

The Metaphysics of Ecofeminist Essayism

*Intra-acting with the Essays of Rebecca Solnit &
Terry Tempest Williams*

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Det humanistiske fakultet

UNIVERSITETET I OSLO

May 2017

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Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

In this thesis, I draw parallels between ecofeminist philosophy and Karen Barad's proposal for a new, performative and posthumanist metaphysics in order to analyse the capacity of *ecofeminist essayism* to enact change in the world. The ecofeminist essayist chooses to place herself in situations where she will encounter difference, as a by-product of her activism, for example, or through her research. This is the foundation of innovation, creativity, and invention. Of becoming and change. I explore the ways in which activist-writers Rebecca Solnit and Terry Tempest Williams engage the space between philosophy and activism—an extension of the Cartesian Mind-Body problem—and how their personal, politically-situated essays can embody that elusive connection.

Acknowledgements

And it is said that it is impossible to picture the subatomic world, and that the electron cannot be described.

(It is said that women show a bias for the mysterious.)

Discontinuity is discovered and it is said that light moves in particles.

And yet it is said light also moves in waves.

And the electron, too, is discovered to be both a wave and a particle.

A duality pervades nature, it is decided.

(As to how much space an electron takes up, or where it is at any given time, it is said, those questions are ‘as meaningless as... how much room a fear, an anxiety, or an uncertainty take up.’)

And it is written that psychology is unable to solve ‘the riddle of femininity.’

– Susan Griffin, *Woman and Nature*

I came to this thesis the way I have come to most creative projects in my life: by luck and chance and personal attention to similar glimmers in unexpected times and places. It is possible that the first spark—the *terminus ad quem*—came four years ago, as I backpacked through Norway’s Lofoten region. A ragged copy of *Woman and Nature* had accompanied me on the trip, and the text—with its revolutionary content and form—provoked me to the point that I felt compelled to read it aloud as I walked, stomping my way across those spongy, emerald meadows. The passage above embedded itself somewhere in my subconscious, and I knew just where to look when, suddenly and unexpectedly earlier this year, I discovered myself immersed in physics, metaphysics, and feminist science studies.

I wasn’t alone on those far northern trails. My husband Jonathan was splashing through the mud and stalking through the tall grass beside me, listening to my voice echo against the high, stony cliffs around us. He asked questions, and when there was a reference to a scientific subject with which I was unfamiliar, he was willing and able to explain. This is our relationship. I am tremendously grateful for the role he played in the delivery of this thesis: as a sounding board, an advocate, a co-parent, and as a husband. I’m also thankful to my daughter, Petrikke, born during my time as a master’s student at UiO. She inspires me to set an example of curiosity and studiousness, and I’ll never forget her incredible patience on the days I had to pick work over play. Nor the solid, joyful way she would hug and kiss me when I found time to *leke* again!

Of course, I must thank my thesis advisor, Bruce Barnhart, for his flexibility and trust as my project morphed toward this surprising point. I am also grateful for my MA cohort,

whose participation in the English Masters Society at UiO enriched my thesis semesters. I especially couldn't have finished writing without the wisdom and solidarity of Marianne Svarstad, who put me into the path of Karen Barad and helped me get a grip on *agential realism*, or without Kevin Steinman, who inspired me to apply to the MA program in the first place.

Finally, I'm proud to submit this thesis as an example of its contention. It is one of innumerable phenomena resulting from my *agential intra-action* with the work of two contemporary ecofeminist essayists. In it, I hope the reader will find, along with new ideas and strong research, some essence of the living, breathing, sweating ecofeminist essays that first inspired me. I have included several of the voices that rang out right when I needed them in the process, as well as a couple that have stuck with me over the years. The pattern I didn't see until I neared the end of the writing was this: *Women standing up to speak*. An actress, a poet, a politician, and a feminist icon, two writers, and a theoretical physicist stepping up behind their podiums, each telling an audience something it didn't necessarily expect to hear. My antenna on this project was serendipitously attuned to these moments, both recent and long past.

I must thank Rebecca Solnit and Terry Tempest Williams for their writing. Not only the books I deal with in this thesis, but the sound, rebellious, lyrical essays they continue to write. Since I began my thesis year, the American presidency has fallen into the hands of a man and a party with an utter disregard for the sovereignty of the natural world. Solnit, Williams and their contemporaries must work harder than ever to advocate for public lands, indigenous people, women, and other vulnerable groups. I hope to join them in that good work, both as a writer, and as a standard bearer for progressivism within the Democratic Party. It was Solnit, in particular, whose explanation of the notion of *a politics of prefiguration*, "the idea that if you embody what you aspire to, you have already succeeded," pushed me to run for (and win) an election for Chair of Democrats Abroad Norway in February 2017 (*Hope in the Dark* 80). And so her words moved me to action. These are the *poetic crossings* that ecofeminist essays can accomplish.

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1 Introduction

A few weeks after the American war in Iraq began, Rebecca Solnit published her essay “Hope in the Dark” online. It was 2003, and even as anti-war activists like herself mourned the battle cries from the White House and Congress, Solnit wanted to share a positive perspective on the present. As an historian, as well as a lifelong environmental and feminist activist, she set out to remind readers of history’s long view. In her essay, Solnit commented on past successful popular revolutions, taking care to note their catalysts. These actions may have seemed small or failed in their time, but have come to be recognised as essential sparks to greater change. She talked about things like the abolition of slavery, the legalisation of contraception, and the fall of the Berlin wall, each an advent that seemed part of a pattern of progress in her mind. By 2003, these things—basic civil rights, basic reproductive rights, and the end of the Cold War—had been embraced by modern American society, making it unfortunately easier to forget the fights that had brought them to the fore. Remember the victories, Solnit entreated her readers. If we acknowledge the good things we have achieved together in the past, we will have more hope in our ability to make change together in the future. “Hope in the Dark” was Solnit’s first foray into online publishing. As she watched the piece go “viral,” she was “amazed by the ravenous appetite for another way of telling who and what we were” (xi). In this case, the method of distribution was new, but the medium of communication was still an essay. That good, old French try¹. As in trying to explain, trying to convince, trying to persuade, trying to move Mohammed’s mountain. Trying to make change. In this thesis, I will look at the essay’s present and potential in one particular realm: *ecofeminist essayism*.

At its heart, ecofeminism is the convergence of the ideals of environmentalism and feminism. Coined by François d’Eaubonne in her book *Le Féminisme ou la mort* (1974), *ecoféminisme* was conceived as an eco-centric philosophy, equating the needs and rights

¹ “The genre, which originates with Michel de Montaigne (1533-92), who used the French term *essai* (‘trial’ or ‘attempt’) to designate the personal reflections that make up his collection of autobiographical writings, offers freedoms of movement and association, and an ability to balance truth and fiction, that are untenable in other formats. In his *Dictionary of the English Language*, Samuel Johnson defines the essay as ‘an irregular undigested piece’. We now tend to think of essays as more or less finished works, but this sense of fragmentation or ‘irregularity’ persists in our conception of the form. It is, in large part, this ‘undigested’ quality that made the essay attractive to Virginia Woolf, who was by no means alone in seeing the essay as a model and testing-ground for new experimental techniques and modern ideas about the subject.” (Saloman 15)

of humankind with the needs and rights of the non-human (or more-than-human) world. Ecofeminism sees the exploitation of nature as part of a pattern of dominance including racism and sexism that results from the standing, patriarchal “logic of dominance” that pervades and perverts power structures in our society (McCanty 169). Ecofeminists set out to shatter that status quo in order to liberate those groups whose exploitation currently shores up it up. In action, ecofeminism condemns the exploitation and oppression of both the environment and human minority groups, seeking to lift everyone up to the same level of both value and care. To do this, ecofeminists shine a light on modern power structures, their histories, and the way those histories have been communicated in the past, including the use of language and the methods of distribution. Ecofeminist writers like Rebecca Solnit and Terry Tempest Williams employ the essay in this capacity.

Inspired by the success of her essay, Solnit expanded her hopeful review of the history of populist activism into a collection of essays titled *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*. First published in Great Britain in 2005, the book has since been republished twice in the United States, with updates and additions to maintain the principles with more current examples. The collection grew and changed, adapting to each context in which it was reconceived and republished. As I will show in my first chapter, *essayism* is an inherently dynamic genre, constantly changing and evolving, not easily defined. I contend that this dynamism is also a key component of the metaphysics of activist literature, which I will introduce in more detail below. Everyone has a story to tell, but not everyone has the time, ability, or inclination to write those stories down. Writers tell all kinds of stories for all kinds of reasons. Essayists, like journalists, often tell the stories of others; unlike journalists, at least in the classic sense, essayists engage with others’ stories in an intentionally personal way. For activist writers like Solnit and Williams, the choice to write these situated stories is rooted in the desire to right past wrongs and create future change. In her foreword to the third edition of *Hope in the Dark* (2015), Solnit explains the role storytelling plays in social and political change-making:

“Changing the story isn’t enough in itself, but it has often been foundational to real changes. Making an injury visible and public is often the first step in remedying it, and political change often follows culture, as what was long tolerated is seen to be intolerable, or what was overlooked becomes obvious.

Which means that every conflict is in part a battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard.” (xiv)

More than a decade after the original publication of *Hope in the Dark* as a collection, the United States of America is more politically divided than ever before. Rome burns. And yet, as Solnit shows, historically, where there is smoke, there is fire, but there are also people of every stripe who come together to put the fires out and change the world. These populist efforts are urged forward by activist-writers.

In this thesis, I will analyse essays by Solnit and Williams from an ecofeminist perspective. As they set out to change the story, I believe they are also helping to evolve the rhetoric of interpersonal political discussions and activism. By infusing the malleable form of the essay with ecofeminist principles, both in terms of content and construction, they urge society toward a more productive and socially sustainable conversation. I will present ecofeminist essayism as a progressive genre of activist literature which I believe is characterised by 1) the revisiting of history from previously ignored/undervalued points of view and 2) the redefining of key terms in debate to defuse masculinist structures and/or empower different/additional political actors. My two chapters—The Personal and The Political—will be organized along these lines. Ironically, while my chapters will be divided on a binary basis, my approach to the critique of Solnit’s and Williams’s essays will be more fusion than fission².

1.1 Discarding Descartes: The Metaphysics of Essayism

“The very words from which she will get into the way of forming sentences should not be taken at haphazard but be definitely chosen and arranged on purpose. For example, let her have the names of the prophets and the apostles, and the whole list of patriarchs from Adam downward...”

-- St. Jerome, Letter on a Girl’s Education, 403 A.D. (qtd. in Griffin, *Woman and Nature*)

² Physics plays an unexpectedly major role in this thesis. If you’re a physics novice like me, it might be helpful to be reminded that fission and fusion are the two ways we have discovered how to harness nuclear energy. Fission involves “splitting apart a heavy, unstable nucleus into two lighter nuclei;” Fusion, on the other hand, is “the process of combining two light nuclei into one.” Both operations release an enormous amount of energy, but Fusion is the more powerful of the two. (Wikipedia)

The rejection of binaries is a key component of feminism, and thereby, ecofeminism. Typically challenged binaries include man/woman, culture/nature, object/subject. These binaries, along with many others, can be traced back to the age-old duality of Mind/Body, originally articulated by René Descartes in the 17th century. Descartes tried to determine the most basic components of reality by breaking down human experience into its fundamental parts. He found two. The first he termed *res extensa*, or the extended thing. This included everything external to the human mind, matter, what we can experience with our five senses. The second he termed *res cogitans*, or the thinking thing. This included everything internal to the human mind, consciousness, emotions and thoughts. Descartes described these two components in his *Second Meditation* as fundamentally separate, and his theory became the foundation of the Mind-Body problem, which has intrigued philosophers and scientists for centuries. Descartes could not find evidence for a bridge between internal and external reality, which is why he conceived of human reality as a strict dualism³. Mind and Body were essential and separate. Since then, Cartesian dualism has been questioned and modified or rejected by wave after wave of philosophers, from Karl Marx (and his notion of historical materialism) to John Searle (who considered the “mind” to be an aspect of the physical human brain). In opposition to dualism, monism holds that Mind and Body are part of the same existence; idealists and physicalists fall into the monistic camp. Idealists—a modern minority—maintain that the Mind is really all that “exists,” and everything else is an illusion or somehow an aspect of the mental. More modern philosophers tend to uphold a kind of physicalism, believing that matter is what matters, and that what we currently think of as “mind” can and will, along everything else, one day be explained by the physical sciences. In the interest of a physicalist conclusion to this query, modern society looks increasingly hard at the human brain. Neuroscientists parse the brain’s anatomy, biochemistry, molecular biology, and physiology. Meanwhile, psychologists interrogate perception, cognition, attention, memory, intelligence, etc. Yet, still we have not found a way to explain the link between Mind and Body, either the one that fuses them or the one that channels communication. Interiority and exteriority remain to be the ways in which we comprehend reality.

³ A dualism being, according to Robert Brandom, “a distinction whose components are [conceived] in terms that make their characteristic relations to one another ultimately unintelligible” (qtd. in Rouse 144). Barad’s relational ontology claims that differentiation and intelligibility are only possible through intra-action of components, rendering dualism obsolete.

Mind and Body. Culture and Nature. Male and Female. Human and Nonhuman. Objectivity and Subjectivity. In my research, I kept finding myself at the bottoms of these unbridged canyons, with one part of some socially-constructed binary on either side of me. Never have I perceived the duality of reality more intensely; yet, never have I been so inclined to believe that the duality of reality is inaccurate, or at least incomplete. The feminist in me sees such allegedly fundamental division as simply the first step toward inequality. Only once divided can the two (or more) things be compared, be weighed and measured, be experimented upon. This practice is what quantum physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad terms “*Thingification*—the turning of relationships into ‘things,’ ‘entities,’ ‘relata’” (812). According to Barad, thingification “infects much of the way we understand the world and our relationship to it” (812). She questions our assumption “that the existence of relations requires [pre-existing] relata,” and posits that “the persistent distrust of nature, materiality, and the body that pervades much of contemporary theorising and a sizeable amount of the history of Western thought [may] feed off this cultural proclivity” (812). Like Descartes, when we want to understand something, our urge is to break it down into elementary components, separate them, and understand those pieces individually. We do this because we believe (and have been taught) that this will give us a way to understand the unreliable whole, as if all structures and systems are simply the sums of their individual and separable parts. Unfortunately, this tendency has not managed to bridge the chasm between Mind and Body; instead, it requires that the two things remain distinct, separate, and individual. This separation is a hallmark of representationalism:

“the belief in the ontological distinction between representations and that which they purport to represent; in particular, that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing. That is, there are assumed to be two distinct and independent kinds of entities—representations and entities to be represented.”

(Barad 804)

Barad bristles at the “common sense appeal” that representationalism has achieved “within Western culture... [so that] it seems inescapable, if not downright natural” (806). She notes that Joseph Rouse “identifies representationalism as a Cartesian by-product—a particularly inconspicuous consequence of the Cartesian division between ‘internal’ and

‘external’ that breaks along the line of the known subject” (Barad 806). In her paper *Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter*, Barad suggests that it might “be better to begin with a different starting point, a different metaphysics” (812). Rejecting representationalism and its metaphysics of individualism, she presents instead “a relational ontology that rejects the metaphysics of relata, of ‘words’ and ‘things,’” in favour of happenings or *phenomena* (812).

Ian Hacking “traces the philosophical problem of representations to the Democritean dream of atoms and the void,” an image that haunted a surprising amount of my reading for this thesis (Barad 806). In James Geary’s book *I is an Other*, he gives us the history of ancient Greek atomic theory this way:

“According to the Greeks, the world was made up of just two basic things: atoms and the void. ‘Atoms are unlimited in size and number,’ wrote Democritus, the fourth-century B.C.E. Philosopher who formulated ancient Greece’s version of atomic theory, ‘and they are borne along in the whole universe in a vortex, and thereby generate all composite things—fire, water, air, earth; for even these are conglomerations of given atoms.’” (13)

The Greeks believed this literal atomic shower led to the creation of everything in the physical world, “all the things we see, hear, smell, touch, and taste,” by combining the falling atoms in “every conceivable way” (Geary 13). However, with “Democritus’s atomic theory emerges the possibility of a gap between representations and represented” (Barad 806). Greek atomic theory allowed for absolute separation of individual components, and so, when Descartes walked the canyon between Mind and Body and failed to find a connection, he determined the two were essentially separate, irresolvable. I walked the same canyon and came away with something different.

Democritus envisioned an endless rain of atoms in the void that resulted in the creation of everything in the physical world, but eventually, another Greek found a “flaw in the theory” (Geary 14). Epicurus realized that, “[i]n order to meet its match, an atom could not simply fall through the void like rain. It must veer from the vertical path and waft its way down like a feather” (Geary 14). How else could matter be formed? An atom on a direct, predestined path “would never bump into any other atoms and thus never form the conglomerations Democritus described” (Geary 14). Epicurus came up with a

theoretical solution in the *clinamen*, “the unpredictable moment during which each atom deviates from its course, creating the opportunity for a chance encounter with another atom” (Geary 14). These “clinamactic collisions” were the origin of all “change, surprise, and variety [in] the world” (Geary 13). But Barad challenges us to see this differently. Along with many contemporary quantum and theoretical physicists, she suggests that the collisions themselves are what matter, and that the atoms—supposed by Epicurus to be both individual and at the mercy of chance—should instead be conceived as *agencies* (Barad 815). In her proposed alternate metaphysics of *agential realism*, individual atoms do not fall through the void; in fact, atoms (or “things”) do not exist prior to their collisions (Barad 815). She proposes that the *intra-actions*⁴ of these agencies—a postmodern replacement for clinamactic collisions—result in phenomena which allow observation and, subsequently, an understanding of the differences between the intra-acting components (Barad 815). The components of an intra-action only exist within the intra-action, making them dependent upon one another for existence (Barad 815). The reality of Mind and Body *is* their relationship. Reality isn’t (or isn’t only) *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, extended thing and thinking thing. Reality is their intra-action. In fact, it’s possible that neither Mind nor Body can exist without the other; both interior and exterior are required for reality to *be* at all.

Barad’s suggestion of “performative alternatives to representationalism [that shift] the focus from questions of correspondence between descriptions and reality (e.g., do they mirror nature or culture?) to matters of practices/doings/actions” helped me approach the work of ecofeminist essayists in a new way (803). Using Barad’s model of a performative metaphysics, I examine ecofeminist essayism as a dynamic *material-discursive practice* that engages “important questions of ontology, materiality, and agency” (803). I will show the ways in which the writer-narrator’s agency triggers intra-actions in life that inspire the written work, as well as the ways in which the writer-narrator’s agency on the page trigger intra-actions that inspire her readers.

^{4 4} Barad coins this notion of *intra-actions*—“where relata-within-phenomena emerge”—which she differentiates from the popularly understood concept of *interactions*, “which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata” (815).

1.2 Chapter One: The Personal

“The measure of such objectivity is not the verification of asserted theses through repeated testing, but individual experience, unified in hope and disillusion. Experience, reminiscing, gives depth to its observations by confirming or refuting them.”

– T.W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form”

Viola Davis leaned on the white lectern on stage at the 2017 Screen Actors Guild Awards. She had just been named the Best Supporting Actress for her role as Rose Maxson in August Wilson’s *Fences*. The fingers of Davis’s left hand wrapped tightly around the pale green legs of the SAG statuette; the fingers of her right hand balled into a fist. She thanked Wilson for writing the play and screenplay, saying he had “beautifully... honored the average man, who happened to be a man of color.” Her dark shoulders gleamed like ocean waves at night as she rocked to that preternatural rhythm of deeply emotional truth. “Sometimes we don’t have to shake the world and move the world and create anything that is going to be in the history book,” she said. Her left arm swung at the elbow like a flag in the wind; her right fist pounded the table. “The fact that we breathed and lived a life and was a god to our children, just that, means that we have a story and it deserves to be told.” This idea that individual human stories “deserve” to be told is what drives the genres of autobiography, memoir, and personal essay, as well as biography and even historical fiction. Here, I focus on the self-reflective genres, places where the author’s personal experience appears directly in the text as “I.” As in inspiration and influence and impact.

