The term *ecofeminism* has been widely used since the late 1980s to name a growing political, cultural and intellectual movement, both activist and academic. Ynestra King has named it ‘the third wave of the women’s movement’. Its defining claim is that the destruction of the environment and the historical oppression of women are deeply linked.

Ecofeminist thinkers come to environmental issues expert in controversies about distinctions between sex (‘natural’) and gender (‘cultural’), questions of whether the category ‘woman’ or ‘women’ has any clear natural referent or is not, in fact, an unstable product of social conditions. This helps render ecofeminism perhaps the most sophisticated and intellectually developed branch of environmental criticism. It is especially sensitive to the environmental implications of differing conceptions of human personhood. Nevertheless, as Glynis Carr writes, ‘While ecofeminist philosophy and politics are relatively well developed, ecofeminist literary theory and criticism are not’, a discrepancy that arguably applies to ecocriticism generally.

The following statement by Donna Haraway would now command almost universal consent among ecofeminists and the majority of ecocritics:

> certain dualisms have been persistent in Western traditions; they have all been systemic to the logics and practices of domination of women, people of color, nature, workers, animals – in short, domination of all constituted as **others**, whose task is to mirror the self. Chief among these troubling dualisms are self/other, mind/body, culture/nature, male/female, civilized/primitive, reality/appearance, whole/part, agent/resource, maker/made, active/passive, right/wrong, truth/illusion, total/partial, God/man.

The point being made about these dualisms (‘man/woman’, ‘culture/nature’, etc.) is that the first term of each pair has often been defined in opposition to
and with implicit superiority over the other. Environmental critics refer often to such hierarchical dualisms, though there are various different ways of engaging them. As often in this field, one can draw a crude but workable distinction between romantic/essentialist arguments and broadly post-human ones. For the first, the critic’s task becomes simply to take up the more denigrated term and affirm it. Ecofeminism of this kind is a variety of identity politics, affirming, that is, woman as a given identity crossing distinctions of nationality, religion or political allegiance. For others, like Haraway herself, the fact the two terms (man–woman, etc.) have been mutually defining – ‘woman’ being understood by her relation to man and vice versa – must mean that simply affirming the supposedly lesser term is inadequate. The whole set-up or opposition and its complex implication in a related set of hierarchies needs to be rethought in its totality. Such ecofeminism cannot, then, remain an identity politics, simply affirming a given ‘woman’ or ‘nature’. It gives itself the challenge of unravelling whole networks of assumptions and practices in cultures across the globe. Even a seemingly trivial item in a novel, poem or report that draws on assumptions about sexual difference may then ramify into huge social and political questions.

A characteristic ecofeminist gesture has already been encountered in Scott Hess’s reading of the Wordsworths. Criticising the liberal conceptions of personhood implicit in William’s text, Hess contrasted it to the very different conception instantiated in Dorothy’s journal. Dorothy ‘constructs a non-hierarchical and relational model of difference’ (7) attentive to the flowers as living things beyond their status as aesthetic spectacle, part of a working landscape of human and non-human relationships of which any observer is a part.

Rachel Stein considers the poet Adrienne Rich as a different kind of nature writer and makes similar points about the rejection of implicitly masculinist and exclusively heterosexual conceptions of personhood and agency. Rich gives no credit to finding ‘solutions to societal problems by exiling herself in the wilderness’ or the use of nature as a means to self-cultivation. Crucial here is the rejection of that tradition of thought and writing that would project the illusion of being a detached spectator or observer, either as a kind of consumer of experiences or in the fantasy of an unimplicated objectivity. Stein endorses the way in which Rich writes from out of an affirmation of her own specific and particular situation, identity and history, ‘as a white middle-class woman, an assimilated Jew searching for meaningful traditions, a lesbian, a teacher, a North American, and a person suffering with an aging and increasingly ill body’ (198).

Masculinist conceptions of identity and personhood are held to involve a simultaneous denigration and fear of the bodily, associated with the ‘natural’ as
opposed to the ‘cultural’, and the ‘woman’ as opposed to the ‘man’. Against this Rich thinks through her own painful experience of arthritis. The intellectual as well as physical unease of immediate participation in nature undoes any fantasy of detached human spectatorship:

The problem is

to connect, without hysteria, the pain
of any one's body with the pain of the body’s world
For it is the body’s world
They are trying to destroy forever

‘Contradictions: Tracking Poems’

Rich’s affirmation of the bodily nature of human identity is not an essentialist affirmation of the body simply as nature. Stein sees it as an endorsement of the argument that “the body is neither – while also being both – . . . self or other, natural or cultural, psychical or social. This indeterminate position enables it to be used as a particularly powerful strategic term to upset the frameworks by which these binary pairs are constructed” (Elizabeth Groz). Thus, Rich’s poem presents bodily pain as itself a refusal of the very nature–culture split at work in much other nature writing.

