xueming Vincent

Volume 38, Number 1, 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1095384ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095384ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Athabasca University Press

ISSN

0832-6193 (print)

1705-9429 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Article abstract

The article explores ecofeminism as intersectional, founded upon a politics of relations. Through an ecofeminist re-reading of Eavan Boland's "Anna Liffey" and Grace Nichols' "Hurricane Hits England", the article discusses how these women poets remake geographies to locate themselves in time and place as kin to other person-beings.

Cite this article

Vincent, E. (2022). Ecofeminist Poetry as Living on Earth with Attention and Care. *The Trumpeter*, 38(1), 23–45. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1095384ar>

Copyright © Esther Xueming Vincent, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Ecofeminist Poetry as Living on Earth with Attention and Care

Esther Xueming Vincent

Ecofeminist Poetry as a New Politics of Relations

While ecopoetry may be said to examine the nature of human dwelling on the Earth through a politics of relations between human, environments, and ecosystems, ecofeminist poetry may perhaps be described as an ecopoetics centred upon reviewing the place of the historically marginalised woman within her environment, with a focus on her relations with others within a male-dominated context of oppression. An ecofeminist framework looks at the oppression of women and the oppression of nature and draws connection between the two, suggesting how the liberation of one translates into the liberation of the other. Yet, as Donna Haraway suggests, ecofeminism should look beyond the traditional conflation of woman with nature by finding alternative ways of relating to nature so as to transcend “reification, possession, appropriation, and nostalgia” (Forbes and Sells 1997, 21). This challenges ecofeminist writers to devise a new politics of relations, one that revises and re-envisions the place of the woman within the natural world she inhabits.

According to Ariel Salleh, ecofeminism shares the tenets of deep ecology, which is concerned “about the oppression of all life forms” (1993, 98). The first principle of deep ecology, as defined by twentieth-century Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, advocates the “well-being and flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth [as having] value in themselves... independent of the usefulness of the nonhuman world for human purposes” (n.d., 4). Næss further elaborates by intimating a “fundamental deep concern and respect” for the ecosphere as a whole, regardless of whether or not it is being appreciated by any conscious being (5). This commitment to Earth’s intrinsic value, our intimacies with and obligations to Earth, as well as the woman’s place on Earth within this larger ecosystem of reference, especially at such perilous times as these, is the dialogue I hope to examine in this paper.

This will be done in two ways, namely: 1) through the close reading of specific poems by Irish poet Eavan Boland and Guyanese-British transatlantic poet Grace Nichols through an ecofeminist lens, and 2) through the close reading of ecofeminist poetry by Mojave American poet Natalie Diaz, biracial Canadian poet Kanika Lawton, and indigenous Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez. In reading Boland and Nichols, we see how an ecofeminist lens opens us to viewing the woman’s role and place on Earth as inextricably linked; she makes her home on

Earth and finds kinship in the natural world, and in turn, is mothered by Earth. In the works of Diaz, Lawton, and Perez, we see how ecofeminist poetry may respond to living and dying on Earth in precarious times through the attention and care needed to reimagine a new way of interbeing on Earth. It is my hope that the reader leaves this essay with the conviction that poetry can enlarge, enrich, and transform our lives, our relationships, and our ways of being on Earth.

"evolving praxis": Ecofeminism and the Intersectional Self

Ecofeminism prides itself as being a grassroots initiative with a collective consciousness, with no single woman laying claim to its conception. Rather, ecofeminism traces its roots to a plethora of marginalised female voices from varying contexts, cultures, and climates to contribute to the spirit of activism and social justice that pervades the ethos of the movement and its philosophies.

It American ecofeminist writer, scholar, and activist Greta Gaard defines ecofeminism as an

evolving praxis... that grew out of many women's interconnected sense of self-identity—a deep recognition of interbeing that bridges socially constructed boundaries of class, race, species, sexuality, gender, age, ability, nation, and more—and an “entangled empathy” (Gruen 2012) that brings both compassion and action to the task of alleviating conditions of eco-social injustice (“Ecofeminism” 2016, 68).

One might argue that the intersectional nature of ecofeminism, with its commitment to an “interbeing” of relations, offers an expansive perspective to the reading of gender and the environment by considering other socially constructed notions of identity. As an “evolving praxis”, ecofeminism is concerned with theory and the enactment of that theory in the everyday lived experiences of the woman. One such example can be found in *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*, where in her chapter, “Women/Water”, Gaard brings to attention the unequal power relations in which women (unknowingly) find themselves entangled.