It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the genres of personal essay, memoir, and autobiography. All three have overlapping characteristics. All three are personally situated and reflective. All three can be amplified within a larger context of history or society. An autobiography is best differentiated by its intent and rigid structure; it is usually written along historical lines, offered chronologically, and purports to relay the “facts” of the writer’s life. If set on a spectrum, autobiography is intended to be the most factually accurate, as well as the most objective genre of the three. However, there is a lot of grey area on this spectrum. One man’s autobiography can easily be another man’s memoir. Further down that spectrum are memoir and personal essay. Both genres tend to

incorporate more poetic elements, a lyrical style, for example, as well as fictive techniques. Rather than sticking to a chronology, personal essays and memoirs begin with whatever moment or observation strikes the writer-narrator as most important, and can jump around in terms of linear personal history. The writer-narrator in these works also seeks to develop a relationship with her reader by finding common ground and/or confessing something about herself. This intimate space allows the development of a journey that is selective about which “facts” of the writer-narrator’s life are shared, in what order, and with what emphasis. Where these two genres differ is in terms of intent. A memoir, personally situated and inspired by some theme that appears in the pattern of events and facts selected by the writer, is still mostly focused on the writer’s life. An essay, on the other hand, can be motivated by myriad other things. The writer’s own life, though it appears on the page, is usually a source of inspiration and perspective on something else. The intent is to share information, open doors that were previously closed, and make the reader think about something new and/or in a new way. Beyond that, the other real point of difference between the personal essay and memoir is one of length. The former is usually a short form, while the latter is usually book-length. In this thesis, the personal essay is my primary focus, but the similarities between the personal essay and the memoir would allow, for instance, a single chapter of a memoir-length work to be lifted out of its book and considered from the perspective I offer here on the personal ecofeminist essay.

1.2.1 Virginia Woolf’s Radical Subjectivity

While “the history and origin of the essay—whether it derives from Socrates or Siraney the Persian”—is interesting, I will not delve into that history much here, because I agree with Virginia Woolf: when it comes to the essay, “like all living things, its present is more important than its past” (“The Modern Essay” 1). Woolf believed that the power of the essay, once untethered from classical methodology, was almost boundless. She enjoyed the interdisciplinary capacity of the essay in terms of passing along knowledge. She also appreciated the tension implicit in the insightful, empowered voice of the personal essay, which “we write... as though this were beyond all others our natural way of speaking” (qtd. in Saloman 16). The essayistic voice is curious, questioning, and open

to philosophical detours. In Randi Salomon's collection on *Virginia Woolf's Essayism*, Salomon explains:

“Free from the expectations of linear narrative, the essay has no obligation to complete, or even to tell, a story, or to tell only one story. The essay is ordinarily classified as a non-fiction genre, yet it is not bound to ‘prove’ the truth of its statements in an objective fashion, and a certain license is more or less assumed by the reader... Essayists make no claim that their works are ‘finished’ or closed to further argument, but rather look to their readers to continue the thought process they have initiated.” (16)

This idea that an essay springs from a place of personal inspiration, unrestricted by commonly accepted rules regarding storytelling or truth, and invites a response from the reader, corresponds well with ecofeminist philosophy, where ideas are most important in their exchange. Ecofeminists hold that all voices are important and that power comes from interaction, difference, and interdependence (Mallory 314). The ecofeminist essayist uses her own voice—the “I” championed by Woolf, compelled by that which has been seen or felt by the “eye” of the writer-narrator—and then moves fluidly from one concept to the next, considering who else—human or non-human—may have been affected by that thing the writer-narrator felt or observed personally. In my first chapter, I examine the capital “I” of the personal essay. Beginning with Woolf, I will look at the way the essayistic voice contemplates truth, thrives in an environment of uncertainty, and allows subjectivity to unseat objectivity.

German philosopher and sociologist T.W. Adorno remarks in “The Essay as Form” that the essay is “classed among the oddities” because “[i]ts concepts are neither deduced from any first principle nor do they come full circle and arrive at a final principle” (93). Rather, the essay’s “concepts receive their light from a *terminus ad quem*⁵ hidden to the

⁵ Important clarification: *Terminus ad quem* roughly translates to “the point at which something ends or finishes,” while *terminus ad quo* translates to “a starting point or initial impulse” (Google translate). This can be confusing as, throughout this thesis, I will use the former—*terminus ad quem*—in ways that imply inspiration or point of origin. It is important to note that I have chosen to adhere to Adorno’s ideas on the essay’s *terminus ad quem* in a way that is consistent with Barad’s performative metaphysics, and her idea of reality as an ongoing becoming. To put it succinctly, if not simply: The *terminus ad quem* of an essay, too, is dynamic and performative, comprising of both what touched off the original charge in the essayist’s mind and what the essay has achieved by its written conclusion, and is only “real” as a component of the intra-actions giving rise to the essay itself or the reading of the

essay itself, and not from an obvious *terminus a quo*” (101). Joan Didion expressed this as, “I write entirely to find out what I’m thinking.”⁶ In the personal essay, questions are as important as (and sometimes more important than) answers⁷. a structurelessness that flies in the face of, for example, Descartes’ rules on discourse, which begin with “the presupposition... that all knowledge can potentially be converted into science” (Adorno 97). Adorno rejects this Science/Art binary and argues that “[t]he ideals of purity and cleanliness” in traditional scientific study “bear the marks of a repressive order; these ideals are shared by the bustle of authentic philosophy aiming at eternal values” and result in “a sealed and flawlessly organised science [and] a conceptless, intuitive art” (97). Adorno suggests that these two separate results are, by definition, weaker than what their entangled⁸, impure sum might be (97). The engagement of the essayist’s “I” in her work allows access to the writer-narrator’s personal values as a source of inspiration, and her personal perspective—literally placed and situated in the world she observes and intra-act with—as a means of moving through the stories she eventually tells. She jumps into the work inspired by a personal question and writes her way toward the unknown answer or answers, a process that, I will show, is intentionally and fruitfully subjective in this form.

Objectivity, though elevated by western culture as inherent to rationality and, therefore, truth, is not prioritized the same way in ecofeminist essayism. As Val Plumwood, the renowned Australian ecofeminist scholar, explains in her book *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, “Objectivity is usually seen as excluding the emotional, the bodily, the particular, the personal, and of course especially the ‘political.’ Rationalist influences devaluing the body and emotionality and identifying them as feminine are clearly influential here” (42). This harkens back to Susan Griffin’s

essay later on. It can also be the essayist’s identification of a pattern among multiple experiences/observations over time, an open-ended, searching process parallel to the crafting of the essay itself.

⁶ Joan Didion, “Why I Write” *New York Times Book Review*, Dec 5, 1976

⁷ Physicist Margaret Wertheim wrote *Pythagoras’s Trousers*, her first book on physics, specifically because friends and acquaintances kept intimating that they were intrigued by physics, but had purchased Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* and couldn’t get past chapter one. In a recent interview, Wertheim explained, “The problem with most books about physics is that they tell you the answers, and they focus on the answers. But they don’t explain the questions and why the questions matter.” Valuing questions equally with answers is a revolutionary idea, ecofeminist in principle. (*On Being Podcast* with Krista Tippett, 16 Feb 2017)

⁸ Barad’s relational ontology depends on an understanding of entanglement similar to that of Niels Bohr, who understood “entanglements in ontological terms (what is entangled are the ‘components’ of phenomena). For Bohr, phenomena—entanglements of objects and agencies of observation—constitute physical reality; phenomena (not independent objects) are the objective referent of measured properties” (Barad *Meeting the Universe Halfway* 309).

Woman and Nature, as well as countless classical references to femininity as uncontrollable, problematic, and inherently untrustworthy. Feminists understand the many negative outcomes of this way of thinking. What Plumwood illuminates anew is the idea that western culture's dedication to rationality/neutrality in research and argument can also lead to a lack of "care and respect for what is studied and of responsibility to those affected by it" (42). Where objectivity is pure and removed from the pursuit of knowledge, subjectivity is messy and involved. Admittedly, if academic writers/researchers give weight to their personal experience, either in the gathering or the disseminating of information, there is a risk of bias in the research. But ecofeminists argue that true impartiality is already a myth. As Plumwood reminds us:

"Power is what rushes into the vacuum of disengagement; the fully 'impartial' knower can easily be one who... will bend their administrative, research, and pedagogical energies to wherever the power, prestige, and funding is. Disengagement then carries... a paradoxical politics in which an appearance of neutrality conceals capitulation to power." (306)

Requiring the teaching and learning of lessons to be emotionally neutral—extracting or excluding the 'self'—serves the status quo. For activist-writers, the benefits of subjectivity outweigh the costs. In this chapter, I will also examine the motivation behind what ecofeminists believe is a particularly masculinist dedication to objectivity, and the historical price that has subsequently been paid by women, minorities, and the environment. Pointing to the research of Margaret K. Willard-Traub, I will consider the ways in which situatedness and the intentional engagement of multiple, subjective voices in scholarly work can confound scientific expectations. I will also use Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" as an example of the way she championed this kind of radical subjectivity, opting to root her ideas in the body of a woman, fluidly encountering concepts by way of human and non-human interactions, and relating them on the page with humility and room for error. Woolf's writer-narrator defies Cartesian principles of knowledge and learning (as well as teaching), and questions abound, which I will show accomplishes multiple things, including the empowerment of her readers/audience.

1.2.2 Polyphonic Performativity in the Work of Rebecca Solnit

One of those readers is Rebecca Solnit, whose work continues to push the envelope in terms of the essayistic voice and an ecofeminist engagement with subject matter. In a recent interview⁹, she described her motivation this way: “I try and encourage people. I take interest in pleasures and possibilities that are already all around us. I try and connect the present, past, and future in how I tell stories. I try to look for the alternatives and the overlooked entrances and exits.” Solnit began her writing career as a journalist, but her numerous essays and collections certainly go beyond the rules of classical journalism, among them impartiality and strict adherence to reportage. Marcus O’Donnell suggests that Solnit’s work exemplifies what he calls polyphonic open journalism, a situated, engaged, politically- and emotionally-sophisticated style of essay writing that interweaves multiple motivations and voices. I note the parallels between O’Donnell’s definition of polyphonic open journalism and ecofeminist philosophy, which “strives to make intelligible those things that ostensibly [sic] remain outside the domain of the thinkable—or, more accurately, the un-thought through” (Mallory 311). The ecofeminist essayist has less interest in discovering how things abstractly and universally “are”—reality as a set of fundamentals or ideals that can be determined through dissection and impartial research—than she has in asking previously unasked questions, approaching previously overlooked corners of the world, and creating change. Thus, philosophy and activism collide. Only in the collision—in the “I” of the essayist, in the “eye” of the climactic hurricane—does either exist at all.

I do not go so far as to argue that the essayist does not exist prior to the events that inspire her essays or prior to the writing of the essays themselves, but Barad’s “performative understanding of discursive practices” that “challenges the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things” resonated with me, especially in regards to Solnit’s work (802). The ecofeminist essay requires an intentional questioning of assumptions, the intentional seeking out of different and varying points of view. The ecofeminist essayist chooses to place herself in situations where she will encounter difference, as a by-product of her activism, for example, or through her research. Solnit’s personal journeys and, as a result, her works, are full of these deviations—philosophical detours, interdisciplinary knowledge relevant to the subject

⁹ Kyte, Lindsay. “Why Is Rebecca Solnit Hopeful?” *Lion's Roar*, 4 Sept. 2016, www.lionsroar.com/the-truth-teller/. Accessed 6 May 2017.

matter based on her own values. This is the foundation of innovation, creativity, and invention. *Becoming*¹⁰. Change.

To close my first chapter, I will look closely at two of Solnit's essays I find to be manifestly ecofeminist in terms of both content and construction: "Across the Divide" and "Open Door" (2005). In both, Solnit critiques socially-constructed binaries and connects histories—both well-known and unknown—to advocate for the potential power of interdependence. Not only does Solnit accept that her subjectivity impacts and affects the situations she observes as a writer, she celebrates that her presence can change things by way of intra-action, and that simultaneously, she herself is changed.

1.3 Chapter Two: The Political

"The confusion between these two diverse human activities—inventing stories and following traces in order to find something—is the origin of the incomprehension and distrust of science shown by a significant part of our contemporary culture. The separation is a subtle one: the antelope hunted at dawn is not far removed from the antelope deity in that night's storytelling. The border is porous. Myths nourish science, and science nourishes myth. But the value of knowledge remains. If we find the antelope, we can eat."

– Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*

In the northwest corner of Wyoming, the least populated state in the country, is a land of seething cauldrons and steaming calderas. As a child, I stood on the boardwalks and watched geysers blast boiling water hundreds of feet in the air. The sulphuric steam dampened my hair, and I was surprised at how difficult hot, wet air could be to breath. Yellowstone National Park is the oldest in our national park system. I wandered visitor centres, musty places full of dioramas and taxidermy, where visitors learned about history. Dry snake skins and rabbit pelts rested in boxes for us to touch. Birds and rodents sat preserved on bits of branch and rock behind glass for us to see. Outside, my little brothers offered pretzels to living yellow-bellied marmots beneath signs that said, Please Don't

¹⁰ In an agential realist account of reality, *becoming* is contrasted with *being*, Barad goes so far as to reject the separation of ontology from epistemology, moving instead to fuse the two disciplines into one: *onto-epistemology*. (829)

Feed The Animals. Yellowstone is a place I know. Or knew. Or thought I knew. Along with all the biology and geography, I knew that Lewis and Clark Expedition had “discovered” Yellowstone National Park. Only years later would I come to find how limited my understanding had been. Terry Tempest Williams writes about the same revelation in the introduction to her book, *The Hour of Land* (2016):

“The creation of America’s national parks has been the creation of myths. I grew up with the myth that when Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872, it was void of people. No one told me that our first national park was the seasonal and cyclic home of Blackfeet, Bannock, Shoshone, and Crow Nations. I was told instead that the steaming basins with geysers and fumaroles, hot springs and boiling waters were avoided by Indians—it was superstitious ground; Indians kept their distance. Like any good story with the muscle of privilege behind it, it seemed believable. And I never asked the question ‘Who benefits from the telling of this particular story?’” (11)

The question of which story is ultimately told and who stands to profit by it is a political one. *The Hour of Land* is a collection of essays on America’s national parks. Each includes the names-and-dates histories of a park’s conception and official creation, but woven throughout are Williams’s own experiences in that park—sometimes long ago, sometimes more recently. The people she meets and, sometimes more importantly, the birds she sees in the skies, trigger a series of observations on the complexity of national park history. *Who participated in the initial protection of the park? Who fought that effort? What was the original vision? How did that change over time? What does it look like today?* And always, *Who profits from the telling of any one of these stories?* In my first chapter, I showed the way ecofeminist essayists utilize a uniquely empowered and expanded personal voice to revisit history from previously ignored or undervalued points of view. In this chapter, I will illuminate the political potential of ecofeminist essayism in this regard.

Most ripe with potential, I contend, is the essayist’s ability (even responsibility) to engage in constant redefinition in the process of her writing. This begins on the level of individual words, where definitions are important the way that a map’s key is important.

One must agree on key terms before embarking into new philosophical territory because, like a map's key, we make use of a signifying system in philosophical discussions, "to locate or fix the position of something in relation to something else" (Morris and Voyce). It keeps us on track. At the same time, an ecofeminist rarely accepts the classically agreed upon definition(s) of any word.

1.3.1 Definition and Redefinition in Feminism: A Brief History

"For the essay perceives that the longing for strict definitions has long offered, through fixating manipulations of the meanings of concepts, to eliminate the irritating and dangerous elements of things that live within concepts."

– T.W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form"

Feminist scholar Maureen Devine's hypothesis on the *phallogentrism* of language appears to echo this sentiment, holding that "the male subjective has traditionally been the linguistic centre of consciousness which both genders must consequently relate to... Men, as the dominant gender, have had the opportunity to form not only culture, but also language, with all its interrelated symbolism and metaphor" (Hagene 15). I connect this feminist/ecofeminist scepticism regarding language to Barad's described rejection of the "representationalist belief in the power of words to mirror pre-existing phenomena," which "is the metaphysical substrate that supports social constructivist, as well as traditional realist, beliefs" (802). Barad points out that "[s]ocial constructivism has been the object of intense scrutiny within both feminist and science studies circles where considerable and informed dissatisfaction has been voiced" (802). We need definitions, but we also need to be open to the possibility of redefinition, casting a critical eye on the origins of terms, their inventors, their advocates, and the motivations behind them. In my second chapter, I will look at the politicisation of definitions, and the way ecofeminist essayists can endow words with new meanings, while simultaneously democratising access to these words.

Redefinition operates on levels beyond language, as well. I will begin with one of the most symbolic and defining statements of the feminist movement: *the personal is political*. Using Lynne Segal's paper on the "Formations of Feminism: Political Memoirs of the Left," I will examine how this paradigm shifted in the life and writings of Doris

Lessing. Segal notes that Lessing, when writing about her own life, offered a “frank portrayal of her most intimate thoughts and feelings, which are not abandoned as she ages. Bodies, sex, desire, relationships, pleasure, loneliness, confusion, pain and sorrow lace her memoirs throughout” (24). This is in stark contrast to men’s memoirs of the same era, which Segal had also studied, where “rarely a hint of such things creeps into [the] narratives” (26). Segal reveals the political consequences of Lessing’s intimate revelations—the way the author’s body became emblematic for other women’s bodies—as well as how this result was anticipated by Lessing. I use the example of Lessing’s work in its ground-breaking combination of personal and political, along with the author’s stated reluctance to feminism, to show two things: 1) the historical embrace of the physical body by feminist essayists; and 2) the way essays empower both writers and readers in terms of intent. Lessing’s choice of subject matter (and preference for subjectivity) helped women reconsider and give a voice to what was relevant in their own lives, and she understood that her writing would be interpreted and utilized by generations of readers beyond its publication. In fact, she invited that response.

1.3.2 Invitational Rhetoric in Ecofeminist Essayism

Invitation is a rhetorical device that might be deemed too passive for a movement as progressive as ecofeminism, and yet invitation is an innate quality of the essay as a form. As Saloman puts it, “The most natural and appropriate response to an essay (as any number of essayists have demonstrated) is another essay” (16). Dialogue is expected. I will use this chapter to show how the ecofeminist essayist uses what Jill Swiencicki calls *invitational rhetoric* to move from divide and conquer to define and empower¹¹. In her paper “Rhetorics of Invitation and Refusal in Terry Tempest Williams's *The Open Space of Democracy* (2004),” Swiencicki describes this move as “[a] broadening of rhetorical means beyond the patriarchal bias of ‘persuasion, influence, and power’ toward feminist principles of ‘equality, immanent value, and self-determination’” (153). Activist-writers like Solnit and Williams want to make change in the world, and invitation, when reconsidered this way, turns out to offer a route of reengagement with the body. In *The Open Space of Democracy*, Williams writes about her experience as an anti-war activist in

¹¹ Audre Lorde’s famous speech that includes this phrasing appears prominently in my second chapter.

2003, the criticism she received and how she chose to respond. Namely, she invited her critics to engage in face-to-face conversations about their differences. These written invitations were usually declined or ignored, as the critics in question continued to act in opposition to Williams and her contemporaries without publically acknowledging the resistance of the minority. Swiencicki illuminates how even this risk of rejection fails to limit the potential of invitational rhetoric when the inviter, in this case Williams, chooses to publish the invitation and rejection. Publication of an essay becomes an overtly political step in the invitational process, and it empowers readers to take up the cause in their own diverse ways.

Again, we see similarities to Barad's relational ontology, which finds that "social constructivist approaches get caught up in the geometrical optics of reflection where, much like the infinite play of images between two facing mirrors, the epistemological gets bounced back and forth, but nothing more is seen" (803). Essayists seek to expand the conversation precisely by entering intra-actions with an expectation of agency, both their own and that of their readers. Change can't come from direct reflections or objective, disembodied, neutral representations of what "is". Change can only come from invention, deviation, involvement, political motivation, the ability to imagine what could be. I will show the performative potential of invitational rhetoric in publication, the way it expands the reach of the dyad and enables intra-actions with the audience.

1.3.3 Rewilding in the Work of Terry Tempest Williams

In the second half of this chapter, I will examine the opening essay of William's most recent book, *The Hour of Land*, an essay titled, "Grand Teton National Park: Keep Memory," with these ideas in mind. As I look for examples of redefinition—particularly in regards to power and axiological inheritance—as well as examples of invitational rhetoric, I will use Barad's theory on the use of diffraction—"a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction" to explain the author's intent, but also the potential results that will resound beyond publication (803).