In Gretel Ehrlich’s *The Future of Ice* (2004) an affirmation of bodily experience also serves as a kind of identification with the physical earth. Ehrlich’s is a kind of hybrid writing, blending personal narrative with historical anecdote and snippets of popular science. To experience oneself as a physical body, acted on by other material bodies, is seen to challenge ‘the myth of objectivity,’ crucial to the authority of science when used as an ideology and in the cultures of global managerialism. Ehrlich’s prose is accordingly full of images that are bodily and erotic, involving taste, touch and smell as well the more mediated senses of sight and hearing.

Ehrlich makes frequent reference to the frightening scientific consensus on climate change: ‘I would write a book about winter and climate change, about what would happen if we became “deseasoned,” if winter disappeared as a result of global warming’ (xi). Clearly, her alternative sensuous modes of interacting with nature are not tantamount to the accusation that those of the sciences have no validity. The issue is that they need not also deligitimise other valuable kinds of engagement with the world, non-dualistic, sensuous and non-hierarchical. Elsewhere she writes:

To separate out thought into islands is the peculiar way we humans have of knowing something, of locating ourselves on the planet and in society. We string events into temporal sequences like pearls or
archipelagos. While waiting out winter, I listen to my mind switch from logic to intuition, from tree to net, the one unbalancing the other so no dictatorships can stay.\(^9\)

Throughout *The Future of Ice* the background threat of climate change produces all kinds of cognitive, rhetorical and emotional shifts, altering even mundane events and sights. These suggest with an alarming ease bigger implications in the sight of a glacier whose ‘forehead has been torn open and is posed to fall’ (46). In an earlier passage Ehrlich sees the side of a mountain that has been churned up by tourists as ‘a fresh wound, a whole shoulder torn, with a watery ooze and a hole that’s getting bigger . . . As I walk I see how the wound grows, where backpackers have climbed farther up to avoid the mud but, in so doing, have torn the Earth’s skin more’ (30).

**An écriture ecoféminine?**

Ecofeminist criticism is especially strong on the implications of various notions of human personhood. Rich’s affirmation of women’s ‘weak ego boundaries’ is reminiscent of a point made about the science of ecology by Neil Everden: that its tracing of energy and nutrient flows disregards the boundaries between one creature and another, dissolving hierarchical subject–object dichotomies: ‘Is there even a boundary between you and the non-living world, or will the atoms in this page be part of your body tomorrow?’\(^{10}\) A major contemporary challenge for ecofeminism could be stated as being to maintain the critique of liberal and neoliberal conceptions of the person without forfeiting the moral or political force usually identified with that rights-based tradition.

An ecofeminist essay affirming alternative models of personhood and agency is L. Elizabeth Waller’s ‘Writing the Real: Virginia Woolf and an Ecology of Language’.\(^{11}\) Waller focusses on the innovative and experimental style and narrative forms of Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) and other texts. *The Waves* consists of multiple narratives moving through various natural cycles (spring to autumn, day to night), each with its various non-human protagonists. The six human characters are presented in what critics usually take to be ‘stream of consciousness’ modes. Waller, however, challenges the mainstream view of this text as ‘an exploration of the workings of the minds of the six named characters within the text . . . interspersed with depersonalized prose which describes constantly shifting patterns of light and water’ (Kate Flint).\(^{12}\) Consider the following passage:
‘Now they have all gone’, said Louis. ‘I am alone. They have gone into the house for breakfast, and I am left standing by the wall of flowers. It is very early, before lessons. Flower after flower is specked on the depths of greens. The petals are harlequins. Stalks rise from the black hollows beneath. The flowers swim like fish made of light upon dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. I am a boy in green flannels with a belt fastened by a brass snake up here. Down there my eyes are the lidless eyes of a stone figure in the desert by the Nile. I see women passing with red pitchers to the river; I see camels swaying and me in turbans. I hear tramplings, tremblings, stirrings around me.’