Citing the exploitative, gendered structures of consumerism, and commodification of water ownership, treatment, and consumption, Gaard poses uncomfortable yet essential questions about women's relationships with other women, and women's relationships with water. The two are interconnected and intersectional. The woman who is able to afford bottled water and access to clean water and sanitation suffers less than the woman who has to walk for three to five hours a day to draw and carry water for the family use. At the end of both equations is the notion that “all bodies of water in an ecosystem share the same flow” (Gaard 2007, 23), yet

there are distinct differences in the way their bodies and lives are marked. They both rely on water, yet they participate in differing ways within an ecosystem of systemic exploitation of Earth, reinforcing the intersectionality of eco-social injustice. The woman's relationship to water as water bearer is an instance of a direct reciprocal interbeing, and ecofeminism reminds us that the domination of water is also the domination of the woman whose life is closely intertwined with Earth for sustenance and survival.

American poet, essayist, and feminist Adrienne Rich delves into a similar issue of identity in "Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet", stating how a poet's identity as a man or woman is inextricably tied to "the location of the self" within a historical time and place (1986, 181). To be fully embodied, a woman poet needs to be aware of her location, and from that awareness, write directly from her lived experiences as a woman and poet. Rich further elaborates about her own context, rallying for women poets to engage with other socially constructed markers of identity like culture and nation whilst rejecting being co-opted into the dominant ideology: "As women, I think it essential we admit and explore our cultural identities, our national identities, even as we reject the patriotism, jingoism, nationalism offered to us as 'the American way of life'" (1986, 183). For Rich, it is this very alienation, from "our own roots, whatever they are, the memories, dreams, stories, the language, history, the sacred materials of art" (1986, 185) that should drive the woman poet to utilise language and poetry for resistance and revision: "I felt more and more urgently the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self" (1986, 181). Rich's emphasis on the transformative power and collective potential of poetry as action is echoed in the ethos of ecofeminism, which interrogates systemic structures of domination and oppression, and advocates change along ecological and social lines.

The "making geographies": Reading Boland and Nichols with an Ecofeminist Lens

The poetry and prose of Irish poet Eavan Boland offer meditations on the Irish woman's alienation from her cultural roots, environment, nation, and history, repeating an ecofeminist outlook on her poetics. Paul Ricoeur cites memory and remembering as "not only welcoming, receiving an image of the past, it is also searching for it" (2004, 56). It is this active searching of memory and creative exercising of imagination that characterises the work of Eavan Boland, whose writings examine the intersections between gender, nation, culture (myth), history, and identity in the construction of the Irish woman in time and place. In doing so, Boland seeks to find her (and by extension, the Irish woman's) belonging to place, where she has been excluded, and where she can hope to build a home for herself and her kin.

Boland's intersectional poetics is concerned with restoring the historically disenfranchised woman figure into the larger narrative of the landscape and history of Irish poetry, as well as its myth and nationalism. Resisting the mythologising of women and the feminisation of nature typical of Irish literature written by past and contemporary male poets, she reimagines a poetics where the mythological is domesticised, and the woman and nature move from the incontestable realm of myth into the natural, unromanticised, historical landscape of everyday existence. Boland delineates the woman's understanding of her self with an understanding of her place (her locale, where she has lived, and where she has been placed within larger cultural forces) in "The Woman, The Place, The Poet": "what we call place is really only that detail of it which we understand to be ourselves" (2006, 155). Place becomes a proxy for the female self, and the more the woman understands her relations to place, the greater the likelihood of writing her way back into history.

Like Seamus Heaney, it is no coincidence that the geographical space that Boland occupies influences her poetics, which re-centres the woman. Having lived in cities all her life, she distinguishes between loving a city and submitting to it, and makes a contrast between city living and suburban living: "A suburb is altogether more fragile and transitory. To start with, it is composed of lives in a state of process" (Boland 2006, 160). The transitory nature and state of flux experienced by Boland, afforded by the landscape of the suburb, gives her the courage and space to find her voice and write herself (and the woman) into her poetry. The geographical flux characteristic of the suburb and its revolution around the private sphere presented her with a mirror to see the parallel domestic lives of women as equally consequent and worthy of poetic attention. Unlike the city, with its "finished and inevitable... architecture" (2006, 160) signifying fixity and rigidity, the suburban poet's reverence of the domestic offers her a symbolic place to write against systemic poetic erasure so as to reinstate the place of women in poetic and national consciousness. In the suburb, Boland is liberated into what Anne Szumigalski describes as an "enabling psychological space" (Williams 2011, 142). She responds by putting into words what she observes about place and the dispossession of women, so as to locate the woman at home in her country.

Her poem "Anna Liffey" from *In a Time of Violence* (1994) is one such instance of writing as resistance against patriarchal oppression and its symbolic violence towards women through a male-inherited mythology and culture. Boland demonstrates Rich's commitment to writing as an act of revision through this revisionist poem which reclaims both the Irish woman as well as the Liffey River into a female literary tradition. The speaker narrates the genealogy of the river and the Irish people, and in the first stanza, establishes the origins of the people as matrilineal:

Life, the story goes,
Was the daughter of Canaan,

And came to the plain of Kildare.
She loved the flat-lands and the ditches
And the unreachable horizon.
She asked that it be named for her.
The river took its name from the land.
The land took its name from a woman (1994, 139).