As it turns out, for an ecofeminist activist like Williams, the greatest progress manifests as a kind of return. In her essay on the history of Grand Teton National Park, Williams reflects on the two kinds of conservation at work over time. The first is the history of men with means—the Rockefeller family—who decided unilaterally to protect a

segment of Wyoming from development by establishing a national park. The second is the more recent history of the same family, wherein Laurance Rockefeller unilaterally determined to remove the JY Ranch—the last physical vestige of his family’s authority and legacy—from the park, initiating a complete rewilding of the spot. To *rewild* is to return a domesticated, cultivated place to its original state, removing whatever man-made interference or supplementation has gone on in the recent past. Williams writes about the national parks to remind readers what the intentions were behind protecting these places. She also points out the ways we have failed in that duty to protect, and reveals the surprisingly disparate cast of characters who have aided in the effort to keep some of the United States of America “wild.” To close my second chapter, I will investigate the concept of rewilding, both in terms of an environmentalist strategy and as it regards the essay as a form.

1.4 The Powerful: Where Meaning Comes From

Barad calls for a “robust account of the materialization of all bodies—‘human’ and ‘non-human’—and the material-discursive practices by which their differential constitutions are marked” (810). This thesis is a response to the latter. The ecofeminist essay, in inspiration and materialization, demonstrates the performative nature of reality. Activist-writers like Solnit and Williams engage the space between philosophy and activism with intra-actions in their own lives and on the page; their personal, situated essays embody that elusive connection between Mind and Body, between philosophy and activism, as the resulting phenomena of these intra-actions. Only “through specific agential intra-actions [do] the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate,” and—what is most important to this thesis—only then do “particular material articulations of the world become meaningful” (Barad 333). Who or what or *whether* the essayist and her given subject *were*—separately and distinctly—before their intra-action is, so to speak, immaterial. The intra-action and its resulting phenomena are what matter. This is reality. This is where meaning and change come from.

2 The Personal

“The fact is, all Western consciousness of and reflection upon art have remained within the confines staked out by the Greek theory of art as mimesis or representation. It is through this theory that art as such—above and beyond given works of art—becomes problematic, in need of defence. And it is the defence of art which gives birth to the odd vision by which something we have learned to call ‘form’ is separated off from something we have learned to call ‘content,’ and to the well-intentioned move which makes content essential and form accessory.”

-- Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”

“Almost all essays begin with a capital I — ‘I think’, ‘I feel,’” says Virginia Woolf in *The Decay of Essay Writing* (4). She does not mean the first heavy typewriter key punched against the blank page. Most essays, in fact, do not begin with a literal “I.” As with any written piece of art, an essay’s beginning comes long before words take physical shape. But unlike fictional works, an essay has its root in the “I.” Not only the individual imagination, but the individual’s experiences and, more than that, her values, the things that mean something to her. The preeminent “I,” Woolf notes, is part of the essay’s “peculiar form,” something that “implies a peculiar substance” (4). An essayist is able to “say in this shape what [she] cannot with equal fitness say in any other” (4). Once an essayist employs the “I,” “it is clear that [she is] not writing history or philosophy or biography or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with immortality, or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but is primarily an expression of personal opinion” (4). In 1905, Woolf’s elevation of the essay as a form—being as it was, unapologetically, an expression of personal opinion—was revolutionary. Set against the novel, but also histories and biographies and academic philosophical writing, Woolf could see where others could not the potential of the essay to transcend the boundaries of written communication between writers and readers. Randi Saloman explains in *Virginia Woolf’s Essayism*:

“Woolf understood that the essay’s development of radical techniques was made possible by a quality in the essayistic voice. Where the novelistic voice is authoritative and always, necessarily, in control of its fictive world, the

essayistic voice is unmoored: explorative, open to self-doubt
and prone to risky exchanges with its audience.” (ii)

I want to pause on the word *radical*. Best ecofeminist practice urges us to question definitions, due to an underlying skepticism of the phallocentrism of language, as defined in my introduction. If masculinist culture has developed everything including language, we must be aware of the potential prejudices and fallibility of manmade definitions. In literature, this is doubly important, as it can impact both the potential precision and potential poetry of our communication. Radical can mean both “relating to or affecting the fundamental nature of something; far-reaching or thorough” and “characterized by departure from tradition; innovative or progressive” (Microsoft Office Dictionary). Woolf’s essayistic voice is radical in its rejection of the classic appeal of control and authority, finding the alternative of the unknown a far richer prospect. As well, Woolf’s consideration of subjectivity as an asset to nonfiction writing was a radical upending of the academic tradition which surrounds scholarly writing, and continues to surround so-called “hard” academia¹²—the maths and the sciences—as well as journalism, where objective truth has long been king.

Ecofeminist scholar Chaone Mallory reminds us about the potentially damaging axiological inheritances at work in these fields of study:

“[The] Western master narrative of rationality locates scientific and epistemic authority in a stance of transcendence, distance, separation, dispassionate disengagement, producing a hierarchical, instrumentalizing relationship between the knower and the known.” (306)

This narrative sets objective truth up as an absolute only achievable by way of rationality, with “ontological separation and affective neutrality” as prerequisites (306). On this note, Plumwood explains that “[o]bjectivity is usually seen as excluding the emotional, the bodily, the particular, the personal, and of course especially the ‘political.’ Rationalist influences devaluing the body and emotionality and identifying them as feminine are clearly influential here” (Mallory 306). The irony inherent in the masculinist separation of universal and objective truth from the body is that access to this truth (and the

¹² Margaret Wertheim enjoys the “irony” in calling mathematical sciences “hard” when “mathematics is the least material, least solid thing” of all.

understanding and/or questioning of it) has historically been restricted to groups based on characteristics of the body. Race. Gender. Disability. Sexuality.

2.1 Skin in the Game: Scholarly Memoirs

Researchers like Margaret K. Willard-Traub have studied a marked increase in the number published “scholarly memoirs” in academia. This reflective subgenre is a hybrid that combines scientific research, philosophical thought, and personal history and/or insight in order to present information to readers in an intentionally-embodied way. Willard-Traub writes about the “proliferation [of these] multivalent, and multi-‘voiced’ texts” across academic disciplines (511). The authors choose to offer the results of their research interwoven with scenes from their own lives, which are emblematic of themes underlying the scholarly text, if only anecdotally. Willard-Traub notes that scholarly memoirs are written “very frequently by scholars of color and women scholars” (511). She defines these texts as “ethnographies that are ‘situated’ with regard to the subject position of the writer-researcher,” holding themselves against “traditional expectations for ‘objectivity’ that require, for instance, that a scholar adopt a personal detachment from his or her object of study or maintain a certain distance from potential audiences” (511). But Willard-Traub does not see this as a liability. Rather, she demonstrates the potential of this “more ‘reflective’ academic practice” (511). The books she holds up to the light develop “relationships between writers and their diverse audiences (both those who are scholars and those who are not),” and this allows them to “function in a way that underscores literacy as a social practice, and align themselves with postmodern epistemologies that affirm the multiplicity and contingency of the writing ‘self’” (511). There’s no rule saying that scholars of color or women scholars must tackle topics that are personally visible and influential in their own lives. But they can. When a scholar engages with the personal voice, both in the research and the communication of her findings, there may be bias. There is also, however, the possibility for a deeper personal investment in discerning truth and creating change where necessary.

Willard-Traub argues that scholarly memoirs “establish... connections between writers and readers by enlarging the notion of individual subjectivity, in particular by mobilizing categories of identity such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, and class” (512).

She cites James's Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality* when she says that context and personal voice may enhance academic writing by "stipulating a linguistic transaction 'that involves all elements of the rhetorical situation: interlocutor, audience, material reality, and language' (Berlin 16), a transaction often absent from traditional academic discourses demonstrated by scholars and learned by students" (512). When a professor begins his lesson from the traditional top-down, instrumentalized perspective, prepared to show his students what the truth is and how it can be used, particularly in fields of study based on human experience and interaction—sociology, anthropology, literature, communications, history—something is bound to be lost. This is what Plumwood means by the exclusionary nature of objectivity, and the danger of the vacuum of disengagement. A masculinist sees clean, pure truth. An ecofeminist sees a bloodless idea devoid of the dirt of lived experience. Human knowledge itself may be biased due to its origins, tainted by issues of gender, race, and class that dictated who was given access and a voice when the rules were first put down on paper. Where there is bias, there is politics. And the political, according to feminism, is always personal.

2.2 Radical Subjectivity

"Wow."

Poet Nikky Finney whispered this single word as she drew herself up behind the podium at the 2011 National Book Awards, having been announced the winner for her collection *Head Off & Split*. Her dreadlocked hair swung in long heavy ropes around her face, over her sloped shoulders. She put on a pair of round glasses and smoothed a pair of pages before her and took a deep breath. And spoke¹³. "We begin with history. The Slave Codes of South Carolina, 1739: a fine of one hundred dollars and six months in prison will be imposed for anyone found teaching a slave to read, or write, and death is the penalty for circulating any incendiary literature." For Finney, standing on that stage among that company—fellow nominees for poetry in 2011 included Adrienne Rich and Yusef Komunyakaa—was the realisation of a lifelong goal. It was also something incredibly unlikely given her circumstances. As a young black girl in the American south, she

¹³ Finney, Nikky. National Book Award for Poetry Acceptance Speech. 16 November 2011.

admired her mother's tenacity as a homemaker, "insisting beauty into [her family's] deeply segregated southern days," and she admired her father's prerogative to buy "every incendiary dictionary, encyclopedia, and Black history tome, that ever knocked on [their] Oakland Avenue door." When she heard her name called that night, Finney knew it was time to fulfil a promise to her "girl-poet self." She invoked the men and women who suffered under the slave codes and Jim Crow laws, summoning them to her side in the present. "Some have climbed out of the cold wet Atlantic, just to be here," she said. "We shiver together." Then Finney pointed to the revelation in her young life that haunts and inspires every poem she writes, hearing Dr. Katie Cannon say, "Black People were the only people in the United States ever explicitly forbidden to become literate." In great art, we require that the artist's voice—her I, her "eye"—is radically subjective. Finney's poetry deals in civil rights, identity, sexuality, and race, among countless other heavy, important social themes. She won the National Book Award for a collection ballasted by the stories of the victims of Hurricane Katrina. Her skin in the game is her skin and the history that colors it.

When Woolf posited the potential power of the personal voice in the essay at the turn of the last century, she was negotiating life as a bright, curious young woman in a phallogocentric world that overtly curtailed women's access to knowledge. Twelve years after publishing *The Decay of Essay Writing*, Woolf went on to publish one of her most famous books, a long essay titled "A Room of One's Own" (1929). In it, Woolf tells many stories, including a first-person account of being turned away from a university library on the fictional Oxbridge campus. "[A] guardian angel" bars the door "with a flutter of black gowns instead of white wings" (9). Regrettably, he tells her that "ladies are only admitted to the library if accompanied by a Fellow of the College or furnished with a letter of introduction" (9). Evidently, this "deprecating, silvery, kindly gentleman" regrets not that the rule exists, but that she wasted her time. But who is she? Whose voice tells this story?

The essay is offered from the standpoint of the personal "I," but Woolf's adeptness with this perspective has diversified by the time of its writing. "A Room of One's Own" is structured as a lecture presented in response to the provided topic of "women and fiction". From the first word, however, Woolf bucks expectations: "But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" It is as if Woolf anticipates interruption, feels the need to explain herself before she begins. Defensive in her assertions, her voice appears to lack the authority and confidence

of the typical lecturer. Woolf's preamble goes on to provide something of a hypothetical abstract, the summary and description of a lecture she will not, and ostensibly could not, give. Those who invited her to speak might have wanted the legendary feminist author to talk about "women and what they are like" or "women and the fiction they write" or "women and the fiction that is written about them," but Woolf finds that this intent had "one fatal drawback" (4). "I should never be able to come to a conclusion," she says. "I should never be able to fulfil what is, I understand, the first duty of a lecturer—to give you after an hour's discourse a nugget of pure truth to wrap between the pages of your notebooks and keep on the mantelpiece for ever" (4). This definition of the lecturer's first duty, one may assume, is rooted in traditional expectations of the top-down, instrumentalized teacher-student relationship. An expert with years of experience in a field receives an invitation to speak and provides a monologue of provable, profound answers to the questions of less knowledgeable students. This structure is hierarchical; it is Cartesian; it is dying to be poked at. When Woolf accepts the invitation to lecture, she uses the opening to introduce a different kind of voice. I argue that this is the essayistic voice and, moreover, one that upholds ecofeminist principles.

First, Woolf employs the "I," but in a way that is qualified and redefined. "'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being," says Woolf, pointing to multiple possible identities—"Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or... any name you please"—for her narrator. "Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them; it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping" (5). Trust me enough to follow me into *terra incognita*, she says, and trust yourselves enough to find your way out again; armed with new knowledge we discover together. The essayist feels compelled by an observation in her own life to begin writing and trusts her instincts to connect even the most outwardly tenuous ideas over the journey of the piece. Adorno defends against the resulting "reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random," as such an accusation "assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality" (99). The essay is not designed "to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal" (Adorno 99). To paraphrase this in a way that parallels Barad, the essay does not seek merely to represent a distant, ideal reality in a series of interconnected mimeses; rather, the essay manifests from a set of the writer-narrator's intra-actions with the world and with

the page, demonstrating a dynamic, personally resonant relational onto-epistemology that is, itself, real. Subjective uncertainty¹⁴ is set loose to operate alongside objective certainty. As Woolf exhibits, the essayist doesn't use her voice to assert dominance through an arrogant presentation of something she claims to have mastered. She "is understood to be speaking not as a scholar, or as an expert on a given subject, but simply as one who is interested in the topic at hand and wishes to open a dialogue with the reader, feeling that an idea or a question of interest has been uncovered" (Saloman 16). In "A Room of One's Own," the question of interest is one of sex.

Woolf pulls the concept of an ideal truth further off its pedestal by saying, "when a subject is highly controversial—and any question about sex is that—one cannot hope to tell the truth" (4). There will be no nugget. Rather, "[o]ne can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker" (5). By presenting her speech as a collection of opinions and humbly acknowledging her own limitations, Woolf invites her audience—women at Cambridge University in 1928, but also readers from that time on—to walk into the wilderness with her and emerge with their own personal understanding of, in this case, women and fiction. Woolf's invitation encourages the reader to engage in the act of philosophy according to the ecofeminist definition previously offered by Mallory. Questioning what has been deemed to be outside the domain of the thinkable is one way feminist/ecofeminist essayists shine light on the foundational bias of knowledge and the hierarchies that have been built to accommodate it. This includes the abject separation of science and art.

For Adorno, the historical dualizing of science and art is to the detriment of both, to say nothing of the way it impedes human access to truth. "Although art and science have separated from each other in history," says Adorno, "their opposition is not to be hypostatized... In all their necessity these divisions simply attest institutionally to the renunciation of the whole truth" (97). Invoking the importance of luck and play in the form, Adorno differentiates the essay from traditional academic writing, which is the result of a "scientific purism" that believes "[e]very impulse of expression... endangers an

¹⁴ What I call "subjective uncertainty," Adorno calls a "philosophical subjectivism which translates the exigencies of the object into those of its conceptual organization. The essay is determined by the unity of its object, together with that of theory and experience which have migrated into the object" (105).

objectivity that is said to spring forth after the subtraction of the subject” (97). Pursuit of Adorno’s “whole truth,” rooted in the subjective, is the potential power of the essay. This is a fire ignited by the essayist’s personal, skin-in-the-game terminus ad quem. It is and situated. It is embodied. It is impure and individual, simultaneous and multiplicitous. And it requires a human voice, a human eye.

2.3 Unplanned Encounters and Necessary Detours

An ecofeminist essay is never about any one thing. By definition, it requires both the instigation of the writer-narrator’s “I” and the way her values and experiences lead her to intra-act with the lives and stories of others. There might be something primary, a takeaway tidied and/or a pattern presented in revision, but because essays are inspired by the writer-narrator’s terminus ad quem, the journey outweighs the destination. As well, the ecofeminist ethos is fluid enough to anticipate that the reader’s context could easily affect his own conclusions about the piece. Trained as a journalist, Solnit approaches every project with the ability to interrogate her sources and be objective in her research and writing, but she has described her repeated failure to “attain that perfectly flat voice” in her writing that is required by the traditions of journalism (qtd. in O’Donnell 937). Instead, her own voice rings out and it sticks to subject matter that matters to her, namely, personal-political issues that hit close to home. Writing about her own civil disobedience at the blasted-out Nevada Test Site in *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* (2007), for example, Solnit reflects on the way her writing voice seems to multiply, breaking from mirror into prism around these personal and political topics. She understands the historical reality of radioactive testing in the region; she feels an affinity for the desert terrain; she wants people to understand that “a sunset is no less beautiful when you are wearing handcuffs” (2). Is she a journalist? A memoirist? A critic? “These three voices,” she says, are “one voice in everything except the conventions that sort our experience out and censor what doesn’t belong” (2). Beyond the personal perspective and the relational approach, this interdisciplinary nature is another key component of the essayistic voice that resonates clearly with ecofeminist writers.

Inspired by many rebellious essayists before her, including Virginia Woolf, Solnit has kept a firm faith in her interdisciplinary voice, because the expected alternative of “conventional narrative is too often an elevated freeway permitting no unplanned encounters or necessary detours” (2). What Solnit does instead is to wander freely in her life, in her research, and in her writing. She meanders. Marcus O’Donnell looks at Solnit’s work in relation to journalism, and says that Solnit’s unique contribution to the genre is essayistic:

“The root word for ‘essay’ connects it to weights and balance and an essay originally had the sense of testing something out, or weighing it, an essayist was originally someone who conducted experiments in writing, tested out ideas. In this sense, the term suits Solnit well, because her work is always testing out ideas both in content and in form.” (941)

O’Donnell proposes that Solnit’s work exemplifies what he calls “polyphonic open journalism,” a “distinctive open form of literary journalism” that has evolved to include both “writerly and activist practices” (937). O’Donnell tracks the evolution of literary journalism through craft commentary from several practitioners of the medium, from Tom Wolfe in the 1970s through Robert Boynton at the turn of the millennia. In 2005, Boynton “documented what he calls the ‘new new journalism’ ... a form of journalism that is: ‘rigorously reported, psychologically astute, sociologically sophisticated and politically aware’ (Boynton, 2005: xi)” (939). O’Donnell connects this to Solnit’s essays. In Boynton’s definition, we see the importance of situatedness in this dynamic genre. The writer-narrator is the one whose presence and agency links the pieces of the essay together.

This, says Saloman, is “[t]he essayist’s job... to create harmony from entirely random incidents and events—from a collection of pieces that do not, on their objective merits, form a logical whole” (22). The red thread that the essay’s reader follows from moment to moment is the manifestation of the writer-narrator’s values. It isn’t that the individual events in the essay lack objective merit; it is only that, through the specific prismatic lens provided by the writer-narrator, an object’s merit fragments or magnifies or reflects. It simultaneously affects and becomes contingent upon the merit of other objects selected by the writer-narrator. This kaleidoscopic result is what differentiates polyphonic

open journalism from “traditional journalism” where, says O’Donnell, “balancing multiple sources supposedly builds an easily apparent but singular ‘truth’ by gradually showing it from all sides” (940). A commitment to objectivity assumes that a singular, distinct object exists and that an absolute, neutral representation of the object is possible. And it might be. But that’s not where the essayist’s values—the values of the wanderer, the philosopher—usually lie. Nor is such single-minded objectivity valued in ecofeminism, which promotes instead the potential for discovery, for revelation, for change, as well as an allegiance to interconnectedness and interdependence. According to Mallory, a line of inquiry is ecofeminist when it deals with the “intersections of oppressions, exclusions and marginalizations that particularly impact women and nature” (311). Rather than defining what is and/or should remain outside the realm of the thinkable, ecofeminist essayists move through their work receptive to all subjects, objects, and philosophies, looking for subjective patterns of relationship that reveal something important about the human and non-human condition. They are after Adorno’s “whole truth,” a comprehensive conglomeration of contingencies. Objective and subjective. Science and art.