The term ‘stream of consciousness’ is disputed here. It already sets up the multiple non-human agencies as peripheral, as images only for the ‘inner’ life of the human beings. Waller objects: ‘Are only human characters “named”? Is Woolf’s prose “depersonalized” when it comes to nonhuman characters?’ (147). It is false, she argues, to submit Woolf’s prose to a hierarchical presupposition that the so-called ‘depersonalised’ passages exist only to serve the purpose of human characterisation. It is rather a matter of a less exclusive conception of character and identity: ‘Does human identity exist outside the context of nature – ever?’ (148). The ‘depersonalised’ passages should be acknowledged as granting a genuine agency to the non-human, as describing that vaster field of agency in which human thought, perception and identity are enmeshed (‘My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick . . .’).

The effect of reading the non-human action as ‘foreground’ at least as much as the human is a drastic jump that highlights how far received notions of characterisation in a novel assume, as an unexamined presupposition, a severance and privileging of human action as against everything else. By comparison with The Waves, most other novels may come to seem like enormous and unjustified acts of selection and abstraction. A whole tradition of the realist novel and ‘commonsense’ Western assumptions about human life are defamiliarised.

What other critics simplify as an exclusively human ‘inner’ meditation or stream of consciousness emerges instead as a kind of plural dialogue of multiple agencies and ‘subjects’. Waller quotes Ronnie Zoe Hopkins: ‘attempting to limit “discourse” . . . broadly construed, to an activity that only a single species practices . . . seems quite uninformed biologically, just as restricting the sphere of what can be said to be “known” to the domain of human representation would seem to consign us to a kind of species-wide solipsism.’

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Woolf’s experiment anticipates modern ecofeminist practice and theory in celebrating the sensuous and even the erotic as non-appropriative ways of knowing the natural world, a form of knowledge that is not at once also a kind of power but is open to the agency of others.

Other aspects of Waller’s argument seem more dubious. She reads Woolf’s provocative experiment in compositional method as a letting speak of that part of the natural world that is her own body, with its organic rhythms and correspondences. Thus, Woolf is said to let ‘the flow and flux of ecocentric reality voice the language to describe’ a real world supposedly lost to merely anthropocentric conceptions of discourse (138). This focus on physiology, however, drifts towards a more questionable romantic metaphysic. Woolf’s compositional method is seen to open a usually blocked path to a supposedly lost and unalienated human nature, located in the female body. A loss of an original ‘discourse’ of human and non-human agents thus becomes the more conventional story of the human fall from a lost state of nature/childhood, here politicised as a fall into the divisive categories of patriarchy:

As days, seasons, and years pass, the human characters each struggle to unite culture and nature in language as they did as children, while earth continues conversing with or without them. We read their process of separation, isolated in individualism, and saturation into androcentric culture as the novel progresses. In many ways, what is illustrated in The Waves is exactly what happened in the course of five thousand years of patriarchy. 150–1

Waller hypothesises a fall from an Edenic condition that did not sever ‘culture from nature, internal environment from external environment, human from nonhuman’ (151). It is here, however, that she touches on claims that other ecofeminists would wish to qualify. Others see such myths of some lost matriarchal paradise more as foci and incentives for contemporary struggles than as the topic of a speculative and dubious prehistory. Michael Zimmerman writes:

Many cultural ecofeminists share aspects of the goal of early romantic poets: to overcome social fragmentation and alienation by developing a new myth that is compatible with reason. Political activists who ignore this spiritual yearning in favor of secular rationalism fail to see that societies founded on such rationalism often lack legitimacy precisely because they do not satisfy the meaning-seeking aspect of human experience.
For others, however, new age idealisations of the Great Mother or ‘Gaia’ are damaging simplifications of what nature is, personifications made from given stereotypes of the feminine. Catriona Sandilands writes:

Nature was viewed as the obverse of all that is wrong with civilization. As patriarchal culture was individuated, nature was interconnected. As androcentric institutions emphasized rationality, nature was mysterious. As capitalism was inherently crisis-driven and unsustainable, nature was inherently stable, balanced, and sustaining. Nature was defined in terms of stereotypical femininity because contemporary culture was the manifestation of all that is quintessentially male.¹⁷