The woman and the power of her name is emphasised as the genesis of a nation, and this retelling of the myth of the river can be read as an ecofeminist myth that destabilises patriarchy and its deferral to patrilineal genealogy and naming. The next couplet that follows presents the woman and river as respectively occupying in-between spaces in the home and cityscape, sharing a peripheral status: "A woman in the doorway of a house. / A river in the city of her birth" (1994, 139). The poem situates the woman and river as dwelling in liminal spaces, a terminus or borderland from which the self and its place within its "house" and "birth" might be negotiated.

While one might view this liminality as disempowering and marginalising, another way to read this is through the lens of Johnathan Skinner's description of ecopoetry as "a kind of boundary work, about networks and crossing" (Hume et al. 2012, 760). From an ecopoetic perspective, the poem, as boundary work, becomes a way in which the woman negotiates her place in society. No longer bound to any one specific place (the home) or binary notions of place (home/not home, domestic/political), she is liberated to shuttle between spaces and occupy subjectivities to which she was previously denied. Read as an ecofeminist poem, the portrayal of liminality in "Anna Liffey" becomes an empowering way of mediating the intersecting themes of gender, nature, myth, place, home, and belonging. Woman and river, located in-between "doorway" and "city", can now transcend the limiting constraints of the domestic and societal. Unfettered from gendered norms and expectations constituted by patriarchal narratives and ways of knowing, the woman and river are now imbued with creative agency:

Maker of
Places, remembrances,
Narrate such fragments for me:

One body. One spirit.
One place. One name.
The city where I was born.
The river that runs through it.

The nation which eludes me (1994, 140).

“Anna Liffey” re-envision the woman and river as “One” in body, spirit, place, and name, sharing a similar fate of dispossession, fragmentation, and incoherence. At the same time, they are one in their collective regenerative power and consciousness. Through the course of the poem whose form mimics the body of a river and its varying courses, woman and river gain linguistic and symbolic charge, and this life force restores to the woman and river what history and culture (myth and literature) has denied them in life. The creative energy that surges through the poem may be compared to what Rich qualifies as a distinctly “female energy” possessed by women poets: “And, in the work of both these poets, it is finally the woman's sense of herself—embattled, possessed—that gives the poetry its dynamic charge, its rhythms of struggle, need, will, and female energy” (“When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision” 1972, 19). One might argue that the river imbues the poem and woman with its torrential currents, and so, charged with this potent female energy, the speaker asks the question, “Where is home now?”. The resolute answer she offers the reader in the ultimate line— “I was a voice” (1994, 145):

I feel it change.
My children are
Growing up, getting older.
My country holds on
To its own pain.

I turn off
The harsh yellow
Porch light and
Stand in the hall.
Where is home now?

Follow the rain
Out to the Dublin hills.
Let it become the river.
Let the spirit of place be

A lost soul again.

In the end

It will not matter

That I was a woman. I am sure of it.

The body is a source. Nothing more.

There is a time for it. There is a certainty
About the way it seeks its own dissolution.

Consider rivers.

They are always en route to
Their own nothingness. From the first moment

They are going home. And so

When language cannot do it for us,
Cannot make us know love will not diminish us,

There are these phrases

Of the ocean

To console us.

Particular and unafraid of their completion.

In the end

Everything that burdened and distinguished me

Will be lost in this:

I was a voice (1994, 144-5).

Indeed, the poem searches for “the spirit of place” and suggests that the woman may find her home within her own voice, story, and history (1994, 145). The river teaches the speaker about home and journeying, since from its birth, it is always returning to the ocean. Likewise, a woman might find strength and sustenance, and more importantly, find her way back home into the literary and historical consciousness of her country and people. In rewriting the woman in mythology, Boland’s poetry maps what Jo Gill qualifies as a “new cartography — one which brings place, time and subject position into convergence” (2007, 181). This act of tracing in

herself the voices of other women who have come before her further calls to mind Virginia Woolf's words in her seminal essay "A Room of One's Own", that as women, we think back through our mothers (1929, 64). The Liffey River then, may be read as mother to the speaker, just as the speaker is a mother who finds comfort and kinship in the river's mothering.

Where Boland is primarily concerned with the rapprochement of woman and nation in time and place, Guyanese-British poet Grace Nichols interrogates cross-cultural relations and identity as pertaining to the postcolonial Caribbean woman's place in the world. In "Blood, Bread and Poetry", to elaborate on the location of the woman poet, Rich quotes Woolf who posits that as, "a woman I want no country. As a woman I have no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (1986, 183). The poems of Grace Nichols embody Woolf's allusion to belonging to the world in a way that defies conventional notions of identity as tied to the nation, suggesting a borderless cosmopolitanism as the inheritance of contemporary women poets. With colonialism, postcolonialism, globalisation, and increased movement across borders through travel and migration, the question of a fixed, stable place to call home becomes problematic and increasingly irrelevant. Nichols's ecofeminist poetics could be described as an evolving praxis that engages with the aforementioned concerns.

