

'Pain is the Great Connector':

Nature and Womanhood in the Songs of Chelsea Wolfe

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Abstract

This thesis explores the conception and embodiment of nature in the songs of American folk music/doom metal singer-songwriter Chelsea Wolfe. Through the theoretical perspective of ecocritical feminism that emphasise the interconnectedness of the subjugation of women and the environment, this study delves into how Wolfe's songs relate to nature and the feminine in relation to voice and song. I employ the methodology of Critical Musicology as described by Lawrence Kramer, to provide an understanding of the relationship between song, text and language. And to further facilitate a comprehensive understanding of gender and vocal expression, I utilise the feminist vocal philosophy of Adriana Cavarero where the logocentric division of speech and sound is scrutinised.

Alongside this study's primary focus on Wolfe's vocal expression, attention to how ideas are musicalized and conveyed through sound and textual inclusions contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of how the relationship with nature is embodied in Wolfe's songs.

Keywords: Chelsea Wolfe, ecofeminism, ecocritical theory, nature, womanhood, gender, voice, vocal philosophy, Adriana Cavarero, Lawrence Kramer, Val Plumwood.

Populärvetenskaplig sammanfattning

Den här masteruppsatsen utgör en utforskning av framställningen av naturen i den amerikanska folk/doom singer-songwritern Chelsea Wolfes musikaliska verk. Genom ett teoretiskt ekofeministiskt perspektiv som framhåller att det patriarkala underordnandet av kvinnor och miljön är sammanflätade undersöker den här studien hur Wolfes låtar förhåller sig till naturen och det feminina i relation till röst och sång. Tillämpningen av Lawrence Kramers förhållningssätt i form av Critical Musicology som metod bidrar till en förståelse av relationen mellan sång och text, och för att förankra analysen i kön och röstuttryck använder jag mig av Adriana Cavareros feministiska röstfilosofi som kritiskt granskar den logocentriska uppdelningen av tal och ljud.

För att främja en mer omfattande och nyanserad förståelse för hur relationen till naturen gestaltas i Wolfes låtar uppmärksammar jag även hur motiv och tematik musiceras och uttrycks genom sound och textuella inslag, parallellt med studiens primära fokus på Wolfes röstuttryck.

Nyckelord: Chelsea Wolfe, ekofeminism, ekokritik, natur, kön, genus, röst, röstfilosofi, Adriana Cavarero, Lawrence Kramer, Val Plumwood.

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Title quote: Chelsea Wolfe, ‘When Anger Turns to Honey’, track 3 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

Part I

*I want open plains
and scattered trees
I want flower fields
and I want salty seas
I want flatlands
soft and steady breeze
bringing scents of lined-up orchard trees
dripping heavy with pears and dancing leaves
I want flatlands
will you go there with me*

Chelsea Wolfe¹

Introduction

The historical implications of the language surrounding human culture's understanding of nature ranges from the pre-Enlightenment conception of nature as a benevolent, nurturing mother, to the Scientific Revolution's mechanistic re-conception of the earth as inert, lifeless matter.² Thus, the value of nature becomes instrumental; it exists in service of mankind whose needs are valued above the environment.³ The untouched, natural world then becomes reduced to an aesthetic quality; a backdrop to civilised, modern life.⁴ This perception of the environment strips nature of its agency, as well as ignores its inherent destructive properties – storms, floods and droughts are as much part of the natural world as morning dew, dancing leaves and gentle waves. It encompasses the planet we live on, the very earth beneath our feet. To understand the world, with its vast mountains and deep oceans, as domesticated and in service of mankind seems simplified and frankly absurd.

The gendered framing of nature preconceives the female body as closer to it, with her beauty and life-giving properties as much of a resource as the earth itself. Maleness, then, becomes associated with the mind and the expression of thoughts through speaking and writing. Thus, representing the sphere of the body, song is more suited for the woman than the man, in opposition to the more important realm of thought expressed through speech.⁵ While it is a

¹ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Flatlands', Track 1 on *Unknown Rooms: A Collection of Acoustic Songs* (Sargent House, 2012, compact disc).

² Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Colorado Westview Press, 2009), 240.

³ Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 239.

⁴ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 69.

⁵ Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice. Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul Kottman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 6.

traditional feminine virtue to be silent, there is a perception of the female singing voice as inherently beautiful, natural and pleasurable, in service of the ears of the listener. These preconceptions reconfigure nature, the female body as well as her singing voice into a beautiful garden; they can be understood as domesticated, pruned and cultivated.

In this master's thesis, I want to search for a deeper understanding of nature, beyond the view of it as an aesthetic and material resource, through an ecocritical analysis within the field of aesthetics. The similarities of the domestication and exploitation of nature and the female body are primarily studied and critiqued within the theoretical tradition of ecofeminism; a critical perspective with roots in both the green movement and the feminist movement. Ecofeminism constitutes both a critical field of theory as well as a politics, and the boundary between them is not always easy to identify and differentiate. However, the ecofeminist perspective draws upon a range of theoretical and political projects, including environmental studies, critiques of science, modernity and reason, as well as green and feminist activism.