Sandilands might be writing here of this aspect of Waller’s work on Woolf. Waller’s essay contrasts in this respect with Louise Westling’s otherwise comparable reading of Woolf as developing a practice of writing at odds with masculinist notions of personhood (this time in *Between the Acts*). Westling, like Waller, relates Woolf’s prose to modern critiques of dualisms of human and animal, mind and nature, but not as harking back to dubious idealisations of a lost human essence. Instead her writing forms a new, iconoclastic practice opening new channels of communication and insight. Woolf’s techniques help us ‘recognize how literature can help bring those many voices into presence for a posthumanist future’. Human culture in Woolf is shown as enmeshed in and dependent on multiple non-human agencies, ‘a reality beyond human comprehension and sense of time’.¹⁸

Finally, both Waller’s and Westling’s readings of Woolf’s experiments suggest a challenging rereading of Dominic Head’s account of the mismatch between any would-be ecological perspective and the kind of focus and timescale dominant in the tradition of the realist novel, with its focus on individual personal development in an exclusively social context.¹⁹ Might the mismatch now suggest not that ecocriticism has unrealistic or utopian expectations, but rather the alarming extent to which dubious and destructive assumptions about humanity have passed as almost self-evident in literature for centuries?

‘*Nature provides us with few givens*’ (Lealle Ruhl)²⁰

Much modern feminism sits squarely within the liberal tradition. It can be summarised as working to affirm for women individualist norms of autonomy and right against old, reductive identifications of women with passive ‘nature’
or prejudices that women are ‘naturally’ x or y. In this context ecofeminism has
sometimes looked anomalous. Might the two elements ‘eco’ and ‘feminism’
pull in different directions?

Contemporary ecofeminism usually now differentiates itself from that
strand which Sandilands has nicknamed ‘motherhood environmentalism’. This
took up stereotypical associations of women under patriarchy not to
oppose them directly but to affirm them as environmental countervalues.
Thus women were endorsed as somehow ‘closer to nature’ than men, usually
through their connection with motherhood and nurturing. The association of
women and the domestic sphere could be reaffirmed as their greater sense of
respect for nature as a sort of home (‘ecology’ being from the Greek ‘science
of the household’). Few ecofeminists would now agree with such simple asser-
tions. Rather, ‘It’s not that women are actually closer to nature than men . . . but
throughout history, men have chosen to set themselves apart, usually “over and
above” nature and women.’

Ecofeminism nevertheless remains a flashpoint for the clash between the
ideals of modern liberalism and environmental questions. Are calls for women
to ‘think like a mountain’ a ‘blatant slap in the face’ (Janet Biehl) for struggles
towards individual selfhood and independence? Such questions also underlie
arguments between second-wave, liberal, rights-based feminism and so-called
‘natural law’ feminists who resist the intrusion of the state, the market economy
and various reproductive technologies in what they take to be women’s natural
association with conception, gestation, childbirth and mothering. Lealle Ruhl,
on the other hand, criticises this ‘natural law’ position for its tendency to
project ‘the natural’ as a social and moral imperative. ‘Instead’, she argues,
‘of trying to determine the boundaries of the natural, it is perhaps more useful
to enquire into the placement of the boundaries of the natural, how these
boundaries appear where they do, and why.’

The poetry of Rich may also show the strain between some ecofeminist
projects and liberalism as the now dominant mode of political self-assertion.
Rich writes, ‘We are attempting to . . . break down that fragmentation of inner
and outer in every possible realm.’ This does not mean the familiar roman-
tic programme of the retrieval of some supposedly lost personal essence
through engagement with nature. It is, rather, to recognise that the inner–outer
dichotomy is already a patriarchal fiction, a stance of would-be transcendence
of the bodily and the natural world. She continues: ‘The psyche and the world
out there are being acted on and interacting intensely all the time. There is
no such thing as the private psyche, whether you’re a woman – or a man, for
that matter.’ Such an assertion is directly at odds with modern neoliberalism
and its focus on the atomistic individual and its ‘rights’. Margaret Thatcher’s
notorious statement in this respect, ‘there is no such thing as society,’ seems the very inverse of Rich’s ‘There is no such thing as the private psyche.’

In practice, however, Rich’s politics and poetics remain far closer to a liberal kind of feminism than her observations of the fragility of the ego’s borders would suggest. The strident assertiveness of her work, affirming the rights of a given identity, often conflicts with her simultaneous affirmation of women’s ‘weak ego boundaries’. The poetry seems divided between perceptions of modes of fluid identification and dissolution of the personal ego on the one hand, and the creation, on the other, of a political identity whose voice could be recognised within given models of politics. This issue of voice in Rich exemplifies again that problem that bedevils environmental politics: how to make one’s case heard in a society whose ears are attuned to respond only to the kinds of argument and assumption one also wishes to question?