In the ecofeminist essay, the writer-narrator’s presence and agency behind the pen is what triggers the clinamen, that moment “during which each atom” in the endless atomic shower postulated by the Greeks “deviates from its course, creating the opportunity for a chance encounter with another atom” (Geary 13). Meanwhile, the writer-narrator’s presence and agency on the page embodies the inventive, harmonic collisions of otherwise disparate things—concepts, events, times, cultures, disciplines—that result from the author’s detours. French mathematician and theoretical physicist Henri Poincaré “concluded that great creative breakthroughs occur unexpectedly and unconsciously after an extended period of hard, conscious labor” for similar reasons (Geary 15). He compared “ideas” to Epicurus’s atoms, which rest in the mind, “motionless... so to speak, hooked to the wall” (Geary 15). Then:

“During a period of apparent rest and unconscious work, certain of them are detached from the wall and put in motion. They flash in every direction through space... Their mutual impacts may produce new combinations. What is the role of the preliminary conscious work? It is evidently to mobilise certain of these atoms, to unhook them from the wall and put them in swing. After this shaking-up imposed

upon them by our will, these atoms do not return to their primitive rest. They freely continue their dance.” (Geary 15)

Poincaré’s use of this metaphor, where Ancient Greek atomic theory stands in for ingenuity—the conception of new knowledge—maps to all creativity. The ecofeminist essayist uses her experience and values to determine the starting point of her work and fluidly follows the subsequent chain of intra-actions to where, as Adorno puts it, “[the essay] feels itself complete—not where there is nothing left to say” (93). The deviation that sets off a chain of collisions and, therefore, new combinations of matter or ideas, may be unexpected, but it comes, as Poincaré points out, after the imposition of the will of the one who deviates.

When the narrator of “A Room of One’s Own” sets off on her doomed trip to the Oxbridge library, she has just experienced a moment like this, after a period of tranquillity. Ideas that were attached to the walls of her mind are shaken loose and collide, producing a thought that she likens to “a little fish.” The little fish reminds her of the essays of Charles Lamb, to whom “one would have liked to say, Tell me then how you wrote your essays? For his essays are superior even to Max Beerbohm’s... because of that wild flash of imagination, that lightning crack of genius in the middle of them which leaves them flawed and imperfect, but starred with poetry” (8). (Perhaps this is the lightning crack of climactic collision and the poetical starriness of the kaleidoscope.) Even the way the narrator, upon the revelation of this new thought, veers suddenly from the sidewalk to go more directly “across the quadrangle to that famous library where the treasure is kept” is similar to the Epicurean theory (8). Then somebody—a beadle, or Democritus, or Descartes—interferes and puts the writer-narrator back on the paved path. But the little fish has been set in motion. And “A Room of One’s Own” goes on to contemplate a thousand things, from the gender disparity in access to education, to the hypothetical life of Shakespeare’s sister, to the ultimate contention of the famous essay: that a woman must have an income and a room of her own in order to make art equal to that of her male contemporaries. It’s a remarkable journey: personal in inspiration, political in intent, powerful in scope. All of it hinges on the presence and agency of the writer-narrator, the one who veers from the vertical path. She wafts down like a feather. She deviates from the course at unpredictable moments, putting herself into the path of all nature of other things, and all for the climactic climax, the collision of two otherwise unrelated things to create new meaning in relationship. On an agential realist account,

“[m]eaning is not a property of individual words or groups of words but an ongoing performance of the world in its differential intelligibility” (Barad 821). Ecofeminists believe everything is worth that kind of consideration. Not removed and objective and only valued singularly and separate, but slammed up against one another and subjective and experienced at whatever unique, brief, ecstatic angle the writer-narrator can catch them.

2.4 The Power of Presence

Like Woolf, Solnit has spent her life writing about the things that matter most to her, which are also, she believes, the things that matter most to the planet. As an environmentalist, Solnit has travelled extensively in the American West, favouring the severe, remote places that—to the untrained eye—appear empty, ugly and easy to sacrifice. She has put herself in harm’s way and trespassed legal boundaries time and again, coming away with the stories that spawn her books. In *Storming the Gates of Paradise*, Solnit chose to intersperse the chapters with environmentalist photography. These photos enhance the reading of her prose. In her Introduction, she reveals a tension within the environmentalist movement that might have objected to her use of these photos, or even to her own writing, beautiful as it is. She describes meeting photographer Robert Misrach and seeing his photos of the earth, clouds and sky, images “many people found deeply disturbing,” and hearing “again and again that he was ‘glorifying violence’ with his pictures of the ravaged military landscapes of Nevada’s endless expanse of military land” (3). But she could see that what his critics really wanted was for “the beautiful to be synonymous with the good, beauty never to be seductive unless that seduction was the path to virtue, [and] evil to be easy to reject” (3). Unfortunately, the outcome of this dualistic thinking was that “oil spills were always in small, ugly pictures; and the big color pictures of pristine nature excluded any sense of history, violence, or even, for the most part, decay” (3). Solnit felt an activist-artist’s kinship with Misrach, and she mourned that his grand, exotically-colored photos of man-made scars on the desert were too “voluptuous” for the “dry sensibility of photojournalism” (3). “Richard’s work challenged us to feel the conflicts of being fully present in a complicated world,” says Solnit, “and I

was trying to do the same” (3). What Misrach does with color, scale, contrast, perspective and frame, Solnit and her fellow ecofeminist essayists do with an intensely personal, interdisciplinary voice and the form of the essay.

Where traditional academic papers on climate change, the damage of nuclear testing in the desert, or the plight of women in third world countries, for example, have little chance of reaching a mass market and creating change, ecofeminist essays find a potentially more productive way to deal with the same issues. They give these same stories a face, a voice, and include an invitation to dialogue. Even the most complex issues tremble and recede, albeit a teaspoonful at a time. Solnit and Williams accomplish this, not by distancing themselves for the sake of objectivity, but by getting closer to the difficult material, making tough issues personal, for themselves and their readers. Though “[w]omen are not ‘closer to nature’ than men in any ontological sense,” ecofeminist Ariel Salleh reminds us that “attaining the prize of masculine identity depends on men distancing themselves from that fact. Ecofeminists explore the political consequences of this culturally elaborated gender difference” (qtd. in Mallory 309). This exploration, says Mallory:

“[reveals] the constructed, contingent, yet remarkably durable links between women and nature—conceptually materially, symbolically—[offering] a way out of the current eco-political dilemma of how to represent nature nonanthropocentrically, how to avoid the problem of having human actors paternalistically “speaking for” nature, and how to reconfigure the political in such a way that nature appears on its own accord, is heard through its own polyphonic voices.” (314)

In this strategy, ecofeminism and essayism are almost perfectly complementary. They both begin with the “I,” putting the writer-narrator in a strangely empowered position of agency and compassion, as opposed to authority and control. Subject matter is exactly that, subject rather than object, and usually multiple subjects, selected and relayed in a particular order, to achieve a particular impression for the sake of the reader. The subjects are chosen based on the writer-narrator’s values, and evaluations are made beginning with the humble, open and basic assumption that anything and everything is potentially valuable. The goal of ecofeminism is to move from repression to representation on behalf

of every vulnerable minority; not representation in the sense of speaking “for” someone, but rather in the sense of giving accurate testimony or rendering an accurate portrait. Bearing witness. To achieve this, the writer-narrator begins from a place of identification, blurring the binaries that separate Self from Other, that separate objectivity from subjectivity. Both ecofeminism and essayism see emotion as an asset, so long as it is utilized carefully, so long as it increases personal investment in identifying problems and creating change. And both elevate luck and play and risk in ways that conventions in academic research and journalism would not allow. These unpredictable influences are the muses that shake the ideas off the walls, engaging multiple voices, and asking questions that others—restricted by masculinist codes—would otherwise decline to ask or wouldn’t realize were worth the asking. By expanding the scope of which stories deserve to be told, the ecofeminist essayist re-embodies the truth—equalizing the objective and subjective considerations that reveal it to us—and removes the distance between teller and told, as well as the space between opposing sides in the great debate.

2.5 Solnit’s “Across the Great Divide”

“Positivism’s irresponsibly bungled language fancies itself to be responsibly objective and adequate to the matter at hand; the reflection of the spiritual becomes the privilege of the spiritless.”

– T.W. Adorno, “The Essay as Form”

In her essay “Across the Great Divide,” Solnit begins with the words of “poet and polemicist June Jordan,” who urges us to “begin, now, to reject the... either/or system of dividing the world into unnecessary conflict” because “we need everybody and all that we are” (83). Solnit then moves directly to a moment of redefinition, tracing the origin of the American political understanding of Left and Right to the way “the French National Assembly seated itself a few years after the revolution of 1789,” explaining that “the more radical sat on the left, and thus radicals have been leftists ever since” (84). She suggests that these terms have outlasted their meaningfulness, as “[s]eating arrangements have changed,” possibly because “we’ve all stood up at last and begun to move somewhere new, somewhere unknown” (84). Today, “there are far more than two political positions,

and the old terminology only blinds us,” and Solnit urges the reader to imagine “what alliances and affinities might arise without those badges of right and left,” citing the example of “the recent American militia movements.” (84). The culture was there was “patriarchal, nostalgic, nationalist, gun-happy, and full of weird fantasies about the UN” (85). At first glance, there might not appear to be much overlap between them and the tree-hugging hippies in the environmental movement, who, ostensibly, stand on the other side of the typical left/right political binary. But Solnit invites the reader to look again. It turns out that both sides “prized the local and feared its erasure by the transnational” (85). Rather than being so quick to condemn the apparent opposition, Solnit shows how the ecofeminist principle of equal value and care can only work if it actually extends to all. The hyper-conservative, hyper-patriotic groups made the environmentalists nervous, but if their arguments were considered with more open curiosity than closed condemnation, Solnit explains that the militia groups would have been seen more accurately and helpfully as “the frothy foam on a big wave of alienation, suspicion and fear from people watching their livelihoods and their communities go down the tubes” (85). “What could have happened,” she asks, “if we could have spoken directly to the people in that wave, if we could have found common ground, if we could have made our position neither right nor left but truly grassroots?” (85). In the form of the personal essay, each question brings a sense of opening in the narrative, providing room for the writer-narrator to move and room for the reader to access her own life and experience to make connections with the text and the larger issues at hand.

“Across the Great Divide” goes on to meditate about the “leftist” activism of the 1960’s, where it was positive and where it was weak. Solnit confesses that she grew up “encouraged to despise ‘rednecks and white trash’... a handy way for the middle class elsewhere to carry on a class war while feeling progressive” (85). In conceding this kind of hypocrisy among her own people, Solnit models a gentle firmness and an allegiance to a set of underlying, anti-ideological, nonpartisan principles. She expresses a need for “a broad base” and a “style [of activism] that speaks to far more people than the left has lately been able to speak to and for” (85). The essay interweaves examples of successful collaborations between unexpected partners, from Seattle in 1999, where “the unions represented at least some rapprochement of blue-collar industrial America with environmentalists, anarchists, indigenous activists and farmers from Korea to France,” to the “hundred-nation coalition Via Campesino, with its hundred million members... born

when Mexican leftists went into Chiapas and found common ground with the indigenous population” (86). Solnit does not take the time to pull these examples from the abstract to explain or cite either in great detail to the reader. Doing so might have allowed quantitative analysis of a kind, possibly proving Solnit’s point in an academic sense (i.e., here were the facts of the case; here were the subsequently measured results and evidence of how they benefited the individual parties involved). Instead, Solnit transitions from the broad lens to a more focused one—from the world stage to the place she calls home—“the American West,” where “something similar has been happening, something that partakes of the same open-mindedness, of the best part of politics’ strange bedfellows” (86). Her voice morphs, too, from something more distant and knowledgeable on the grand scale of world politics and environmentalism to a rooted, present, approachable tone. She invites the reader to have a beer.

At an activist retreat in Eureka, Nevada in 1996, Solnit and her fellow environmentalists “ended up drinking at the anti-environmentalist bar because it was the only one in town with beer on tap” (86). She met “a young rancher in a big hat who thought environmentalists hated him” (86). Even after this revelation, Solnit stayed on her stool and asked questions about the man’s family, who had “been ranching in the area for generations”:

“[H]e was knowledgeable about sustainable and rotational grazing if not about the nifty new terminology for it and boasted that his grass grazed the bellies of his cows, unlike all the hit-and-run ranchers nearby he deplored and the mining corporations he deplored more. By the end of the evening I’d convinced him that some environmentalists thought he might be just fine, and he was buying me whiskey.” (86)

Solnit’s agency of self and purpose took her to that bar and engaged her in a conversation with a man who would have previously defined himself as her absolute opponent. Solnit’s agency as a writer-narrator moved from abstract concepts and historical milestones to the situated perspective of her conversation with a potentially oppositional voice. These are Barad’s intra-actions. Whether Solnit and the Wrangler-wearing rancher existed before they clinked pints over a bowl of stale peanuts is debatable; what is undebatable is that, after their exchange, they were changed. He didn’t see all environmentalists as his

enemies, and she had a human face to place on her revelation that “ranch families... love their land and know it with an intimacy few environmentalists will arrive at” (87). This is valuable information and insight for the environmental movement; it is also inherently valuable, in the sense that this group of human beings has invested their lives in a place and a practice that does not deserve to be nonchalantly undermined due to environmentalist zeal, the “sectarian righteousness” of what has long been called the Left (87).

In her essays, Solnit never pretends to be anything other than preacher, or that most of her audience is anyone other than the choir. The challenges and invitations she issues in her writing are meant for people already inclined toward activism and progressivism. It is as though, after her real world intra-actions with “oppositional” parties/agencies, Solnit feels compelled to critique her own “side” of the debate. Shifting fluidly back to the voice of a commentator and critic, she reminds the reader that the “once awfully white-collar environmental movement” has long engaged in “class politics” and “has been pretty good at alienating people who actually live in the environment and work with the resources in question” (88). While constructively criticising one’s friends is never easy, Solnit appears to promote the idea because, on the other hand, receiving constructive criticism can be easier when it comes from a place of love and solidarity. Solnit goes on to remind her own “side” of their continued and expanded potential for greater change. Where environmentalists had previously “worked with a purist paradigm of untouched versus ravaged nature... Working with ranchers opened up the possibility of a middle way, one in which categories were porous, humans have a place in the landscape... and activism isn’t necessarily oppositional” (87). This new kind of activism, this middle way, is an example of what “Arizona environmentalist-rancher Bill McDonald [called] ‘the radical center,’” and it turns out to be the crux of the essay (88).

Calling *The Radical Center* “a hopeful practice... a peacemaking practice,” Solnit admits that “[i]t isn’t the right answer to everything, but it’s a significant new model” (89). She then returns the reader’s attention to history, particularly stories that might have otherwise gone unheard or unacknowledged due to their geographic locations—rural Colorado first, then an indigenous village in the Mexican mountains—or their discounted voices—conservative ranchers and migrant workers. When Solnit relates the story of Steamboat Springs, Colorado—where “[t]he environmentalists and the ranchers were squared off against one another, and while we were fighting, the developers were walking

off with the valley” —it’s a warning (88). Pure opposition is often a myth; it is distracting and leaves both sides vulnerable to some third party who stands to profit from the distraction. When Solnit relates the story of Baldemar Velasquez, founder of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee, and his successful persuasion of conservative Christian families to aid in the fight for the rights of migrant workers, it’s a lesson. Baldemar preached a sermon to an assembly of Christian teenagers in Toledo, Ohio, and used the book of Isaiah to remind them of their responsibility to orphans, widows, and migrants. “It’s not what you serve but how you serve it up,” says Baldemar. “The way you win people over to your side is to try to present the information from some perspective they’re familiar with” (89). He convinced the Christian teens to fast and pray, to raise money, and to educate their own conservative families about the issue. Those families went on to protest against “the supermarkets selling the pickles that were the subject of a farmworker’s battle,” which ultimately forced those markets “to stop carrying that brand, thereby forcing the pickle growers to keep the crop in Ohio and to treat farmworkers as employees rather than sharecroppers” (90). Solnit’s agency as a writer, her personal values and political agenda, connect these stories in a way that is meant to resonate with the reader. By resonate, I mean resound and reverberate. It’s a musical word, but also a technical term pertaining to frequency. A resonance can be picked up and passed along.

The point where “Across the Great Divide” begins—June Jordan’s plea that we “give up the dividing by which we conquer ourselves, the sectarianism, the presumption that difference is necessarily opposition” —is, in spirit, also where Solnit chooses to end. She finds Baldemar Velasquez remarkable for his ability to make connections “not just between issues but between sides” (90.) As Adorno says, there is no first principle, nor any final principle in the essay; “concepts do not build a continuum of operations, thought does not advance in a single direction, rather the aspects of the argument interweave as a carpet” (101). Solnit’s understanding of the environmental movement, in the sense of general history and concept, but also in focused cases of personal anecdote, gave rise to the essay and remain layered throughout the narrative, giving it a situated and invested texture. The reader experiences the endpoint’s similarity to the opening in a way that feels almost cyclical, and yet, we’re not back where we began. An intra-action has occurred between the reader and the page, and so we arrive at the end changed. This does not mean that we are necessarily convinced or persuaded, only that we have more information, more personal experience with a greater number of voices and an increasingly diverse set of

perspectives. I would also argue that by beginning with a complex concept, the essayist invites the reader to partake in an egalitarian rhetorical transaction, like the one cited by Willard-Traub in the scholarly memoir. The ecofeminist principle of valuing everyone and everything equally extends to this idea, as well, starting off on a note of mutual respect, assuming a level of sophistication from the reader.

When Descartes published his *Discourse on Method* in 1637, he believed he had discovered a metaphysical system through which humans could access as much truth as possible. Trained in a Jesuit school, Descartes tired of the theological curriculum and the way it was taught, preferring instead mathematics and physics, whose methods “he found to be less biased and more capable of delineating truth and reason” (“René Decartes” Appleby). He became so convinced of the supremacy of these mathematical methods that he formulated the idea of a tree of knowledge: “the roots of this tree were metaphysics, its trunk was physics, and its branches were the other sciences, including medicine and ethics” (Appleby). Then he attempted to apply his geometric method to philosophy in order “to prove the rationalism of human cognition” (Appleby). Descartes is considered the father of modern philosophy. While his concept of “methodic doubt” seems similar to the prerequisite skepticism of ecofeminism as previously discussed, much of the rest of his method stands in opposition to both ecofeminist philosophy and the essay as form. The third Cartesian rule, for example, reads like a vow:

“To conduct my thoughts in such order that, by commencing with objects the simplest and easiest to know, I might ascend by little and little, and, as it were, step by step, to the knowledge of the more complex; assigning in thought a certain order even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence.” (qtd. in Adorno 103)

This “is sharply contravened by the form of the essay in that it begins with the most complex, not the most simple,” says Adorno (103). Interestingly, Adorno connects the arrogant admonition “to understand the simple before risking... complexity,” with the traditional, totalizing, teacher-student relationship. Students, naïveté and all, deserve more credit than that in Adorno’s mind. Complexity is what “entices” them to learn in the first place, and “[s]uch a postponement of knowledge only prevents knowledge” (103). What the essay allows is a revolution in the pursuit of knowledge and truth, where, “[i]n

opposition to the cliché of the ‘understandable,’ the notion of truth as a network of causes and effects, the essay insists that a matter be considered, from the very first, in its whole complexity” (103). By revolution, I mean rebellion and transformation, but also rotation. It is an insurgent word, but also pertains to forward motion, cycling forward, one pedal at a time.

2.6 Solnit’s “Open Door”

Solnit’s collection *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005) includes essays about some of history’s most famous explorers and expeditions. It is also, and perhaps more importantly, a series of stories about her personal encounters with literal and figurative terra incognita. As the title implies, Solnit’s philosophy about exploration differs a bit from the classical understanding. Even, or perhaps especially, in a modern world that has been thoroughly mapped¹⁵, there is danger in allowing such “understanding” of the world to be taken for granted. Solnit’s *Field Guide* starts with an essay titled “Open Door,” which begins with a childhood memory of her family spending an evening drinking wine and waiting for Elijah. In keeping with religious tradition¹⁶, Jewish families observe Passover by leaving an empty chair at the table and a door open to the outside. The ritualised presence of “the door open for the unknown” imprinted an important value on young Solnit (4). She grew up understanding that “the door into the dark” was “where the most important things come from” (4). Solnit connects this principle to a quote from pre-Socratic philosopher Meno: “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (4) It was the early appearance of this question in this book that prompted my thesis. It was not one I’d thought of before; encountering the question required my intra-action with Solnit’s essay. And I wanted an answer.