Writing from the margins as an immigrant, post-colonial woman of colour, Nichols demonstrates an ecofeminist commitment to an intersectional, transatlantic understanding of gender, race, nature, and culture. Her poems grapple with themes of home and belonging, migration and identity, place and displacement within the wider discourse of an "ecopoetics of mobility", which typifies the way many individuals relate to place in contemporary times, and is defined as "a way of poetic world-making that conceives of natural phenomena and human-nature relationships in particular places as both ecologically suggestive and fundamentally geographically mobile" (Gerhardt 2016, 425). In such ecopoetics, the fundamentally mobile nature of home removes the need to make deep attachments to singular places or one's bioregion and may perhaps be represented by a rhizomatic rather than an arborescent way of rooting oneself to places. For many, this can be alienating, especially if the geographical mobility they experience is forced upon them rather than voluntary.

Ursula Heise proposes that one antidote to the removal of place-attachment, or feeling at home only in one's bioregion, is to adopt an "eco-cosmopolitanism", which re-envision theories of environmentalism and ecology with globalisation, transatlanticism, and cosmopolitanism (Adamson and Slovic 2009, 17-8). Gaard further cites Val Plumwood who offers us an alternative way of envisioning an ecopoetics of mobility (and its ensuing alienating effects) by crafting a new way of relating to the land and Earth, rather than nation, as home:

Plumwood suggests that we "belong to the land as much as the land belongs to [us]," a belonging and identity that is articulated in "the essentially narrative

terms of naming and interpreting the land, of telling its story in ways that show a deep and loving acquaintance with it and a history of dialogical interaction” (230) (“New Directions for Ecofeminism” 2010, 657).

This loving attention to storytelling, naming, and interpreting the land is at the heart of Nichols’s work, which resolves to reconcile the woman to the land and world through movement rather than rootedness, which in the words of Haraway, “conceive[s] of place and sense of place as not threatened by or in conflict with, but in many ways constituted by, movement” (Gerhardt 2016, 425). Focusing on the transatlantic, cross-cultural relations between the Caribbean ancestral homeland and British motherland, poems like “Hurricane Hits England”, “Ink of Exile”, and “My Children Are Movers” reimagine woman and nature relations and move readers across oceans and cultures to conceive of the woman as belonging to a larger ecosystem of the Earth.

Yet, Nichols’s poetry can be described as firmly grounded in the landscape and a tangible sense of place of interwoven relationships and subjectivities:

“The poetry I feel closest to has always been the kind that also keeps an eye on the landscape [. . .] a sense of place has always been important to me as a writer.” For Nichols, place is more than the natural and visible world. It is a complex interweaving of history, community, authority and subjectivity (Gill 2007, 179).

Echoing Gaard’s definition of ecofeminism, Nichols recognises the woman’s sense of self as tied to the multiplicities and complexities of place, which are fundamentally ideological in nature. Her sentiment is reminiscent of Edward Soja’s notion of “making geographies”, which characteristically “begins with the body, with the construction and performance of the self, the human subject, as a distinctively spatial entity involved in a complex relation with our surroundings” (Gill 2007, 166). For Nichols, the concept of “making geographies” is particularly resonant, and her poetics demonstrates a keen awareness of her history and place as a female descendent of slaves and immigrants within a postcolonial context. More so, her poetry could be described as the making of geographies in themselves, represented by the making of stories, histories, places, bodies, and subjectivities that negotiate meaning within a complex environment of relations.

An ecofeminist reading of “Hurricane Hits England” reveals how Nichols employs the imagery of the hurricane to conjure the natural force, power, and energy of an immigrant woman who is forced to confront the, oftentimes conflicting, dualities of her ancestral and postcolonial heritage:

It took a hurricane, to bring her closer

To the landscape
Half the night she lay awake,
The howling ship of the wind,
Its gathering rage,
Like some dark ancestral spectre,
Fearful and reassuring: (1996, 125).

Navigating the intersections of gender, race, nature, and culture, the speaker encounters a refreshed way of relating to the Earth, not as dominant or subordinate to the hurricane, but as its equal. The speaker initially struggles to make sense of the hurricane in her adoptive homeland England, but soon learns that rather than resisting, fearing, or attempting to subjugate it, she needs to learn to accept and relate to the hurricane as “another” aspect of her self, a fellow being on Earth (Murphy 1992, 316). The hurricane is a signifier of nature as well as the speaker’s repressed parts of herself, and the poem intimates that for the speaker to fully understand herself and her place in the world, she needs to first “make kin” with the hurricane, integrating her self with the other, rather than defining herself in contrast or opposition to it:

Tropical Oya of the Weather,
I am aligning myself to you,
I am following the movement of your winds,
I am riding the mystery of your storm (1996, 126).