In this study I explore how nature is conceived in the songs of American doom/folk singer-songwriter Chelsea Wolfe, whose musical and textual expression frequently features associations to nature. On her seven studio albums, the natural world is a constant companion, discernible in the song's themes and motifs, a relationship full of complexity. From the grieving to the reverent, nature inspires a wide array of emotions that are expressed through musical, vocal and textual ideas that explore and embody nature and the relationship to it.

Wolfe's music oscillates between genre conventions, from soft to hard, ugly to beautiful, acoustic to industrial to surreal soundscapes, and her voice can best be described as hazy and dreamlike, augmented by heavy use of technical effects such as reverb, delay and distortion. She whispers, screams and sings in harmonies. The instruments are sometimes incessant, harsh and deafening, and other times soft and lulling, like a comforting blanket of sound. In some instances, the soundscape is composed by sounds and noise outside the conventional realm of musical composition, such as ambience, feedback and scratching, as well as machine-like or metallic whirring, whining and buzzing. The musical sound sometimes matches the energy of Wolfe's vocals, and other times contrasts them, creating a fascinating dynamic that accompanies the expression of her musical ideas.

There is a profound grief and a longing permeating the albums that resonates within the listener and her lyrics seeds questions about gender, nature, ancestry, beauty, ugliness, mental health, sleep, dreams and identity. Especially the relationship between gender and nature resonates with me, and through an ecofeminist reading I hope to gain a deeper understanding of how Wolfe embodies this relationship in her songs.

Purpose and Research Problem

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the relationship between gender and nature in the music and lyrics of Chelsea Wolfe through an ecofeminist reading. I aim to explore nature through the vocal as well as musical and textual associations to the natural world in her songs; how nature and the environment appear and what meaning is assigned to it. How is that meaning musicalized and vocalised? In relation to this, how does the associations to nature relate to an understanding of death, grief and longing?

My ambition is perhaps not to come to a complete, comprehensible understanding of all of these questions, but I want to let them drive the analysis, towards a deeper understanding of the relationship between womanhood, body and nature in Wolfe's music – and so the main research question becomes: How does Chelsea Wolfe embody the relationship between nature and womanhood in her songs?

Field of Research and Theoretical Perspectives

Within the critical ecofeminist discourse, nature is understood as a fourth category of oppression alongside sex, class and race. Nature becomes something to conquer and colonise to the white, male master identity and the assumption that reason is the human, male, attribute that sets us apart from nature enables a feminisation and passivation of the environment that justifies exploitation.⁶ As such, there are many similarities between how a patriarchal and capitalist-globalist civilisation views nature and the female body as a natural resource. Donna Haraway asserts that '[e]cofeminists have perhaps been most insistent on some version of the world as active subject, not resource to be mapped and appropriated in bourgeois, Marxist or masculinist projects'.⁷ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva claims that the patriarchal civilisation's denial of nature's agency creates the assumption that nature exists as man's property, a resource to be used for relentless technological development, similar to how women are assumed to exist to provide workers and soldiers.⁸

The term 'ecofeminism' was coined in 1974 by the French philosopher Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la Mort* and asserted a feminist perspective of green politics. During the seventies and eighties, the interpenetration of ecology and feminism developed primarily outside of academia, but when it was researched inside, it was usually within the fields of environmental

⁶ See Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 199.

⁸ Maria Mies & Vandana Shiva, [1993], *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed Books, 2014), 116.

sciences, philosophy and religious studies. In the nineties, ecofeminism was incorporated into the academic fields of literary studies.⁹ Contemporary ecofeminist readings and interpretations of art have finally travelled outside of the universalised Western society by adopting a postcolonial perspective into the ecofeminist tradition of thought, cultivating a closer understanding of indigenous and local culture's intimate relationship with the earth and the land.¹⁰ These endeavours elucidate how Western, globalist civilisation mercilessly colonise and exploit other countries and reduce their land and people to a natural resource. Thus, unfettered globalisation threatens to eradicate the diversity of cultural identity and sever people's ancient cultural ties to the earth.¹¹ For Third World women who fight for the conservation of their land and against the separation of the spiritual Mother from material Earth, this fight is a resistance of the transformation of sacred and celebrated Earth into dead, raw material for industrialism and commodity production.¹²

Since 1974, several branches of ecofeminism have sprouted, with different ideological and philosophical interpretations and approaches to the relationship between gender and nature. While Patrick D. Murphy asserts that 'it cannot be claimed that ecofeminism represents a stable, clearly defined theory adhered to or acknowledged by all practitioners of a feminist ecology or an ecological feminism', what is shared is the agreement on what is opposed and what needs to change, 'and the masculinist linkage of women and nature that denigrates and threatens both'.¹³

The ecofeminist understanding of the connection between the domination of class, race, sex and nature is rooted in the construction of 'other' in human society. It is the ecology movement that adopts an understanding of how nature is constructed as 'other' in human society; stripped of its subjectivity, agency and voice, that now attempts to speak for nature. However, as feminism represents the voice of the original 'other' in patriarchal human society, according to Ynestra King, the connection between domination and 'other' becomes clear: 'social domination extends beyond sex and social domination of all kinds, because the domination of sex, race, and class and the domination of nature are mutually reinforcing. Women are the "others" in human society, who have been silent in public and who now speak through the feminist movement.'¹⁴ King claims that the disenchantment of nature comes with a belief in unlimited control of nature and that science

⁹ Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature and Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 48.