¹⁵ Google Earth stats, 2012

¹⁶ Religious traditions are also maps of a sort, a signifying system for communications both within and regarding the religion and its practitioners, but also a navigational guide for religious activities. In the way Solnit goes on to describe her childhood comprehension of these rituals, however, there is an implied sense of the writer-narrator’s innate tendency toward redefinition. There was what the ritual was meant to teach, but also what the child—going through the motions of the ritual at the behest of her parents—personally took away from the experience in terms of meaning. I don’t think these microacts of self-definition and redefinition are unique to women or writers, but I do think feminist (ecofeminist) writers are uniquely positioned to remember and record them, given their open, equal consideration of the world and everything—human and nonhuman—in it.

“Open Door” sets the stage for the rest of the collection. Life, Solnit contends, is a constant personal expedition. We go out into the world every day and live, we confront what we don’t understand and find a way to understand it, or we learn to live without that understanding. She references J. Robert Oppenheimer’s directive to “live always at the ‘edge of mystery’—the boundary of the unknown” alongside Edgar Allen Poe’s observation that “[a]ll experience, in matters of philosophical discovery, teaches us that, in such discovery, it is the unforeseen upon which we must calculate most largely” (5). These juxtapositions create tension to pull the reader along. She sets side-by-side the similar wisdom of a nuclear physicist and a poet; the concept of calculation, with its allegedly firm foundation of objective, fundamental laws beside the idea that the calculation hinges on our dependence upon the unknown. Spurred on by this apparent paradox, but she continues forward in the text—and backward in time—to “a celebrated midwinter’s night in 1817” when John Keats “walked home talking with some friends” and conceived of “a quality [that] went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature... Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (qtd. in Solnit 6). “One way or another,” says Solnit, “this notion occurs over and over again, like the spots labelled ‘terra incognita’ on old maps” (6). Not only is the metaphor a familiar one to this thesis, but here we can see the way the writer-narrator has identified a pattern of phenomena in her own life’s intra-actions—with people, literature, others, the non-human world—and determines to intra-act with the page in a way that communicates the pattern, so that it may resonate in the minds and lives of her readers, too. This is the heartbeat under the floorboards of her *Field Guide*: that the “thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost” (6).

As we’ve learned to expect in an ecofeminist essay, Solnit next scrutinizes the language itself and finds an opportunity for some redefinition. She shares the origin of the word “lost,” derived from “the Old Norse *los*, meaning the disbanding of an army” (7). Then she brings the concept out of the abstract and into her own life experience, explaining that “childhood roaming was what developed [her own] self-reliance, a sense of direction and adventure, imagination, a will to explore, to be able to get a little lost and then figure out the way back” (7). The act of considering a word or concept from both an historical and a personal perspective achieves multiple things: it garners trust in the authority of the writer-narrator and it invites the reader to think of her own personal

experience with and understanding of, in this case, getting lost. The strategy also arms the reader with a deeper understanding of the writer-narrator's values, which informs all future connections between the subject matter of the essay.

Solnit moves the narrative forward with a more recent and specific personal memory on a hike in the Rocky Mountains, where the mountains are “like crumpled fabric, a steep landscape of ridges and valleys running in all directions, easy to get lost in and hard to walk out of” (8). She meets a woman named Sallie who “had long been a member of the Mountain Search and Rescue team;” Sallie is on “a routine mission” to find “one of those hikers... [who] usually reappear somewhere near where they had vanished” (8). This encounter with Sallie—walkie-talkie in hand at the trailhead—opens the narrative to a series of reminiscences that Solnit otherwise would not have had access to. The essayist's voice expands to accommodate Sallie's experiences with Search and Rescue (SAR). There are stories of hunters wandering too far off-trail after their prey; of doctors surprised by snowstorms and found in white-out conditions; of skiers making poor choices off-piste and winding up in the freezing spray of waterfalls. Solnit and Sallie take another hike along the Continental Divide on a ridgeline trail that “[seemed] like the center seam of a world hemmed all around the horizon in rows of jagged blue mountains” (8). When a lightning bolt cracks through an approaching mass of clouds, the pair retreats down the mountain to safety while Sallie recounts the rescue of “a lost eleven-year-old, a deaf boy who was also losing his eyesight as part of a degenerative disease that would eventually cut short his life” (9). After the boy hid too well during a summer camp game of hide-and-seek, rescuers hunted all night long. At dawn, “just as the sun came over the horizon, [Sallie] heard a whistle and ran toward it.” (9). The boy “was radiant at being found, and she was in tears at finding him” (10). Getting lost in these remote parts of the world can be a matter of life and death, but SAR teams “have made an art of finding and a science of how people get lost” (10). Solnit contrasts this idea with the way there is also:

“an art of attending to the weather, to the route you take, to the landmarks along the way, to how if you turn around you can see how different the journey back looks from the way out, to reading the sun and moon and stars to orient yourself, to the direction of running water, to the thousand things that make the wild a text that can be read by the literate.” (10)

Not only is “Open Door” ripe with references to Solnit’s ecofeminist respect for the natural world, but this passage notes an important rejection of the Science/Art binary. Solnit’s list of outdoor survivalist arts is also a list of sciences, meteorology, topography, geographical surveying, and astronomy among them. Art and Science are both required to survive becoming lost, to find one’s way back to familiar territory again.

Solnit is literate in this sense, but also admits that her “skills are not notable” (12). In her personal experience, there have only been minor moments of “touching the edge of the unknown that sharpen the senses,” but she also describes how—on hiking trails and city streets—she enjoys going “beyond what I know, and finding my way back a few extra miles, by another trail, with a compass that argues with a map, with strangers’ contrary anecdotal directions” (12). It becomes apparent that Solnit is also literate in the sense of Negative Capability. When she turns a strange corner and finds an unfamiliar vista, she greets the view by saying to herself, “I have never seen this place before” (13). She compares that sensation of welcoming unexpected newness with “stories that make the familiar strange again... [c]onversations that make everything around them disappear. Dreams that I forget until I realize they have colored everything I felt and did that day” (13). “Getting lost” in these cases “seems like the beginning of finding your way or finding another way” (13).

Suddenly, Solnit transitions the narrative back in time, noting that “[n]ineteenth-century Americans seldom seem to have gotten lost as disastrously as the strays and corpses picked up by search-and-rescue teams” (13). It’s a quick jump, emblematic of what Saloman describes as “[t]he essay’s protean nature, its seemingly effortless ability to reinvent itself” (15). Saloman is not commenting on the form of a single essay (though I believe it applies just as well in that sense), but on essayism as a genre. In *Virginia Woolf’s Essays: Sketching the Past (2000)* Elena Gaultieri differentiates between the “two traditions of the essay, one English and one Continental” where “the former is the preserve of men of leisure, speculating idly on the world from their armchairs [and] the latter, as articulated by T.W. Adorno and George Lukács, is more subversive and ambitious in its claims” (Saloman 17). Essayism is mutable, adaptive, able to accommodate personal stories and political agendas, able to expand and flex to amplify an infinite variety of voices. Adorno admires that “[t]he essay does not permit its domain to be prescribed. Instead of achieving something scientifically, or creating something artistically, the effort of the essay reflects a childlike freedom that catches fire, without scruple, on what others

have already done” (93). This observation on the genre’s variability can also work when applied to the nature of an individual essay. Solnit’s “Open Door” exemplifies this idea, in that the “fire” of the narrative jumps from Oppenheimer to Poe to Keats, then from Sallie’s SAR stories to the ingenuity of nineteenth century Americans. These movements between subject matter might seem abrupt, the connections tenuous, but they also seem organic, as though this meandering motion is also the way one lives a life. Not being—which implies a kind of passive, pulsing stasis—but becoming.

This is what Barad proposes: that “reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but ‘things’-in-phenomena. The world is intra-activity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency” (817). It’s not a perfect metaphor, since the fundamental laws of physics allow us to predict the movement of the tides, but it will do. Reality *isn’t* until phenomena *happen*. And phenomena only happen based on agential intra-actions: Solnit’s encounters with Oppenheimer, Poe, and Keats, which, through the writing and reading of the essay, become the reader’s encounters with Oppenheimer, Poe, and Keats. And then, too, there is the phenomenalization of meaning and/or change, contingent upon those same agential encounters. Adorno makes this similar distinction: that “[t]he essay mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as *creatio ex nihilo*” (93). Nothing comes from nothing. Whether ideal “things” and fundamental laws exist separately and independently in the universe prior to or outside of interactions/intra-actions is, again, immaterial. Intra-actions, motivated by the essayist’s values, inspire the essayist’s work, resulting in her intra-actions with the page, which, in the phenomenon of the essay, inspires the reader’s intra-actions, and so on. And so on. Saloman evokes the ebb and flow of agency, too, when she compares the protean nature of the essay to the protean nature of reality, which “requires an equally protean sensibility to accommodate it”; that is, the sensibility of the essayist and, I would argue, the sensibility of the empowered reader.

In the case of the previously mentioned transition in the middle of “Open Door,” the reader—armed with an ever-deepening understanding of the writer-narrator’s values—understands that Solnit’s revelation about the way “getting lost [can seem] like the beginning of finding your way or finding another way,” is an act of redefinition (13). She is recasting the action of getting lost as exploration and discovery. This connects to her failed attempts to find stories of these pioneering people getting lost. Instead, she learned

“that being off course for a day or a week wasn’t a disaster for those who didn’t keep a tight schedule, knew how to live off the land, how to track, how to navigate by heavenly bodies, waterways, and word-of-mouth in those places before they were mapped” (13). Solnit quotes historian Aaron Sachs, who expounds on the idea, saying explorers “were always lost, because they’d never been to these places before” (14). The red thread remains taut.

The ebb and flow of “Open Door” continues through intra-actions with Solnit’s friends, who showed up at times “when everything was going wrong... bearing stories, one after another, and they seemed to provide, if not answers, at least milestones and signposts,” a few of which Solnit calls out specifically, adding new voices to the polyphony (15). One signpost comes from Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, another from the Wintu tribe of north-central California, whose dying language “doesn’t use Left or Right to describe” the speaker’s body, preferring instead cardinal directions. A Wintu’s east arm as he leaves home in the morning is his west arm when he returns home at night. Solnit envies this intimate sense of place and direction, as well as the way it displaces a sense of self. “In Wintu,” she says, “it’s the world that’s stable, yourself that’s contingent” (17). A Wintu can never be lost as long as he is somewhere. Solnit returns to Woolf, who “knew despair and the desire for what Buddhists call unbeing, the desire that finally led her to walk into a river with pockets full of rocks,” which is “not about being lost but about trying to lose yourself” (19). All these signposts came to Solnit over an unspecified number of years; she calls it “this long spell when stories rained down” (20). The writer-narrator needed that time to identify patterns in the phenomena that resulted from these intra-actions; establishing that pattern on the page is how the essay came to become.

Every scene, every insight, every observation in the essay points to Meno’s question: “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” And yet, the reader and Solnit reach the end without an answer. When she “[sets] out to look for Meno”—literally hunting through libraries for the quote she remembered from somewhere in her youth—she finds that Meno is the title of one of Plato’s dialogues. In it, “Socrates faces off with the sophist Meno, and as always in Plato’s rigged boxing contests, demolishes his opponent,” saying:

“I know, Meno, what you mean... You argue that man cannot enquire either about that which he knows, or about that which he does not know; for if he knows, he has no need to enquire; and if not, he cannot; for he does not know the very subject about which he is to enquire” (24).

Solnit’s disappointment was, at least at first, profound. She likens this moment, discovering the true origin of the quote that had stuck with her for years, the *terminus ad quem* of this very essay, to “[catching] sight of what at a little distance looks like a jewel or flower and turns out a few steps later to be trash. Yet before it is fully revealed, it looks beautiful” (23). I like this hypothetical, because it has happened to everyone. A common mistake. With it, Solnit reinforces the common universality of the human experience and emphasises a powerful message about the beauty of potential. But she also goes further than that.

“Open Door” is part of the metaphor, too. The reader saw Meno’s quote early on in the piece as a jewel in its disconnected context and moved toward it expecting a powerful resolution by the time she turned the final page; when the writer-narrator discovers the original context of the quote, she offers it exactly in the text of the essay, so that the graceless bulk of it becomes fully apparent. Solnit’s second intra-action with Meno becomes the reader’s second intra-action with Meno, and they are similarly disenchanting. Yet, Solnit beckons to the reader, urges her to pause and bend at the waist, examine the moment and the quote more closely. The reader’s intra-action with Meno, after all, is not identical to Solnit’s. It can’t be. The reader has the benefit of everything the essayist has offered before, all those insights and scenes laced together with red thread, beginning with Solnit’s childhood remembrance of Passover. “The important thing,” says Solnit, “is not that Elijah might show up someday. The important thing is that the doors are left open to the dark every year. Jewish tradition holds that some questions are more significant than their answers, and such is the case with this one” (24). An ecofeminist thought¹⁷. And she

¹⁷ Mallory explains that ecofeminist philosophy “imagines, and tries to bring into being new ways of relating with nature, and other living beings, and the planet.” To imagine these things the nature of which has been entirely unknown to society, ecofeminists ask important, complex questions (e.g. “How are concepts such as ‘nature’ and ‘the natural’ deployed to justify relations of exclusion and inequality, relations that particularly affect women, people of color, non-heteronormative persons, the differently abled, and other-human-Others?”). But “how these are answered will depend on the context in which they are applied—what is more important than the answers is that these kinds of questions get asked” (321). From an agential realist perspective, the asking of questions is as valuable an intra-action as the answering of them.

goes on to show how, “in most of the dialogue, Socrates rebuts and attacks Meno with logic and argument and even mathematics. But for this question he shifts into mysticism—that is, into unsubstantiable and poetic assertion” (24). Persephone appears, followed by an ancient Greek explanation of reincarnation, before Socrates—who, the reader realizes, would not have felt comfortable with a state of Negative Capability—explains that “the soul, having been born many times, and having seen all things that exist... has knowledge of them all... [therefore,] all enquiry and all learning is but recollection” (24). Or, as Solnit clarifies:

“[Y]ou can know the unknown because you remember it. You already know what seems unknown; you have been here before, but only when you were someone else. This only shifts the location of the unknown from unknown other to unknown self. Meno says, Mystery. Socrates says, On the contrary, Mystery. That much is certain. It can be a kind of compass.” (25)

Bending closer, the reader finds the jewel in the grass beside the path. It was under the bit of trash that first caught her attention. Or perhaps it wasn't there at all before her intra-action with the essay.

3 The Political

"If you deny any affinity with another person or kind of person, if you declare it to be wholly different from yourself – as men have done to women, and class has done to class, and nation has done to nation – you may hate it or deify it; but in either case you have denied its spiritual equality and its human reality. You have made it into a thing, to which the only possible relationship is a power relationship. And thus you have fatally impoverished your own reality. You have, in fact, alienated yourself. "

– Ursula K Le Guin, "American SF and the Other" (1975)

In January of 2017, Kamala Harris, the newly minted junior senator from the state of California, stood up to object to the nomination of Senator Jeff Sessions for the position of Attorney General in the new Trump administration. Senator Elizabeth Warren had already been officially silenced and rebuked for attempting to read a letter penned by Coretta Scott King into the record. Martin Luther King Jr.'s widow had written the letter to Senator Strom Thurmond in 1986 in an effort to quash the nomination of Jeff Sessions to a position on the federal bench. She accused Sessions, then Attorney General of Alabama, of having "used the awesome powers of his office in a shabby attempt to intimidate and frighten elderly black voters." It worked. Thirty years later, the Republican majority in the Senate objected to the same letter, claiming it was unjustly critical of Sessions. After Warren's removal, Senator Mitch McConnell explained: "Senator Warren was giving a lengthy speech. She had appeared to violate the rule. She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted." This last statement became a new feminist rallying cry, and almost certainly bolstered Senator Harris's decision to speak out. She questioned Session's ability to perform the duties of the federal Attorney General in a way that would be just to all Americans. Harris, the daughter of immigrants from India and Jamaica, was fresh off a six-year run as California's Attorney General. Her address to the Senate body that January morning was an impassioned plea laced with prosecutorial expertise. She noted that she was "a direct beneficiary of landmark rulings" by the Supreme Court (i.e., *Brown vs. Board of Education*); without those decisions regarding inherent civil rights, Harris remarked it was doubtful she would be a member of the Senate.

As a career prosecutor, she reminded her colleagues that every time she filed a case, it did not read “the name of the victim versus the name of the defendant,” but rather “The People versus the Defendant”:

“Because in our democracy, in our great judicial system, we have rightly said a harm against any one of us is a harm against all of us. Especially because we know that harm is most often directed at the some of the most vulnerable and voiceless among us. We rightly have declared that, as a civil society, we will not require them to fight alone. We will stand with them. Justice for all.”

This feminist drive for justice informs the work of Solnit, Williams, and their contemporaries, who use essays to take on some of the heftiest, farthest reaching issues of our time (e.g., climate change, public education crisis, domestic violence). Ecofeminists take this idea further, expanding the definition of “all” to include the non-human world. But an expanded philosophy means little to the state or trajectory of the world without action. In this chapter, I will show how ecofeminist essayists engage in subtle, surprising acts of revolution in their work—redefinition and invitation—in order to make change.

3.1 Redefinition in Feminism’s First & Second Wave

Some might view autobiographical or memoir writing as self-indulgent or soft, treading water while looking backward rather than forward, but I think that’s a narrow view. The context of any published text continues beyond the timeline of the content or the timeline of the author’s life; it extends beyond the date of publication and into the life of each reader. This is particularly true of the personal essay, where the writer-narrator begins from a terminus ad quem and moves outward, engaging the reader in a series of observations/scenes based on the writer-narrator’s own intra-actions with the world and the page. The essay’s tone and structure imply its position as one part of a dialogue—humble and seeking, inclusive and open-ended, one part of an interdependent relationship with the reader. As we’ll see again later, a single action is less valuable than a single intra-action, and that single intra-action continues beyond a one-for-one exchange: question and

response, punch for punch. The important thing is often what happens next. *Keep watching*, says ecofeminism. *There's something more to come*. In this case, the memoir is personal, even when steeped in a political timeline; the voice and posture and experience are individual, as well as open-ended, when written this way, and extended as an invitation. What the reader does with the story is also important. That's where the power comes in.

Definition plays a key role in feminism precisely because of its rejection of the incomplete and inaccurate axiological inheritances that come along with phallogentric definitions of, for example, womanhood, femaleness, femininity, and even individualism. In her paper "Formations of Feminism: Political memoirs of the Left (II)," Lynne Segal examines "political memoirs of [feminist] militants immediately preceding the second-wave feminism" of the 1970s, including books by Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir, and Sheila Rowbotham. Previously, Segal had written a paper called "Lost Worlds: Political Memoirs of the Left in Britain" that focused on male activists from the same era. In her work on women's political memoirs, she notes that "even today, intimacy is still imagined as a feminine preserve" and claims the "popularity of memoir writing is itself a sign of women's cultural influence" (8). Segal finds that "where and when women do record lives of dissent and struggle, whether focusing upon their own feelings or not, private lives often edge outwards, throwing fresh light upon the ways in which we are defined by and help to define the worlds we move through" (8). For feminists, definitions (especially or beginning with self-definition) are fluid and affected by personal context. The "evocative force" of Lessing's work, specifically, "whether in fiction or autobiography—has always been her incisive personal voice," wielded expertly, says Segal, using "her own experience to recount dilemmas which appeared emblematic of the life of a woman to a multitude of later readers, who would use them politically" (12).