Calling the hurricane by several familiar names, “Huracan”, “Oya”, “Shango”, and “Hattie”, the speaker illustrates what Haraway elucidates in her chapter “Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin” as “making kin” with nature:

We need to make kin sym-chthonically, sym-poetically. Who and whatever we are, we need to make-with—become-with, compose-with—the earth-bound...

My purpose is to make “kin” mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy... Kin-making is making persons, not necessarily as individuals or as humans (2015, 161).

In “kin-making”, the speaker personifies the hurricane, and in calling her by many names, the speaker begins to understand herself as kin to the elemental forces in nature. This re-imagining of the relations of interbeing between woman and nature as kin is fundamentally ecofeminist in approach, enabling the speaker to overcome her marginalisation and alienation as an immigrant and postcolonial woman of colour. In “making kin” with the hurricane, the speaker

comes to a realisation in the final stanza:

Ah, sweet mystery,
Come to break the frozen lake in me,
Shaking the foundations of the very trees
within me,
Come to let me know
That the earth is the earth is the earth (1996, 126).

By the end of the poem, the speaker has not found her home in either her ancestral or adoptive land, or in the problematic notion of national identity within a postcolonial discourse, but in the larger “ecological wisdom” of the Earth as home (Spretnak 1990, 4). As hurricane, lake, trees, winds, and storm are kin to her, she finds her belonging to the Earth in a cosmic way as a fellow person-being. Her “geography” of home then is not restricted to social constructions of gender, ancestry, cultural affiliations, or national identity, nor is it marked by geographical or geopolitical boundaries, but it is liberated by an intersectional politics of relations that crosses the borders of inclusivity, diversity, interconnectedness, and belonging.

Additionally, Nichols’s poem may be read via a womanist ecopolitics, which traces its history to the lived experiences of Black women and women of colour. Womanist ecopolitics “rest on notions of livingkind (all living beings are of a type), aliveness (all elements of creation are alive), luminosity (divine energy/power pervades all things), and Cosmic citizenship, as well as on love-, reverence-, and healing-based practices” (Maparyan 2016, 45). Reminiscent of indigenous worldviews, womanist ecopolitics closely resembles ecospirituality and may be used to supplement ecofeminism’s intersectional approach. “Hurricane Hits England” epitomises an ecowomanist philosophy by engaging with the above notions of “aliveness”, “luminosity”, and “Cosmic citizenship”, as well as with the theme of healing through a reconciliation of the speaker to Earth (her home).

From a womanist ecopolitics perspective then, the hurricane could be said to take on spiritual significance for the speaker, whose healing comes from being ecologically restored to the Earth and its wisdom. In doing so, the speaker rediscovers a new way of knowing herself and her place in the world, one that acknowledges a transatlantic mobility while maintaining a deep-rooted intimacy with the land. The antidote to alienation is integration of the woman with the hurricane (nature) and of deconstructing the popular self/other binary that separates humankind from the natural world. In doing so, the woman finds herself re-integrated into the Earth as home, co-existing with other human and more-than-human person-beings as kin in an ecology of physical and spiritual well-being and oneness.

"a part of my body": Indigenous Worldviews, Ecospirituality and Kinmaking Poetics

In Indigenous worldviews have much to offer us whereas Western, scientific knowledge and ways of knowing have separated us from Earth. Potawatomi Nation botanist and scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer laments in *Braiding Sweetgrass* how Science is a "language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects" (2013, 49). She continues to comment on how scientific terminology "define[s] the boundaries of our knowing [where] what lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed" (2013, 49). In her chapter "Learning the Grammar of Animacy", Kimmerer shares how language shapes worldview and either facilitates or hinders remembering our relations to Earth. Referring to the Ojibwe language, a close relative of Potawatomi, she reveals how words that are classified as nouns in the English language are verbs in this indigenous tongue, offering readers access to a worldview where "everything is alive":

A bay is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *bay* is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live... all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms (2013, 55).

Kimmerer draws connections between learning the language of animacy and learning to live with restraint on Earth and equates speaking a language of animacy with the survival of our planet:

The animacy of the world is something we already know, but the language of animacy teeters on extinction—not just for Native peoples but for everyone" (2013, 57).

Home, she concludes, is when one becomes "native to this place" (2013, 58), implying a remembering and re-envisioning of our relations to Earth as part of a larger cosmic citizenship.

In 2017, the Whitney Museum held an event, *Words for Water*, where Native women artists gathered to write poems and musical pieces in resistance to the construction of the Dakota Access and the XL Keystone Pipeline at Standing Rock. Mojave American poet Natalie Diaz was one of those gathered, and her poem, "The First Water Is the Body", can be read as a work of eco-activism that honours the land, its water, and indigenous peoples. Diaz explores a kinship and interbeing with water through an ecospiritual body politics grounded in her Mojave language and culture:

The Colorado River is the most endangered river in the United States—also, it

is a part of my body.

I carry a river. It is who I am: *'Aha Makav*. This is not metaphor.

When a Mojave says, Inyech *'Aha Makavch ithuum*, we are saying our name. We are telling a story of our existence. *The river runs through the middle of my body*.

So far, I have said the word river in every stanza. I don't want to waste water. I must preserve the river in my body.

In future stanzas, I will try to be more conservative (2020, 49).

In the Mojave culture, river and body are synonymous, "not metaphor", and the language of the Mojave people honours this interbeing of river as "part of [the] body", an entity and being that can be "waste[d]", misused and abused, and so needs to be actively "conserve[ed]", protected and "preserve[d]" (2020, 49). Through Diaz's poem, which re-imagines river/body relationships, one begins to see the world and the woman's relationship to water and Earth as "a story of our existence", one that is at risk of becoming "endangered" (2020, 49), echoing Kimmerer's lexis of "extinction".

Diaz further constructs a striking image of a Native woman for ironic effect, emphasising her renunciation of "a visual relationship" between woman and river in favour of a more fundamental "happening" (2020, 51) within both bodies:

We carry the river, its body of water, in our body.

I do not mean to imply a visual relationship. Such as: a Native woman on her knees holding a box of Land O'Lakes butter whose label has a picture of a Native woman on her knees holding a box of Land O'Lakes butter whose label has a picture of a Native woman on her knees . . .

We carry the river, its body of water, in our body. I do not mean to invoke the Droste effect—this is not a picture of a river within a picture of a river.

I mean river as a verb. A happening. It is moving within me right now (2020, 51).

In a worldview where river and woman are one, the speaker “carr[ies] the river, its body of water, in [her] body”, asserting how any kind of violence, destruction, damming, or the pollution of river body equates to the violent, destructive, damming, pollutive effects on the female body. Like Kimmerer, Diaz exhorts the animacy of the river. Unlike Kimmerer, Diaz’s self *is* river. This radical mode of perception unifies rather than divides the woman from Earth and brings to mind how in looking after and caring for our Earth, one looks after and cares for the self, which is the basis of interbeing. The speaker’s river, like that of Kimmerer’s, depicts “river as a verb... moving within [her] right/now” (2020, 51), pointing towards entanglements in language, culture, gender, spirituality, and ecology.

“entangled empathy”: Attending to Earth Others with Attention and Care

In discussing our entanglements with others (Earth, more-than-human, human), the work of leading scholar in Animal Studies and Feminist Studies Lori Gruen comes to mind. Derived from the Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics, Gruen coins the term “entangled empathy” to denote a type of

caring perception focused on attending to another’s experience of wellbeing... [It is] an experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognise we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another’s needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities (2015, 3).

Similar to ecofeminism’s emphasis on intersectional and oftentimes unequal power and modes of relations, entangled empathy is founded upon a politics of relations that is fundamentally unequal in nature, serving as a “way for oneself to perceive and to connect with a specific other in their particular circumstance, and to recognise and assess one’s place in reference to the other” (2015, 67). Focusing specifically on relating to more-than-human animal others, Gruen notes how such entanglements involve the self reflecting on “proximity and distance”, which tends to require “expertise and observation” on the part of the human kin (2015, 67). At the

heart of this ethic of entangled empathy is a process of “sharing experiences and perspectives” (2015, 75) with other sentient beings so that one’s perception is altered from this new mode of relations: In seeing through another’s eyes and seeing how the other sees you, you are changed.

Canadian poet Kanika Lawton’s poem “Grief, Carrying” attempts to attend to the grief and sorrow of orca mother Tahlequah, who in 2018, captivated the world by carrying her stillborn calf on her back for 17 days in the waters of the Pacific Northwest. The speaker addresses the orca as mother, personifying Tahlequah vividly to evoke her shared pain:

Mother, I know grief is an ocean too vast
to swallow, pulling at our womanhood with
sharpened teeth, blood all in the water,

beckoning hurt. Guilt the way we cut at
ourselves, bodies against rock, beached
until burning.

Mother, you have travelled so far, brought
your pain to the surface again and again,
held back against your calling, fell onto

that which you cannot be, pulling until, it
too, begins to rot. A child loved but
gone, a weight heavy with sorrow (2018).

In calling the orca Mother, the speaker humbles herself as daughter, and bridges the interspecies divide to acknowledge their shared “womanhood”. The orca’s body becomes the speaker’s body, and Tahlequah’s devotion to her dead calf, “pulling until, it / too, begins to rot” (2018), becomes a shared suffering by orca, speaker, and reader. The “weight heavy with sorrow” (2018) transforms from metaphor to meaning, and the reader is made aware of the impact of anthropocentric ways of living (overfishing of Chinook salmon and consequent malnutrition in orcas, ships sailing in orca sea routes resulting in the death of orcas, increased traffic and noise from the Canadian Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project accelerating

population decrease and possible population loss) on the ecology and survivability of the orcas (food source, reproductive capabilities, mortality rate) in the region.