For example, "Lessing captures exquisitely the overwhelming pain that can devastate an older woman gazing at a younger woman, all the more so when she—like Lessing—has been seen as beautiful" (14). In Lessing's writing, we find grief, unadulterated and unadorned on the page. She recalls "the narcissistic joy she once found in her own strong, young body" (14). Again, Segal compares the selection of subject matter to what she has found in her study of men's political memoirs, and points to this distinct divide: men writing of their political experiences seem to forego reminiscences of their physical selves, or of ageing in the physical sense. Whether this is due to a gendered

hierarchy of relevance can't be proven, of course, but Segal makes that correlation. "Is there any pride fiercer than a young woman's?" asks Lessing, "I used to stand among people, knowing my body was strong and fine, under my dress, and secretly exult" (14). She would go on to allege that "it is 'female ruthlessness', the 'unregenerate' nature of young women, that causes the heart-breaking unfairness older women suffer" (14). When someone like Lessing writes about bodies and sexuality, the political nature of both becomes implicit; when a woman tells her personal story in a political context, whether or not that was the author's intent, her body then becomes an emblem for other women's bodies, just as her story becomes an emblem for other women's stories. Segal describes Lessing's entanglement of the personal and the political as "gripping in its struggle, however equivocally, to depict a whole social reality, which encompasses the ambiguous place of the political in her unfolding story" (13). I contend she is using the word whole in the sense of Adorno's conception—a contingent conglomeration—as opposed to Descartes's—separable, individual and independent. In finding a way to exemplify the feminist contention of the inseparable personal-political, Lessing gave her readers a new set of tools to work with.

Ironically, while Lessing's subject matter revolved around the "issues feminists would politicise and seek to transform just two decades later," when asked directly about the women's movement, she chose to "vehemently denounce rather than embrace feminism when it came along" (Segal 14). For Segal, this is "puzzling... barely credible even," as Lessing's voice had been ahead of its time, "sharp and discerning about women's lives and feelings" (14). But from an ecofeminist perspective, authorial intent matters only as much as her reader's prerogative. This was apparent even to Lessing, who believed "the political intentions of authors are hardly all there is to a book," going so far as to observe that a written work "is usually richest and most productive 'when its plan, shape and intention are not understood, because that moment of seeing the shape and plan and intention is also the moment when there isn't any more to be got out of it'" (qtd. in Segal 16). In a meta sense, this appreciation for the unknown potential of an idea—of a book, in this case, or of an essay—is deeply ecofeminist. If a book or essay could be "understood," it would lose its maximum power. Finite, it could be held up to the light. Subject would become object. In a way, Lessing's prediction that her writing would be picked up and run with beyond what she had intended, was also a contribution to the feminist canon. She conceded the infiniteness of words and their definitions alongside the

finitude of her individual political ambitions. She was right. Readers decided how to use her work in the fights that came thereafter; readers carried the banners that read *The Personal is Political*, which, as Segal articulates, means the personal is also “a sight of struggle and change” (14).

Before moving on to the second wave of Feminism, I want to touch on the fact that Segal’s paper clearly falls into the grey area examined by Willard-Traub in the first chapter of this thesis. Perhaps we should even call it a scholarly personal essay. In Segal’s study, while she writes of four feminist icons as a scholar, she also writes of them as a feminist, making the end and the means connected for her. Beyond that, as a young woman, Segal had a brief personal contact with Lessing which makes her wonder whether she (Segal) was the catalyst for a character in one of Lessing’s books¹⁸. And finally, of Rowbotham, Segal includes a parenthetical to this effect: “She became my closest, most lasting English friend” (20). Where information on the other three memoirists is almost exclusively based on cited research, Rowbotham’s section in Segal’s paper blurs into personal reminiscences throughout.

While the 1960s may have been a battleground of progress and transformation, the remembering of that decade has also “become a battleground... [arousing] fondness or loathing, but most often dismissal as the last moment of irresponsible, self-absorbed dreamers” (21). In the final section of her paper, Segal explains that Rowbotham “[rejected] such dismissal” and, through the medium of memoir, attempted to explain what the 1960s had been for her, but also what it had been for the feminist movement, knowing “it provided a backdrop for her own and others’ lasting radicalisation” (21). She approached her own story as a trained historian, pursuing a comprehensive understanding of the time that solidified her status as a second-wave feminist icon. In this effort, she viewed “retrieval” of artefacts, both of her own past and the surrounding context as an “act of rebellion.” Understandably, she found this process difficult. What she desired was

¹⁸ *The Sweetest Dream* was Lessing’s “autobiographical novel,” that she wrote rather than publishing a third memoir. The character in question encounters Lessing at a time and in a set of circumstances that are similar to those Segal remembers of her meeting with the great author. However, during the course of her research, Segal also learned that many other young feminist readers of the work had had similar experiences and wondered the same thing, proving to Segal that the character in question was “[a] composite picture, no doubt.” Composite characters are one of the genre’s unique vulnerabilities. If the character named and/or described in a work that is, ostensibly, true, turns out not to exist in one body and under one name, does that degrade the truthful foundation of the work as a whole? I argue that it does not, as the composite represents a number of truthful qualities that are relevant to the work; but the reader must accept this premise and trust the author to have accurately distinguished between what was relevant and irrelevant in the development of the composite character.

concrete, but she was writing as the emblem or icon of a movement. An icon is a symbol, something representative and held up as significant, something that indicates the form of a greater whole. Her situatedness made it impossible to distance herself and convey an objective truth about the time or circumstances. The 1960s had been a time of “radical ideas and fashions” that were ultimately domesticated and “repackaged—commodified, sanitised” for public consumption (21), and she wanted to remind her readers about the “genuinely egalitarian movements” that gave rise to the heady, emotional time and its productive activism. She hoped her book could reawaken that energy in a new generation of feminists. As she hunted for a logic to her “fraught embrace of the seditious 1960s,” Rowbotham remained “well aware of the traps and distortions of memory... as she [sifted] through relics for ‘evidence’ to narrate ‘the tangle of coincidences which contribute to the particular fatality of living a life’ (xvii)” (21).

Evidence fell short of the ultimate cause of Rowbotham’s project, not because evidence is unnecessary, but because evidence turned out not to be what the project required. Evidence being, here, synonymous with concrete representations of an ideal truth, absolutes which, at least allegedly, provide the skeleton of Western (masculinist) culture. The word “evidence” comes from the Latin *evidentia*, or evident, meaning what is “obvious to the eye or mind.” As we’ve seen, feminists regard this conceit as flimsy, at best. If something is obvious, it can only be seen or considered one way. It can be classed, named, claimed, used. What Rowbotham’s memoir managed instead was to put the 1960s into relief, embodying on the page what is possibly most kinetic about feminism:

“The fundamental threat, or exhilarating promise, which feminism offers those it ignites is that of transgressing the barriers between public and private. Rowbotham’s memoir embraces that challenge in ways not quite seen before: not to lose herself in politics (like Kapp), to disown it (like Lessing), or to provide her own life as exemplar (like Beauvoir), but rather to resurrect her young selfhood in order to grasp the emergence of a whole social movement of women.” (21)

In Segal’s language, we see the kaleidoscopic nature of feminist philosophy, the undaunted hope in the plurality of people, of concepts, of language itself. Simultaneously, feminism is both threat and promise. Likewise, Segal employs the multitasking verb ignite

to convey the promising spark that inspires feminist progress and the hot, angry coal of defensiveness that fuels anti-feminist dissent. The frustrated potential of language, harnessed and domesticated by a phallogentric culture, is at the core of ecofeminism. As Rowbotham wrote: “As soon as we learn words, we find ourselves outside them... There is a long inchoate period during which the struggle between the language of experience and the language of theory becomes a kind of agony” (25). Feminists in the 1960s were fired up by their personal experiences, but they had to formulate their arguments within a hierarchical system that had been built without their input and sometimes literally worked against them. In response, feminists developed their own vernacular, but they also re-evaluated the existing language and put words to work in new ways.

Adjusting her glasses, Audre Lorde surveyed the crowd. She had been invited to take part in an international humanities conference at NYU entitled “*The Second Sex—Thirty Years Later*,” inspired by the anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir’s landmark feminist text. “[*The Second Sex*] is not an easy read,” writes feminist scholar Lynne Segal:

“but one maxim crystallised out of the ink that was spilt to fill the hundreds of pages Beauvoir penned on the situation of women, drawing upon a medley of historical, philosophical, psychological, anthropological, biological, biographical and economic research: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.’” (16)

By 1979, Lorde had established herself as a poet and theorist, and her presence at the conference, attended by more than 800 women from all over the world, was a draw. “Like most of the conference participants, Lorde was a woman, a feminist, a socialist, a public intellectual and an activist scholar,” but when Lorde took the stage at NYU, much the way Woolf had done at Cambridge some fifty years earlier, she had no intention of giving the conference organizers or attendees what they thought they’d come for (Olsen 260). Lorde decided to use her presence to confound expectations and further her radical feminist agenda. “I agreed to take part in [this] conference a year ago,” she began, “with the understanding that I would be commenting upon papers dealing with the role of difference within the lives of American women: difference of race, sexuality, class, and age” (110). She was a forty-five-year-old Black, lesbian, divorced mother of two, and she was ready

to speak the truth about that situation to a group of people who didn't see the truth coming. Lorde claimed racism, classism, ageism, and the overall devaluing of difference remained alive and hearty within feminism's second wave. As evidence, she pointed to the conference itself¹⁹.

Lorde had been invited to “comment within the only panel at [the] conference where the input of Black feminists and lesbians [was] represented,” a move that might have made attendees “assume that lesbian and Black women have nothing to say about existentialism, the erotic, women's culture and silence, developing feminist theory, or heterosexuality and power” (110). She bristled at the obvious tokenism she saw at play, but to which her White, straight colleagues appeared to be oblivious, at best. Then she spoke a few of her most famous words in her role as an activist:

“Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference—those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older—know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.” (112)

The panel was titled “The Personal and the Political,” and Lorde had received her invitation to speak for members of a minority within the feminist movement. By itself, this scenario is problematic based on the ecofeminist preference to speak with rather than for vulnerable or voiceless minorities. Lorde's advocacy for the minorities she specified in her speech was not limited to interactions outside the perceived safe haven of a feminist conference. In fact, she felt even more strongly her duty to “[challenge] the ironies, paradoxes, and oxymora—to use euphemisms for hypocrisy, dishonesty, and collusion with others' oppression” at work within that haven, “resulting from dominating those who are different while denouncing one's own oppression” (Olson 260). Given that the “absence of” direct minority perspectives “weakens any feminist discussion of the

¹⁹ Lorde's speech was later published in essay form, first in an anthology of “Writings by Radical Women of Color” in 1983 and then again in 1984 in a collection of Lorde's work titled “Sister Outsider.”

personal and the political,” Lorde went on to champion difference and interdependency as the crucial pillars of restructuring society for the benefit of all (110). This was the only way to combat the “failure of academic feminists to recognize difference as a crucial strength” which “is a failure to reach beyond the first patriarchal lesson” (Lorde 112).

Difference in Barad’s relational ontology is tricky. Relata do not pre-exist relationships, and reality only phenomenalizes as “happenings” in the intra-action between agencies, but this does not mean that the requisite interdependence of the components of an intra-action make those parts indistinguishable. On the contrary. Barad describes the comprehension of difference between the components in terms of diffraction. Drawing on the ontology of Bohr’s quantum theory, where “things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties,” Barad explains that “the boundaries and properties of the ‘components’ of phenomena become determinate” within specific agential intra-actions. Like everything else in agential realism, difference is “not a static relationality but a doing,” specifically, “the enactment of boundaries” (Barad 803). A “diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of differences appear,” and this is an important clarification for ecofeminists, who believe that, as Lorde suggests, difference offers the unexpected possibility of strength, and the effects of differences are often the impetus of progressive change (Barad 803).

Lorde’s speech in New York rounded out with a dramatic call for redefinition: “In our world, divide and conquer must become define and empower” (112). Feminists would need to work with all “personal visions” to “lay the groundwork for political action” (112). Lorde’s words rocked the boat and sent ripples across the feminist movement—imagine the atoms falling from heaven and ricocheting against one another, combining anew—as the epiphany sank in. Personal vision provides the platform for political action. It was time to redefine success and then achieve it.

3.2 Invitational Rhetoric: Empowering the Dyad

One example of the ecofeminist prerogative to redefine success is the concept of “invitational rhetoric,” a term “coined twenty years ago in Sonja Foss and Cindy Griffin’s 1995 article, ‘Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,’ which aimed to expand and name feminist rhetorical practices that do not have persuasion as an

endpoint or marker of a successful encounter” (Swiencicki 152). Feminist scholar Jill Swiencicki defines invitational rhetoric as “[a] broadening of rhetorical means beyond the patriarchal bias of ‘persuasion, influence, and power’ toward feminist principles of ‘equality, immanent value, and self-determination’” (153). She identifies invitational encounters as “listening-based exchanges that create an environment where transformation and growth can occur, but neither are criteria for success” (153). Foss and Griffin found that “the change process that an invitational encounter may provoke” was more of “an affective-cognitive deepening... than an encounter involving humiliation, guilt, embarrassment, or angry submission from the interlocutors” (Swiencicki 153). The latter is, of course, an intentional indictment of the patriarchal definition of success in the sense of victory, inextricably linked to the winning of a war. It’s conclusive and tidy, at least for the victor, who by all accounts will go on, as they say, to write the history of the battle. Foss and Griffin contrast this kind of thinking with the feminist perspective that treats both parties in the encounter with equal respect and, they posit, may be able to proceed from an invitational interaction with mutual benefit and growth, and without those negative side effects of humiliation or angry submission.

As Swiencicki acknowledges, however, there is one major critique of invitational rhetoric. Listening (and offering to listen) has long been classified as the passive or weak position in a conversation or confrontation. Critics like Daphne Desser see this as an “[i]nherent irony,” because:

“although it was conceived as a feminist expansion from the solely antagonistic mode, the calls for civility, reciprocity, and understanding at the core of invitation are part of a sexist, racist legacy of limiting radical, passionate, change-oriented speech and emotion, along with bold material change.” (153)

Desser sees “invitational rhetoric as a re-inscription of a disempowering, feminized stance... too close to maternal teaching, too linked to the social/cultural expectation that women attend to” (153). This argument seems similar to Lorde’s assertion about the master’s house being impervious to the master’s tools, but Swiencicki notes that Desser’s “analysis rests on the assumption that invitational rhetoric is the opposite of confrontational rhetoric and takes place largely among a dyad that can but may not have larger repercussions” (153). Swiencicki finds the “dyadic assumption” to be problematic,

and contends that the potential of invitational rhetoric is infinite when one takes into account the way it triggers additional actions or encounters by “those who take up the work that remains or the ideas produced by the invitational encounter” (154). Authorial intent doesn’t limit the capacity of a book or essay to abet political change, and a single invitational encounter is not limited to the parties who participate directly. Even if the invited party exercises his prerogative to refuse to engage.

In an invitational encounter, the inviter always risks the refusal of the invitee, and “[r]efusal is, of course, the premier option available in hegemonic struggles, especially for those in power” (Swiencicki 157). This assumes, however, that the one who extends the invitation must invite because she doesn’t have the leverage to compel the presence of another would-be interlocutor. In an ecofeminist world, where ideals of mutual respect reign, invitation fits the bill better than a subpoena. But in our world as it “is”, refusal is a risk. Yet, argues Swiencicki:

“telling the story of a person’s motivation to listen, and the story of being refused, reveals the importance of narrative both for involving the audience in the ethics within and surrounding the exchange and for creating opportunities for those differently positioned in the situation to take up the issue when listening fails.” (152)

Rejecting rhetorical binaries that “[pit] understanding against acting, and listening against change making,” Swiencicki “[examines] what happens when invitation is studied as one strategy in an ecology of actors and processes working on a political problem” (152). To do this, she offers examples of invitational rhetoric in the essays of activist Terry Tempest Williams.

3.3 Williams’s “The Open Space of Democracy”

After the attack on New York’s Twin Towers in September 2001, the United States government identified the terrorists as members of Al-Qaeda, a group based in Afghanistan. The U.S. Military responded by invading Afghanistan the following month, the beginning of what would turn out to be a thirteen-year conflict (with American troops still stationed in the Middle East, even after the official “end” of the Afghan War). In

2003, apparently compelled by reports of so-called “Weapons of Mass Destruction” in the hands of Saddam Hussein, President George W. Bush turned his sights from Afghanistan and ordered the invasion of neighboring Iraq. In the first months of the Iraq War, Williams established herself as one voice in a small and unpopular minority. She saw the knee-jerk reaction of the American President and Congress as short-sighted and ill-fated, and dared to question where the connection lay between the two invasions. In the hyper-patriotic climate of those years, it took some courage to stand apart and ask questions, to try to keep clear eyes while the rest of the country seemed to lose its head. Williams, even in the heat of those frightened, vengeful days in 2003, called out the battle cries as war-mongering.

The day after President Bush strode out on the deck of the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier to declare—prematurely, as it turned out—America’s “Mission Accomplished,” Williams took the stage at the University of Utah to give the commencement address. Like Woolf in Cambridge and Lorde in New York City, Williams surprised her audience. These were her people. It was her home state, her alma mater. A large percentage of the crowd was Mormon. A smaller percentage was made up of her family, friends, neighbors. But Williams felt compelled to avoid commencement speech clichés, opting instead to ask some important questions. Among them: “How do we engage in conversation at a time when the definition of what it means to be a patriot is being narrowly construed?” and “How do we engage in responsive citizenship in times of terror?” She urged the graduates to tend toward openness, because “[w]hen minds close, democracy begins to close. Fear creeps in; silence overtakes speech.” She contrasted an “open democracy [which] inspires wisdom and the dignity of choice” with a “closed society [which] inspires terror and the tyranny of belief.” In the former, citizens have a voice, but she warned that “[w]hen democracy disappears, we are asked to accept the way things are. I beg you: Do not accept the way things are. Question. Stand. Speak. Act.”

Her timing didn’t win her many fans, however, and she found herself publicly shamed and harassed. She would later call the experience horrifying. But Williams persisted. She got into an emotional exchange with Senator Bob Bennett, who also spoke at the University of Utah that day. Senator Bennett (who was also Williams’s neighbor and formerly her Mormon bishop) followed up by writing Williams a letter that began:

“As I listened to you outline things that are important to you, an interesting question popped into my mind: What would she be willing to die for? Waging war always creates

the risk of dying, so any discussion of war raises that issue.

Then I asked myself, What would I be willing to die for?"

Bennett's question required drilling down, finding what he assumed is the base instinct of every human: defence of something he loves more than his own life. In Bennett's mind, every person has a hierarchy of priorities in his life, and he must determine what falls above and below the threshold of that level of defence. This impulse is deductive, and Bennett's list of people and things for which he would die is, he admits, "predictable," as well as logical: "family, certainly, followed by church, protection of community, and yes, finally, the cause of freedom, for others, as well as my own family and friends." Posing the question in his letter, Bennett wanted Williams to examine her own life and deduce the same thing. Though the letter was at odds with her own beliefs, Williams took it in the spirit in which it was intended, sincere and principled. She admits, regretfully, that it took months for her to reply. This, she says, was because she struggled so hard to answer his question. What was she willing to die for? And then she realised that the struggle was bound up in the very premise of the senator's query. His question was not her question. What mattered to Williams was not "what I was willing to die for, but what I was willing to give my life to" ("Commencement").

This intentional, respectful rejection of an existing, potentially axiological premise at the outset of a debate is a hallmark of ecofeminism. Catriona Sandilands builds the case for ecofeminism "as a body of political theory" that "begins with the premise that ecofeminism contains an inherently democratic political vision, even if that vision is not stated as explicitly as it might be" (qtd. in Mallory 305). Chaone Mallory clarifies that Sandilands does not mean:

"democracy construed formalistically and as constituted by rules and procedures, such as regulations for voting or petitioning congress and the like, but democracy as another name for a public sphere where ecological citizens and subjectivities are formed, contested, and continually re-made through performance, play, debate, and embodied collective and public engagement with the other beings, human and otherwise, with whom we share what might be called the 'ecopolisphere.'" (315)

Once Williams decided to engage with the senator—her political opponent, but also her neighbour and friend—and answered his letter, she did not ignore his original question. Instead, she answered both what was important to him and what was important to her, a bid to earn the credibility that only comes by displaying knowledge of the proposed rules of engagement before one breaks them. Williams told Bennett that she had finally determined that the thing she would be willing to die for and be willing to give her life to is the freedom of speech, “the open door to all other freedoms” (“Commencement”). Seeing an opportunity to embrace their differences for the good of the larger community, the ecopolisphere, Williams tried something new.