Lawton's ecofeminist poem demonstrates an entangled empathy towards the orca in its desire to connect with the other while recognising the differences between self and other, this tension amounting to the speaker's wish to break out of her body to "become something outside / of this body, all barren and wasted" (2018):

Mother, once I saw a pod of your sisters and
I wept and wept, wanted to swim until I broke
against the surf, become something outside

of this body, all barren and wasted. Knew I will
not have children and cried for myself. Called
myself selfish. Called myself merciful (2018).

The speaker's barrenness is juxtaposed to the impotence of Tahlequah, whose conception birthed a calf devoid of life. The shared experience of losing a child, characteristic of entangled empathy, induces in the speaker a deep grief both "selfish" and "merciful". The poem ends with the imagined death of the orca mother "one day", and the speaker signals at her own inability to become (mother/woman/Tahlequah) and forgive (herself/humankind):

Mother, one day the foam will take you, and
it will not ask you to beg forgiveness but it
will give you peace, and it will carry you

against the current, and I will drink from the
water until I cannot drink anymore, and I will
not give birth, but I will hold myself against

my becoming and grieve what I cannot be
and forgive (2018).

The speaker bequeaths "peace" upon Tahlequah in a scene that imagines her future passing and depicts a poignant image of the water "carry[ing]" Tahlequah "against the current" (2018),

mothering the orca in the same way that she carried and held her dead calf for 17 days in the water. Lawton's poem ends with a couplet that stresses the "proximity and distance" (Gruen 2015, 67) of the human self relating to animal other: The speaker and orca share one womanhood, yet they are distinctly separated by land and sea. They share one ecosystem, yet both species can never fully become or comprehend the other. The poem's title, "Grief, Carrying" attunes the reader to the complexities of language and verb form; in placing the continuous verb "Carrying" after the noun "Grief", the comma is needed to separate and hold the two words together (as opposed to "Carrying Grief"). Similarly, calf and mother, speaker and orca, woman and animal are separated yet bound together by a gossamer thread signifying the complexities and non-translatibility of their entanglements.

Indigenous Chamorro poet Craig Santos Perez too meditates on this heartbreaking incident in his poem "Echolocation" which dedicates itself to "J35, Tahlequah" in his book *Habitat Threshold*. Perez's ecopoetics centres on attention and care to Earth/others, and his indigenous Pacific culture and identity may be compared to the ecofeminist and ecospiritual worldviews of Kimmerer and Diaz, where more-than-human others possess animacy and sentience. In his poem, the speaker establishes the relationship between self and orca as one of initial detached observation:

My wife plays
with our daughter
while I cook dinner.

On the news,
we watch
you struggle
to balance
dead calf on
your rostrum (2020, 42).

At first, the speaker knows the orca mother through a mediated channel, the news, and through this encounter, finds an unlikely kinship in the orca's "struggle" to carry her child. The speaker forms a bond with Tahlequah, observing the ways in which they both attempt to parent their children, the speaker ferrying his daughter from "preschool" to "the hospital" while Tahlequah

carr[ies] [her]
child's decom-

posing body
a thousand
nautical miles
until every wave
is an elegy,
until our planet
is an open
casket (2020, 42).

The ecological message is clear here, that human beings are culpable for the orca mother's loss (which stands for the atrocities committed against countless species of more-than-human animal others, those already extinct and those on the verge of extinction), and that we share in the killing of this orca child—we are made to hold ourselves accountable. Or in Haraway's words, "We are at stake to each other" (2016, 55). The opening of the planet and the opening of the "casket" is both a violent and sobering affair; in being made to watch, we see and perceive our lack of attention and care towards our Earth and its resultant consequences since we too inhabit this "casket" that is our "planet" (Perez 2020, 42).

The speaker further attempts to bridge the communicative gap between self and orca through sound in "What is mourning / but our shared / echolocation?" (2020, 43), appealing to a primal sensory instinct predating the acquisition of words and language. The dialogic nature of echolocation (call and echo) positions speaker and orca as partners relying on each other to navigate in the dark; the "shared / echolocation" strikingly conjures the speaker's wish for reconciliation with what can be interpreted to be a lost part of himself, a way of "mourning" that transcends the boundaries of species. In the penultimate stanza, the speaker opens with a striking image that haunts the reader in its understated simplicity, one that characterises the "resilience" of the bereaved orca mother who finally lets go and continues swimming through and in spite of her grief:

Today, you let go
so her body
could fall and
feed others.
Somehow,
you keep

swimming.
We walk
to the beach
so our daughter
can build
sandcastles.
May she grow
in the wake
of your resilience (2020, 43).

The orca teaches the speaker about strength and resilience in the face of immense grief and uncontrollable trauma, and the reader too comes to respect the quiet tenacity of Tahlequah, whose strength of spirit inspires our remembering. The resilience of the orca too offers hope, that of a possibility of a more responsible, livable future where we inter-be with fellow Earth others. Significantly, the orca mother's reach is restorative and reconciliatory; she carries the speaker and reader into a state of "remember[ing]" their "wildest / oceanic instinct" (2020, 43)—that is, the feminine, maternal parts of ourselves that society might have taught us to reject, repress, or forget—an aspect of ourselves that is capable of unconditional love and mothering (of self, of others):

May we always
remember:

love is our wildest
oceanic instinct (2020, 43).