She invited Bennett to sit down for a public talk. Williams hoped that as “a senator and a writer, but first, as neighbours” they would be able to “find... common ground through shared experiences” (Williams 19). She suggested that this civil exercise “could provide an example of how people can come to listen to one another with real, authentic exchanges” (Williams 20) This explicit invitation to intra-action displays Williams’s “[eagerness] to practice a citizenship premised on rejecting the discourse of terror (with its hallmarks of binary exclusion, domination, and pre-emptive judgment)” (Swiencicki 157). Not divide and conquer, but define and empower. Again, this is the act of ecofeminist redefinition. “[Promoting] what she calls ‘personal diplomacy,’” Williams reimagines confrontation as contact, ““a flesh and blood encounter with public process that is not an abstraction but grounded in real time and space with people we have to face in our own hometowns”” (Swiencicki 157). In ecofeminism, the body is always at play. The senator’s privately written reprimand of Williams came from a distance. By contrast, Williams’s responding invitation was literally an attempt to bring the conflict back into the body. Flesh-and-blood, face-to-face.

Unfortunately, Williams’s invitation was ignored by Senator Bennett. Another remote, disembodied action. But the refusal was, as it turned out, terminus ad quem. She wrote about the commencement address and what unfolded for her, personally, thereafter in a series of three essays for Orion Magazine that would later be republished as part of her book, *The Open Space of Democracy*. The book is a catalog of Williams’s repeated attempts to initiate this kind of personal, flesh-and-blood exchange with individuals who opposed her on issues surrounding the war and the environment. It is also a catalog of all the times she was refused. Swiencicki allows that “[i]nvitational rhetoric as represented in Williams’s book and journal entries looks more like a stalemate, thwarted desire, laying

out of positions with real listening occurring in Williams's prose but not in lived encounters" (159). Stalemate, of course, is a chess term, and chess is, of course, a game of war. While a stalemate isn't always a defeat, it also isn't usually perceived as a victory. Swiencicki contends, however, that an invitation can still be a calculated political manoeuvre.

Williams's invitation doesn't end with Senator Bennett's refusal. Her decision to publish *The Open Space of Democracy* is proof of the continued potential of the invitation. Yes, "[i]solated in a single rhetorical mode, invitational rhetoric in a private encounter, like a letter or a private conversation, can appear to reinforce the inability for such a civil mode to succeed" and leaves room "for the counterhegemonic invitation to be dismissed," but publication of the invitation renders the original isolation of the action moot (160). Swiencicki cites Krista Ratcliffe's *Rhetorical Listening* to show that the invitation itself is an example of:

"the four modes that make up the change process that grounds rhetorical listening: promoting understanding of self and other, proceeding within an accountability logic, locating identifications across commonalities and differences, and analysing claims as well as the logics from which those claims function." (159)

Rhetorical listening echoes a great deal of the ecofeminist philosophy of equal, creative, respectful consideration. Critics like Desser maintain that we should be "cautious about invoking the invitational paradigm" in "situations of power differentials," because "the oppressed are hard pressed to convince oppressors who benefit materially from oppression to be open to dialogue, let alone radical change" (159). But as Swiencicki makes clear, "Williams does not appear hampered by... the apparent naïveté of suspending asymmetry for connection and neglecting how interests and power determine incentive to listen" (160). If our understanding of confrontation conforms to the binary of winning and losing, "the refused invitation looks like weakness, like a lack of power for someone like Williams" (160). But if we "acknowledge the strategic deployment of invitation," we understand that confrontation is not limited to a single intra-action, and that the dyad concerned with the confrontation extends to the audience, reminding us of "the power of the public story, and the ways that story can be taken up and remade" (160). Empowering the public this way, engaging public involvement by sparking public imagination, is a

political act. And it begins with the assumption that politics isn't exclusively the policies and processes that allow society to function, but is, rather, personal.

In the ecofeminist view, “[t]he political has an embodied and performative dimension, in process rather than ends-oriented” and this “open space [is] where notions of democracy, citizenship, power, participation, speech, self, society, the *oikos*, *polis*, and nature are continually produced, interrogated, and transformed” (Mallory 311). Politics is a conversation, inclusive and curious and infinite in potential scope. Point and counterpoint. Dialogue. Invitation and acceptance and response; or invitation and refusal and publication and public response. When it comes to activism, but also the freeing of speech itself, the ecofeminist essay appears especially well-suited to the task.

3.4 Williams’s “Grand Teton National Park: Keep Memory”

“Ecofeminist political philosophy is concerned with questions regarding the possibilities opened by the recognition of agency and subjectivity for the more-than-human world; and it asks how we can respond politically to the more-than-human world on mutual, dialogical terms.”

– Chaone Mallory

Williams grew up in America’s national parks. They were her playground and her classroom, the place where she cut her teeth as an environmentalist and a feminist. Like her previous books, *The Hour of Land* (2016) is a collection of personal-political essays on a common theme: the inherent value of our national parks and the modern threats to their integrity. Also like her previous books, *The Hour of Land* is full of stories about Williams’s family, especially her father, John, who was known as “Teton Tempest” in college, “because every Friday after work he would drive four hours north... At dawn he’d slip on his Ray-Ban aviators, take one green look at the Tetons, and he was gone” (20). The first chapter, “Grand Teton National Park: Keep Promise,” is an essay that begins with a scene from John Tempest’s eightieth birthday. Four generations of Tempests are celebrating their patriarch with a hike through his favourite national park when they encounter a grizzly bear. The group stands its ground with the peace and confidence of people who are at home in the wild, “trying to get a better look at the elusive beast” (19).

After the bear disappears into the forest, the family resumes its walk, “cherishing the wildflowers and wildlife, knowing each species by name” (19). Taxonomy and ecology are not lay sciences. Today, human survival in developed countries rarely requires reliance on one’s personal understanding of the difference between a chanterelle mushroom (edible) and a jack-o’-lantern mushroom (poisonous), or between a King Snake (not venomous) and a Coral Snake (venomous). This kind of knowledge is necessarily concrete and fixed. Williams points to this example of definitive knowledge about plants and animals as one by-product of her family’s abiding love of the natural world. If you love something, you visit it, again and again, and you become familiar with it, study it. Study includes both what has been axiologically passed down by those who first put its qualities into writing, but also a curiosity-motivated personal and present experience. In the Western patriarchal construction of exploration and knowledge, naming has long been an important milestone of mastery, with new titles affixed after discovery, but also after observations that differentiate the new thing from all other previously discovered things. Naming is also one of those traditions ecofeminists want to revolutionize. In “Grand Teton National Park,” naming reappears again and again, through an ecofeminist’s lens, with an essayist’s adherence to open-ended discovery. It is one of many braided threads which Williams follows to the end of the essay.

If you know of Grand Teton National Park (GTNP) at all, you likely see its legendary vista in your mind at the sound of its name—that sudden, jagged ridge of mountain peaks that slices upward from the Wyoming plain without any foothilled warning: Grand Teton, Mount Owen, Teewinot, Middle Teton, South Teton, Mount Moran, and several others. Williams and her brothers “were told as children that teton meant ‘breast’ in French,” but Williams explains that “[t]hese peaks didn’t look like breasts to” her (21). As a girl, she wondered what the French explorers meant by the moniker, since the range “looked jagged in shape not soft and round” (21). An educated understanding of the female body and its own history on the receiving end of masculine conquest remained years away. She notes that “early impressions make their mark, and language has power,” but recounts that she didn’t accept what she’d been told unequivocally (21). Instead, she “invented [her] own story,” not of the mountains’ history, but of their importance and personal symbolism (21):

“The Grand Teton would become my mother mountain. No one had to tell me which peak was the Grand; it was clearly

the one that loomed largest, the one that was massive, the one that looked like it held a skillet of snow... I would worship her with my own gestures as I saw my father worship these mountains with his. Each time we visited the park, I quietly bowed to the Grand Teton.” (21)

Only later would she discover the flaw in her logic. As young Williams stood beside her father at a vista point early one morning in the park, she directed his attention to a flock of sandhill cranes flying in front of the Grand Teton. Only it wasn't Grand Teton. It was (and is) Mount Moran. John Tempest took his daughter by the shoulders and corrected her, physically turning Williams from north to south. In the moment, this was cast as her mistake. There was one true Grand Teton (elev. 13,775 ft), and then there was Mount Moran (elev. 12,605 ft). Certainly, depending on one's geographic position in relation to the range, the latter sometimes appears taller, more immense, more grand, but the fact remained that the real Grand Teton, as christened by the French Voyageurs of the 19th Century, had been officially surveyed and was one thousand feet taller.

From where Williams and her father stood that morning, long after the cranes had passed, this couldn't be disputed. Yet, she “kept looking back at [her] mountain” while her “father kept pointing to his” (21). “I did not want to be turned in the right direction. I did not want to be told where to look for power,” says Williams. “I no longer believed in the names of things. I knew where the power was held for me” (21). Already, though, the reader knows that Williams also understands and respects taxonomy and ecology, which means that this second observation on names and power is really about pulling those two things apart for examination. While her mother mountain turned out not to be the Grand Teton after all, her mother mountain remained premier in her mind, the one that drew her attention and filled her with desire. Williams's story and her father's story were different, both in what they saw when they watched the sun rise pink against the ridgeline and in the weight they gave to the history of the mountains in their own lives. As this atom falls, as Williams recalls her younger self looking from one mountain to the other, the *clinamen* occurs. That Epicurean moment when knowledge veers from its rigid, pre-set path and collides with something else, and new knowledge is born. The writer-narrator responds to the moment fluidly, embarking on the telling of the “[t]wo great stories of philanthropy [that] exist in Grand Teton National Park,” which is also the telling of the transcendent legacy of a father and son (26).

The original footprint of GTNP, established in 1929, only included the line of craggy peaks themselves. Everything else in view, “[t]he entire Snake River Valley, with its sagebrush steppes—home to pronghorn antelope, elk, moose, bison, and bears” was left outside those initial borders, and therefore remained “vulnerable to development” (22). That land was owned by ranchers and farmers, people whose livelihood depended on using that land, and whose ties to the land were bound up with ideas of heritage and dominion. To expand the park, all this land had to be acquired, piece by piece, and it had to be done quietly, to avoid a political backlash. Williams tells the story of Horace Albright, then the Superintendent of Yellowstone National Park, and the future director of the National Parks Service, and his partnership with millionaire John D. Rockefeller, who made it his personal mission to fund the conservation of America’s most beautiful wilderness areas through the consecration of national parks²⁰. The expansion of GTNP began with Albright’s invitation to Rockefeller, heir to the Standard Oil fortune, to visit Jackson Hole, Wyoming in person. Seeing the uncoiled Snake River, “cottonwoods, timbered islands, and a sea of sage, with herds of bison grazing in the foreground... John D. Rockefeller, Jr. knew instantly that Grand Teton National Park had to be more than a mountain range” (23).

He determined to buy the land surreptitiously, “under the guise of the Snake River Land Company... Ranch by ranch... in collusion with the National Park Service” (23). Rockefeller completed these deals anonymously through his “savvy attorneys,” but rumours began to whirl and grow among the “increasingly suspicious” locals. In April 1930, “Rockefeller and Albright came clean” and “the word... spread like wildfire, as it does in small towns” (23). In Washington, “the Wyoming congressional delegation made it clear that... Jackson Hole was a cow town, and they were not happy to find the federal government corralling their lands—especially lands bought up by a fancy easterner” (23). Rockefeller was prepared to donate the land he’d amassed—“more than thirty thousand acres of the most exquisite country in all of America”—but the public outcry painted President Franklin D. Roosevelt into a corner (23). He refused the offer. Unbelievably, “this fight went on for more than a decade,” until Roosevelt used the Antiquities Act “to establish Jackson Hole National Monument, which would include Rockefeller’s lands” in March 1943 (24).

²⁰ John D. Rockefeller, Jr. was a driving force behind the creation and/or preservation of Acadia, Great Smoky Mountains, Yosemite, and Shenandoah. (Williams)

By this time, the U.S.A. was at war in Europe and Japan. In Wyoming, the executive order that formed the new park was interpreted as a government land-grab. Local ranchers, including “a county commissioner named Cliff Hansen,” protested by riding through the “newly established federal lands” driving a herd of “550 yearling cows” (23). Things escalated to include “[i]nflammatory language—calling those in favor of the monument ‘Nazis’” and the introduction of “a bill to abolish the Grand Teton National Monument [that passed in] both the House and the Senate,” forcing FDR to use his veto (25). Seven years later, the monument was officially “absorbed into Grand Teton National Park,” bringing to a close “one of the most epic fights in conservation history” (25). Albright and Rockefeller were vindicated in their original vision; and Cliff Hansen, after serving as Wyoming’s governor and U.S. Senator, acknowledged “that he had been on the wrong side of history” by saying, “I’m glad I lost... Grand Teton National Park is one of the greatest national heritages of Wyoming and the nation, and one of our greatest assets” (25).

In Hansen’s admission, we can see the masculinist language of victory and defeat, that ancient win-lose binary that continues to inflect our social understanding of confrontation. We also see the language of capitalism, with the park falling into the category of asset. The reader must decide whether to believe Hansen meant asset in the intangible sense of value, or in the sense of dollars and cents. It would appear, in the context of Williams’s story—as well as in the way Hansen speaks in Ken Burns’s National Parks documentary²¹—that Hansen meant the former. But Hansen’s record as a conservative legislator in the West proves he remained a staunch adversary to conservationists for the rest of his life. Still, his willingness to admit his mistake regarding GTNP exemplifies how the long-view of history is an important political tool for ecofeminists, and can be expertly wielded in the essay as a form. The political struggle between local ranchers and the federal government was ends-oriented on both sides. The former wanted to repel the government and maintain the status quo; the latter wanted to expand the delineated territory of a national park to protect that land for all time. But history, like geology, has an almost incomprehensible scope. The battle over GTNP proves that, even when the engaged parties think they are fighting one battle for one prize, the concept of a standing win-loss is a myth. Either outcome gives rise to something else

²¹ *The National Parks: America’s Best Idea* (2009)

beyond it. Which is why Williams's essay isn't actually about the origin story of a manmade park.

While the U.S. Government hemmed and hawed over whether to accept the donation of land, the Rockefeller family began using one ranch on the property for family retreats. Established in 1906, The JY Ranch was ultimately absorbed by the park, but the family was able to maintain ownership of the existing dude ranch compound. Visitors over the next fifty years included multiple U.S. Presidents, as well as “diplomats, artists, and literati” (26). Then, in 2001, Laurance Rockefeller shocked his family and the National Park Service by suddenly deeding the JY Ranch land to GTNP. The ranch would be dismantled, and the land—“1,106 acres that surround the Eastern half of Phelps Lake at the base of Death Canyon”—would be restored to its original, pristine state (27). Thirty historic cabins and other structures on the ranch were removed, “lifted from their foundations and repositioned, but only after meticulous documentation by cultural anthropologists” (29). And so the rewilding began.

To *rewild* a place is to return it to its pre-cultivated, pre-domesticated, pre-dominated state. At the age of ninety-one, Laurance Rockefeller oversaw “[e]very tree cut, every stone removed and returned, every curve created for the eight-mile trail network through sagebrush meadows, forests, wetlands, and creek” (29). This was his “deliberate and deeply thoughtful plan to create ‘a different kind of experience’ for the visitor in Grand Teton National Park” (29):

“The legacy of Laurance Rockefeller not only builds upon his father’s legacy, but transcends it in important ways. By acting on behalf of the future and, at the same time, articulating a spiritual imperative that says all life has dignity and deserves protections, and we must now minimise our impact in the name of restoration, Rockefeller the younger shows us not only what is possible but what is necessary.”
(28)

The question of what is necessary to life—more accurately, what is necessary to sustainable life—reverberates beneath the surface of ecofeminist political philosophy. Mallory points to this as the “problem of freedom and necessity” which is “basic to

(masculinist) Western philosophy... [where] freedom has been traditionally conceived of in opposition to necessity” (316). Freedom, especially in the American ethos, is characterised by “independence, transcendence, the rational, the sublime, the mental/spiritual, and the political,” subjugating Necessity, which is coloured by “dependency, immanence, of the bodily, beautiful appearances, corporeal restriction, and most importantly, ‘nature’” (Mallory 316). Citing feminist scholar Bonnie Mann, Mallory notes that “[s]ome postmodernisms posit a conception of all reality as linguistically constructed, thus denying the materiality of such things as bodies and nature” (316). The potential cost of accepting this binary of freedom versus necessity, distancing “reality” from “language” and “lived experience,” is that our society “may become ensnared in the ecologically dangerous fantasy that we are untethered from our live flesh-and-blood bodies and the live trees-and-rivers environments in which they are embedded, thereby rendering us *atopos*, literally, unplaced” (316). Disengaged, power rushes into the vacuum.

The duality of freedom and necessity relates directly to representationalism, which “separates the world into the ontologically disjoint domains of words and things, leaving itself with the dilemma of their linkage” (Barad 812). In Barad’s “agential realist account, it is once again possible to acknowledge nature, the body, and materiality in the fullness of their becoming without resorting to... the geometries of absolute exteriority or interiority” (812). Rather than keeping ontology at an arm’s length from epistemology, Barad fuses the two, and creates a posthumanist *onto-epistemology*²² that holds us—humans, non-humans, all “agencies”—“resolutely accountable for the role ‘we’ play in the intertwined practices of knowing and becoming” (812). This notion coincides well with ecofeminism²³. If we consider the structure of society to be currently unjust, and if we claim we can identify the cause of that injustice, and if we hope to be able to make change, we must first believe in our own responsibility to the project of a civil society, to say nothing of our agency in the becoming of reality.

Williams takes this responsibility as an ecofeminist and uses the essay to bear witness to the interdependencies surrounding GTNP, historically and currently. She talks

²² Barad defines onto-epistemology “the study of practices of knowing in being” (829).

²³ Mallory asserts that all knowledge projects have “a political dimension,” and she agrees with Plumwood that “we must make certain that our knowledge projects, scientific or otherwise, and the ethico-political alignments they support, are on the side of life, nature, community, and justice rather than exploitation, destruction, commodification, and extinction” (Mallory 307).

about meeting Laurance Rockefeller for the first time in 1974, hearing him speak at the Teton Science School in 1975, and mourning his passing in 2004. When the newly rewilded shoreline opened to the public in 2008, Williams invited her father to join her for a hike; “he walked the newly marked trail in awe, never imagining that this path would one day be open to him, too” (36). Williams and her father “walked it together well over a dozen times, and each time... gleaned something new: a patch of columbines, a doe and her fawns, an unexpected headstone among the pines” (36). The reader finds herself again in GTNP, back on the trail beneath the mountain range, side by side with Teton Tempest and his daughter, who doesn’t believe in the definitive naming of things, yet knows where the power lies for her. The reader is richer with the knowledge she’s discovered alongside the writer-narrator, of the park’s history, as well as a cognitive deepening around the concepts of time and wilderness, responsibility and legacy.

Rewilding the shoreline of Phelps Lake was a gesture to democratize access to the Teton wilderness. More people will be able to experience that vista and whatever communion may be found in the shadow of the mountains. The ecofeminist essay provides a similar kind of democratisation of access. Due to the ecofeminist’s allegiance to the retelling of previously overlooked and/or undervalued stories, the reader has the opportunity to confront discrepancies between what is found in the essay and what is found in the historical canon. It is a space protected as much as possible from man-made attempts to harness time by way of written history and phallogcentrically-conceived definitions of freedom and progress. For each reader, the encounter with the essay and its phenomenological meaning will be different. The columbines will wither and the deer will proliferate, and the fawns you see this spring will be differently dappled than the fawns you saw one year ago at the same bend in the path. The headstone will sink and tilt and surrender to pale layers of lichen, will crumble. All will become the dust that may one day be gathered together to build something else. The essayist’s agency allows her to bear intentional witness to the place that inspires the work, and the resulting essay provides the reader with an opportunity to bear a similar witness via an intra-action with the page.