In this way, the ecofeminist poetics of Perez's poem lies in its ability to nurture and mother speaker and reader, transforming them from a relationship of observation and detachment to one of attention, care, and devotion to species other than their own. In finding kinship with the orca mother, we are changed and we too change our perception of ourselves, others and the world, re-making "kin and kind" (Haraway 2016, 103) beyond ancestry and genealogy, locating the self within the cosmic web of interbeing. When we attend to Earth others with attention and care, as seen from poems in this essay, we do what the late Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh intimates in his "Ten Love Letters to the Earth"—show a kind of loving presence that recognises the interbeing of self and Earth, of Earth's shared mothering of us and our more-than-human

kin, and an awareness of the Earth being alive in us. It is through this awakened consciousness that we might hope to effect any kind of change on Earth so that our Earth might continue to thrive, nurture, and sustain us, carrying and holding us lovingly through the waters of time.

Works Cited

- Adamson, Joni, and Scott Slovic. 2009. "Guest Editors' Introduction. The Shoulders We Stand On: An Introduction to Ethnicity and Ecocriticism." *MELUS*, vol. 34, no. 2, Oxford University Press, pp. 5-24.
- Boland, Eavan. 1994. "Anna Liffey." *In a Time of Violence*. W. W. Norton & Company,.
- . 2006. "The Woman, The Place, The Poet." *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time*. Carcanet.
- Diaz, Natalie. 2020. "The Water Is the Body." *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Forbes, Linda C., and Laura Sells. 1997. "Reorganizing the Woman/Nature Connection." *Organization & Environment*, vol. 10, no. 1, Sage Publications Inc., pp. 20-22.
- Gaard, Greta. 1998. "Ecofeminism Roots." *Ecological Politics*. Temple University Press.
- . 2007. "Women/Water." *The Nature of Home: Taking Root in a Place*. The University of Arizona Press.
- . 2010. "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 17, no. 4, Oxford University Press, pp. 643-665.
- . 2016. "Ecofeminism." *Keywords for Environmental Studies*, edited by Joni Adamson, William A. Gleason and David N. Pellow, NYU Press, pp. 68-71.
- Gerhardt, Christine. 2016. "Imagining a Mobile Sense of Place: Towards an Ecopoetics of Mobility." *Amerikastudien / American Studies*, vol. 61, no. 4, Universitätsverlag WINTER Gmbh, pp. 421-443.
- Gill, Jo. 2007. "Poetry and Place." *Women's Poetry*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Gruen, Lori. 2015. *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals*. Lantern Books.
- Haraway, Donna. 2015. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, pp. 159-165.
- . 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

- Hume, Angela, et al. 2012. "Imagining Eco-poetics: An Interview with Robert Hass, Brenda Hillman, Evelyn Reilly, and Jonathan Skinner." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 19, no. 4, Oxford University Press, pp. 751-766.
- Kimmerer, Robin W. 2013. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. Milkweed Editions.
- Lawton, Kanika. 2018. "Grief, Carrying." *Rust and Moth*, <https://rustandmoth.com/work/grief-carrying/>.
- Maparyan, Layli. 2016. "Seeds of Light, Flowers of Power, Fruits of Change." *Worldviews*, vol. 20, no. 1, Brill, pp. 48-63.
- Murphy, Patrick D. 1992. "Rethinking the Relations of Nature, Culture, and Agency." *Environmental Values*, vol. 1, no. 4, White Horse Press, pp. 311-320.
- Næss, Arne. n.d. "The Deep Ecology Movement: Some Philosophical Aspects." *Open Air Philosophy*. <https://openairphilosophy.org/the-deep-ecology-movement-some-philosophical-aspects/>.
- Nichols, Grace. 1996. "Hurricane Hits England." *Sunris*. Virago.
- Perez, Craig S. 2020. "Echolocation." *Habitat Threshold*. Omnidawn Publishing.
- Rich, Adrienne. 1972. "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision." *College English*, vol. 34, no. 1, National Council of Teachers of English, pp. 18-30.
- . 1986. "Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet." *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Ricoeur, Paul. 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*, translated by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer. University of Chicago Press.
- Salleh, Ariel. 1993. "Second Thoughts on 'Rethinking Ecofeminist Politics': A Dialectical Critique." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, vol. 1, no. 2, Oxford University Press, pp. 93-106.
- Spretnak, Charlene. 1990. "Ecofeminism: Our Roots and Flowering." *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*. Sierra Club Books, 1990.
- Williams, Nerys. 2011. "Environment and Space." *Contemporary Poetry*. Edinburgh University Press, 2011, pp. 133-170.

Woolf, Virginia. 1929. *A Room of One's Own*. Hogarth Press.