Descartes attempted to domesticate all fields of study by applying his logical method “even to those objects which in their own nature do not stand in a relation of antecedence and sequence.” This is the logic of dominance that ecofeminists resist. By definition, such dominance forces “objects” to go against “their own nature” in order to satisfy a man-made agenda. For ecofeminists, this common, masculinist perception of

knowledge—the mastering and instrumentalizing of an objective truth—hits too close to home. Women, like dark-skinned people from dark continents looming in the terra incognita of ancient maps, like the wild earth itself, have long been perceived as conquest, as territory, as something to be possessed. Quantified and priced. Exchanged. Mastered. Used. In the same way, language has been phallogcentrically conceived as separate from the realities of fundamental, ideal laws of the universe. Language has been used to describe these laws and to aid in the Cartesian amassing of that knowledge, the utilization of that knowledge, and mastery over it. Language may be the master’s tools that built the master’s house, one which the master devalues because of its distance from that disembodied ideal of absolute truth. But language, like women and people of color and the earth itself, need not remain oppressed. As Barad says, “Language has been granted too much power” (801). Feminists need not surrender it to, for example, the abuse of slogans. Bonnie Mann argues for:

“a feminist politics of the-body-in-place which understands our capacity for freedom as integral to the relationship between bodies and places, but realizes that this freedom requires a politics of body and of place—a politics that is founded in an affirmation of our dependence on the earth.”
(Mallory 317)

Not freedom or necessity, but freedom and necessity. Even freedom within necessity. In her 1979 speech, Audre Lorde spoke of the feminist prerogative for “interdependency between women” as “the way to a freedom which allows the I to *be*, not in order to *be used*, but in order to *be creative*” (111). For vulnerable minorities, the empowering decision to join forces and depend on one another, forsaking the protection-cum-repression of the patriarchal system, is one important difference “between the passive *be* and the active *being*” (Lorde 111). Essayists acknowledge the agency available in the interdependence between personal stories, the stories of others, the political, and language itself. In the ecofeminist tradition, an essayist’s prerogative for redefinition acts as the rewilding of language.

Rewilding, most often defined as a return to what came before, should not be seen as a regression. A more holistic, ecofeminist reading of rewilding reveals that it is a system, a cycle. Rain falls, collects, feeds the earth and everything upon it, evaporates, condenses, and falls. And so on. Before the rain came evaporation, and so on back through

the cycle. Nothing comes from nothing. Rewilding isn't turning back; it's wilding again. Not regression, but progression. It is necessary and inevitable and contingent upon what came before and what will come after. We came from dust, and to dust we shall return²⁴. Williams reminds us that she was not born in the shadow of her mother mountain, but "her consciousness toward a land ethic was" (39). "Our public lands— whether a national park or monument, wildlife refuge, forest, or prairie—make each one of us land-rich," she writes. "It is our inheritance as citizens of a country called America" (37). Inheritance in terms of birthright, certainly, but not in terms of the freedom to use the land so much as in terms of responsibility to interact with it in a sustainable way. This was the compulsion that John D. Rockefeller Jr. followed when he wielded his ample resources to secure the Snake River Valley and donated it to the National Park Service. It is also the impulse Laurance Rockefeller followed when he rewilded JY Ranch more than five decades later. This is what Solnit described as "that struggle to put the world back together... the major mandate of the late twentieth century" ("Storming" 2). Each of these actions was born of one that had come before. And Williams's role in this cycle forward, in terms of time and wilderness, is one of witness.

Bearing witness, especially in a position of dissent, one that deviates from the status quo, is always political. In this case, Williams's witness invites those in power to consider an alternative that matters, perhaps, to someone who doesn't have the same access, but whose perspective should be equally valued, nonetheless. Her invitation extends to the reader, too. By publishing what she has seen—the way she has "again and again... witnessed wildness, what it is and why it deserves our fidelity"—Williams empowers readers to create change (39). "Humility is born in wildness. We are not protecting grizzlies from extinction; they are protecting us from the extinction of experience as we engage with a world beyond ourselves," she says. "The very presence of a grizzly returns us to an ecology of awe. We tremble at what appears to be a dream yet stands before us on two legs and roars" (41). Here is what makes the essay powerful in this ecofeminist mode: The same day that John Tempest celebrated his eightieth birthday with his extended family on a trail in the Tetons, he also witnessed his great-grandson, Wyatt, taking his first steps. These two events bookend the essay, because Williams is the one whose presence connects the story and creates the gravity of the message behind it.

²⁴ Genesis 3:19 (KJV): In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Humility is, then, born in the wild equilibrium of cycling generations, the knowledge that the four generations of Tempests on the trail that day “would be followed by four more and four more beyond that” (40). The vulnerability of our environment, the health of our planet, is an enormous, potentially impossible problem, and one which most people feel deficient in the face of. By making the story personal, bringing the reader into contact with the roaring grizzly, Williams humanises the politics behind it and provides a new perspective on possibilities of activism and conservationism. She begins by noting that names are misleading. Things that have been named can always be renamed, if it turns out later that what inspired the “official” name was (scientifically) inaccurate²⁵ or (morally) wrong²⁶, for example. And then there’s Grand Teton National Park, which has gone by many names and, first, by no name. Before the Voyageurs branded the Tetons in the name of the French, the Shoshone people called the same range Teewinot, meaning “many pinnacles.” And before the Shoshone—before any human eyes had widened at the first glimpse of them—the mountains were the sole realm of mountain goats and grizzly bears. And two billion years before that, the range was a swirl of magma beneath the thinning crust of the earth.

²⁵ E.g., The Ring-Necked Duck

²⁶ E.g., Mount McKinley

4 Conclusion

“The very term *place* is problematic, implying a discrete entity, something you could put a fence around. And they did: three strands of barbed wire surrounded this 1,375-square mile high-security area—but it didn’t keep in the radiation or keep out the politics.”

— Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise*

“The persistent underevaluation of the essay and the essayistic underpinnings of much imaginative literature has resulted in a sharply skewed canon, the neglect of many important works, and it has helped create a professional rift between literature and composition studies. Barthes writes of the essay as the generating principle behind the evolution of all genres, a kind of genre of genres. Is the essay literature? Perhaps the question to ask is: can literature exist without it?”

— Robert Atwan, “Essayism”

Terry Tempest Williams introduces *The Hour of Land* with “A Note to the Reader,” in which she takes a moment to thank two people who helped to inspire and midwife the book. This is not a replacement for the Acknowledgments section, which also appears at the end of the volume. Instead, the note acts as a kind of field guide. Williams describes the way Jorie Graham’s poetry acted as a series of cairns, “the careful placement of stones stacked one by one as a small monument to direction,” to guide Williams’s writerly walk in the desert. Graham’s “WE” led her “through the unknown territory of [the] twelve national parks” that ultimately appear in *The Hour of Land*, and Williams decided, when it came time to publish, that the reader would also benefit from this kind of subtle guide-posting. With Graham’s permission, Williams has placed one line from the thirteen-line poem at the trailhead of each chapter, hoping the poet’s “prescience on the page” will offer the reader the chance for a similar “poetic crossing” in the reading to the one she, Williams, experienced in the writing. She goes on to explain that Edward Hirsch “defines ‘a poetic crossing’ as that ‘which follows the arc from physical motion to spiritual action... into another type of consciousness, a more heightened reality. It is a move beyond the temporal, a visionary passage.’” I read this as one description of the link between Mind and Body, the communicative channel that connects the two.

On an agential realist account, Descartes was wrong; Mind and Body do not pre-exist their relationship as distinct and separate relata. I'm not sure I believe that, and I'm certain I have not proved that in this thesis. However, I do feel comfortable saying that, from an ecofeminist perspective, whether Mind and Body exist apart from one another is beside the point. Like Solnit and Williams and activist writers everywhere, what I want to achieve with an essay is bold, material change. I want justice—not as an abstract concept, but as a sweat-stained, door-flung-open, fresh-air-cold-in-the-lungs lived reality—and I want it for everyone in Mallory's ecopolisphere. If, as Barad suggests, reality is performative, then only in the agential intra-action of Mind and Body do we experience meaning, do we create possibility, do we have the capacity to make change.

When Williams describes her poetic crossing in the "Note to the Reader," she seems to relate the notion specifically to the connection between Body and Mind, that is, beginning with what is physical and transitioning into the mental-spiritual. She read Graham's poem and that intra-action ignited her imagination. But I propose an expanded, less directional understanding of Hirsch's poetic crossing. In Williams's intra-action with Graham's poem, the two became fused, contingent upon one another, and the meaning indeed crossed from physical to mental-spiritual, but less in the sense of a river-crossing and more in the sense of a heavenly body spinning, so that the side in the light crosses into the side in the dark. This way, the poetic crossing recurs as the planet spins, moving from mental-spiritual to physical again and again, resulting in the phenomena of a dozen essays on America's National Parks, conservation, environmentalism, human rights, and many more heavy-hitting political issues: a book out in the world. To be picked up and intra-acted with by readers like me.

4.1 Objectivity as Responsibility

Like so much of ecofeminist theory, this concept of reality (and meaning and creativity) as an infinitely looping, fractalizing energy-exchange confounds Western, masculinist traditions that strive instead for what is exact and ideal (or, at least, concrete, fixed, and dependable). Perhaps that's why the essay accommodates these principles, in content and form, so well. "[T]he essay," says Adorno, "does not strive for closed, deductive or inductive, construction. It revolts above all against the doctrine—deeply

rooted since Plato—that the changing and ephemeral is unworthy of philosophy; against that ancient injustice toward the transitory” (99). Nothing will be deduced, nothing will be decided. Things may be sorted or understood better after being placed in a new light or juxtaposed with some other now-seen-as-relevant thing based on the values of the essayist. But almost by definition, the subject of an essay cannot be examined in an objective way. In Robert Atwan’s paper on “Essayism,” he examines the way novelists employ the essay as a narrative tool, where it operates as a genre-within-genres. He traces the origin of the term “essayism” to Robert Musil’s novel, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930). Musil’s “protagonist, Ulrich, ‘pays homage to the Utopian idea of Essayism,’ an intellectual attitude that he associates ‘with the peculiar concept of the essay,’ which ‘in the sequence of its paragraphs, takes a thing from many sides without comprehending it wholly’” (qtd. in Atwan 6). This description stayed with me in the research of this thesis, because the question of wholeness kept popping to the surface. Objectivity implies separation because it requires removal and distance, and it hinges on a metaphysics of things-in-themselves and/or things-behind-phenomena. There is less room for objectivity in this sense in Barad’s performative relational ontology, where there are no things, but happenings, and relationship is the only reality in which relata can be observed and differentiated.

Historically, “philosophical discussions of objectivity... in abstraction from detailed examination of scientific practices have... obscured gendered, radicalized, and colonialist themes in scientific work” (Rouse 144). James Rouse identifies Barad’s contribution to “feminist reinterpretations of objectivity as agential responsibility” (142). The inclusion of agency, not as a human attribute (and, it should be noted, specifically not as subjectivity, though it may still be where the attribute of subjectivity takes root for human actors) in Barad’s performative metaphysics is revolutionary for a number of reasons. Chiefly here, “[a]gency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production... in the enactment of a causal structure” (827). Where the essay is a material-discursive practice embodying the intra-active differentiation of becoming for the essayist and her subject(s), as well as for the essay and the reader, “possibilities for acting exist at every moment” (827). The ecofeminist essayist considers herself as part of the world with which she engages; this is something ecofeminism and Barad’s posthumanism have in common, a belief that “[w]e do not obtain knowledge by standing outside of the world; we know because ‘we’ are of the world... The separation of epistemology from ontology is a reverberation of a

metaphysics that assumes an inherent difference between human and nonhuman, subject and object, mind and body, matter and discourse” (Barad 827). The ecofeminist essayist’s possibilities for intra-action within that world are objective in the sense that they are innumerable and objectively equal in potential value. However, Barad clarifies that “these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world’s becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering” (827). An echo of Solnit’s elucidation of history as a “battle over the story we tell, or who tells and who is heard” (*Hope in the Dark*, xiv).

Here I want to admit that I’ve spent a perhaps disproportionate amount of time defending the essayist’s use of subjectivity, because ecofeminist essayists reject the binary that has traditionally cast objectivity and subjectivity against one another, and has elevated the former. I do not mean to do this at the expense of objective truth, thus reinforcing the masculinist binary. There is a place for objectivity within the essay. For example, there are the names and dates of historical events, the percentages of ballots cast, the makeup of chemical compounds, even the laws of physics. But all these things—as well as federal laws, social norms, classifications of race and gender, etc.—undergo a different level of scrutiny before/as they are employed in the ecofeminist essay. Ecofeminist essayists require what is commonly accepted as “truth” to be rigorously and regularly re-examined. The motivation for this re-examination is subjective, situated from within a political philosophy that has located injustice in, for example, the phallogentrism of language. But the foundation of scepticism is objective in the sense that it is applied to everything and everyone, including those ostensibly on the essayist’s “side” of the issue at hand. Solnit’s willingness to interrogate the inherited values, biases and practices of the environmental movement is a good example of this, as is Lorde’s sharp rebuke of academic feminism’s failure to embrace difference as a strength. So, objectivity and subjectivity have their place in the ecofeminist essay, and as with everything else, there is an ecofeminist sense that the two concepts are contingent upon one another, as well. When Solnit and Williams and their contemporaries comes to the table, they are equipped with both objective truth and subjective experience. They say: Here are the cold, hard facts (conventional cornerstones for solid argument) and here is the way those facts manifest themselves in the lives of Women. Children. People of color. Generational ranching families who think environmentalists hate them. Transgendered teenagers deciding which bathroom to use in

North Carolina. Native Americans struggling to secure their language. A curlew feeding in a northern field long after she ought to have migrated south.

4.2 Insightful Intelligence and the Imagination

“Here, in the vanguard, beyond the borders of knowledge, science becomes even more beautiful—incandescent in the forge of nascent ideas, of intuitions, of attempts. Of roads taken and then abandoned, of enthusiasms. In the effort to imagine what has not yet been imagined.”

– Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*

The plural of anecdote may not be data, but ecofeminists also don't see these two concepts as mutually exclusive. In her “Note to the Reader,” Williams describes being inspired specifically by Graham's “insightful intelligence.” At first glance, this description might seem redundant, but insight and intelligence aren't the same thing. Insight is “the capacity to gain an accurate and deeply intuitive understanding of someone or something”; intelligence is “the ability to acquire and apply knowledge and skills” (Google Dictionary Online). One counts on anecdote, the other requires data. It's no surprise that an ecofeminist like Williams would look for and respond to the combination of the two in creative work; I think it's also something she strives for in her own writing. For ecofeminists, the rejection of patriarchal dualities is an incomplete action. Better instead to press the two oppositional things together, consider them as contingencies. Comprehending our lived reality is one thing; determining how to act within that reality is another. Insightful intelligence is the goal of the ecofeminist essayist, not as an achieved attribute of her work, but as part of the ongoing becoming of a performative reality that results in her work.

One reason why the open-endedness of essayism works well for activist writers is that changing the way the world “is” requires a great deal of invention, as well as the imagination that comes before. To return to Woolf for a moment, “A Room of One's Own” was a lecture and then an essay, and in the several decades since its original delivery, while it has been hailed as a ground-breaking piece of feminist literature ahead of its time, it has also become increasingly difficult to categorize appropriately. As Saloman points out, “in many senses, [it is] anything but the argument-driven manifesto it

is often considered to be” (77). In the first place, “Woolf refuses to stake out a set position in this work, or even to offer hypothetical arguments or reflections in her own person,” opting instead to take on a persona whose “I” in the text is a composite of fictional or hypothetical characters:

“[P]ointing out that women’s stories are largely missing from history as it stands, [Woolf’s] fictional narrator requests license to imagine the women who did not make it into history books. Their ordinary domestic lives were deemed unimportant, and they were prevented, in one way or another, from following the more daring trajectories they might have imagined for themselves.” (77)

Of course, the prevention of imagination for these forgotten women of history is, according to feminism, the direct result of a phallogocentric shaping of culture, and this resulted in the loss of “unrecorded and unloved personal histories,” both of which “Woolf attempts to restore in her work” (Saloman 77). Woolf’s famous argument about the gender gap in time and resources behind the creation of art is structured only insofar as an intentional structurelessness can be considered a structure. The writer-narrator tells a first-person story that is equal parts allegory and parable. Saloman describes the unique presentation of the piece as “invention and speculation, of a turn to fiction that is best articulated in the essayistic mode” (77). Woolf wanted to convey to her audience and readers both the potential and value of a previously unimaginable future of equality for her sex. Williams asked the university graduates in Utah at the dawn of a new war to “have the imagination to rediscover an authentic patriotism that inspires empathy and reflection over pride and nationalism.” Here again we have Meno’s question: “How will you go about finding that thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you?” (Solnit “Open Door” 4). Thankfully, where Socrates’s answer does not suffice, “the essay’s sense of possibility [and of] the value of that which has not yet been determined” does (Saloman 77). Woolf worked with both qualities intimately and used them to prove how adaptable the essayistic voice could be.

4.3 The Agential Presence of the Essayist

“People like us, who believe in physics, know that the distinction made between past, present and future is nothing more than a persistent, stubborn illusion.”

– Albert Einstein (qtd. in Rovelli 58)

Physicist Carlo Rovelli considers “Einstein’s jewel, the general theory of relativity” to be “a masterpiece” on the order of “Mozart’s *Requiem*, Homer’s *Odyssey*; the Sistine Chapel” (3). I responded to this idea first because it rejected the science/art binary, opting instead to lift the two disciplines up to the same level of value and care. Rovelli explains the comparison by noting that, “[t]o appreciate these creations may require a long apprenticeship, but the reward is sheer beauty—and not only this, but the opening of our eyes to a new perspective on the world” (3). In Rovelli’s slim, pioneering book, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, Rovelli guides his reader through a series of short, elegant essays that cover the major milestones of history in the scientific field, all that has been discovered, and all that remains beyond us. He begins with the general theory of relativity, then moves to quantum mechanics—“where the most baffling aspects of modern physics lurk” (vii). From there he takes readers through the architecture of the cosmos, elementary particles, quantum gravity—“the attempts which are underway to construct a synthesis of the major discoveries of the twentieth century”—and then into probability and black holes (vii). Rovelli’s final chapter returns to humankind and our desire to see ourselves as part of the universe as we understand it (and don’t yet understand it) by way of physics.

Humans are inherently curious, constantly searching, constantly questioning, says Rovelli, and “[t]his communication between ourselves and the world is not what distinguishes ourselves from the rest of nature. All things are continually interacting with each other, and in doing so each bears the traces of that with which it has interacted” (68). I can’t put words in Rovelli’s mouth, but if I read his reference to interacting as *intra-acting*, I see again this idea of a performative reality, not as the disjoint, ideal things of the universe, falling along uninterrupted trajectories, but as happenings. “Our reality is tears and laughter, gratitude and altruism, loyalty and betrayal, the past which haunts us and serenity,” says Rovelli. “We are also an integral part of the world which we perceive; we are not external observers. We are situated within it. Our view of it is from within its

midst.” (64) Try as we might to examine and understand the universe separately—ideally—in the form of disembodied mathematical equations, humankind continues to experience reality in an inescapably situated way.

In writing this thesis, another important dualism struck me. As I mentioned in my Introduction, activist writers like Solnit and Williams use their essays “to right past wrongs and create future change.” In their writing, we can see the way history is used as a mirror, played back and forth against the light of the future, to show us simultaneously the way things are going if we keep to the status quo and the way things could be if we deviate from the path before us. There is past and there is future. But this Future-Past dualism echoes the Mind-Body dualism. One is tangible, formed, complete, behind us, a referent; the other is intangible, imagined, unformed, incomplete, ahead of us, potential. The nexus of Past and Future is The Present, something at once real and elusive to our limited human mind and body. What I offer in this thesis is the fact of the ecofeminist essayist—the embodiment of agency, materiality and a relational ontology—at one crucial nexus of Mind and Body. Between Philosophy and Action, the essayist is also Present. Her essays are the written revelations of patterns in the world, in the stories of others, as they resonate with her personal values. Her presence, subjective and situated, personal and political, is the link Descartes could not find.

The ecofeminist essayist embraces this situatedness in her work. She follows the natural impulse to relate with people and the environment, acknowledging and connecting with many and diverse points of view. This is how she finds the power of the essay, located in the apparent gap—personally compelling and politically motivated—between the stories to be told and the stories that are told. Barad calls for “a robust account of... the material-discursive practices by which [the] differential constitutions [of all bodies] are marked” (810). The essay is just such a material-discursive practice, and the ecofeminist essay exemplifies, both in form and in content, Barad’s suggested relational metaphysics, where all matter is endowed with agency, and reality is an entangled series of contingent happenings. Rather than being read as a representation or mimesis of our universe and its suspected reality, the ecofeminist essay is the phenomena generated by multiple intra-actions by the writer with her world; and then multiple intra-actions by the writer with the page; and finally (and no less importantly) multiple intra-actions—possibly infinite intra-actions—by the reader and the page, the reader and the world.

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