¹⁰ Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other*, 50f.

¹¹ Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 8f.

¹² Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 19.

¹³ Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other*, 49.

¹⁴ Ynestra King, 'The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology', in *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*, ed. Judith Plant (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1989), 20.

will solve any problem, thus conceiving of nature as 'other'. Through woman's reproductive abilities, she becomes similarly identified with nature, together constituting the original 'Others'.¹⁵

At the same time there is a constant friction within the ecofeminist discourse between the essentialist notion that women naturally have a closer relationship with nature, that oppression unites us and brings us closer to Mother Earth – and the opposite understanding that femininity is nothing more than an oppressive, patriarchal construction that must be completely discarded. For Plumwood it is this dualism, the gendered separation of mind and body that has dominated the Western master identity since the Enlightenment, that enables the exclusion and Othering based on sex, race, class and nature.¹⁶ In the analysis I further explore how Chelsea Wolfe's songs relate to this dualism and the friction between essentialism and construction.

With its roots in the green and anti-capitalist movements, the theoretical works on ecofeminism tend to be distinctly political. This does not mean, however, that ecofeminist readings of art are scarce or become more difficult, they just require an approach and methodology that is appropriate to bridge the gap between political theory and the interpretation of art. Several works on ecofeminism and Victorian and Edwardian women's poetry show how similar ideas concerning the relationship between nature, gender, technology and pollution were expressed during the industrialisation in England.¹⁷ These readings and interpretations of poetry not only examine how women express their own relationship to nature, but also explore how they relate to the notion of the sublime. The relationship between nature and the sublime is intimate, and during the 18th century it became an aesthetic quality; powerful storms, vast oceans and imposing mountains all invoke the sublime. Women were, however, philosophically excluded from experiencing the sublime as it was considered to be beyond the limits of female experience.¹⁸ In the times since then, women's exclusion from the experience of the sublime has been scrutinised, contested and revisioned, and the readings of Victorian women's poetry make it apparent that women always have related to the notion of the sublime, but perhaps not in the traditional, masculine sense.¹⁹

These ecofeminist readings of how Victorian women relate to nature, womanhood and the sublime inform my own analysis of the same topics in Wolfe's musical and vocal expression, while more contemporary, political works provide a broad horizon of how the relationship between gender and nature becomes acutely actualised in light of the climate crisis.

¹⁵ King, 'Ecology of Feminism', 21.

¹⁶ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 1993.

¹⁷ I mention some of these in more detail in the 'Previous Research' section.

¹⁸ Patrick D. Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime', in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses*, 64 (April 2012, pp. 79-94; ISSN: 0211-5913), 84.

¹⁹ See Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Methodology

In order to explore the relationship between gender and nature we must first establish whether this is a text- or musical analysis, or both. At first glance it may seem easier to access these themes primarily through a reading of the lyrics like poetry. But a significant amount of meaning would be left out by restricting the reading in this way. While I have opted for the main focus of the analysis on voice in the limited scope of this thesis, I am also taking the accompanying musical sound into consideration. This provides the study with nuance and complexity as I explore both music and text together. Therefore we must first establish how to understand the relationship between music and text, as well as to what extent they remain autonomous in a composition.

Lawrence Kramer asserts that a poem is not really assimilated into a composition, but rather incorporated, retaining its own life within the musical structure, ‘its own “body,” within the body of music’.²⁰ This understanding of the relationship between text and music avoids a hierarchic ordering and does not emphasise one over the other. I am primarily interested in an understanding of how the lyrics are expressed through vocalisation and framed or enhanced by the music. Are there contrasts, friction and contradictions – or coherence? How does the music amplify the words, and how is meaning musicalized?

To understand the relationship between song and speech, Kramer writes that song consists of a ‘topological distortion of utterance under the rhythmic and harmonic stress of music: a pulling, stretching, and twisting that deforms the current of speech without negating its basic linguistic shape’.²¹ In song, a word can stretch over an entire chorus, and thus be filled to the brim with meaning through the movement of the music. Melody can transform a single syllable word to fill measures and travel through pitch, further and further from resembling the spoken word:

[T]he expressive forcing of high and low notes, where the sound of the words inevitably fades into the effort of attacking the pitch; the complication of rhythm and the varied movement of the voice toward and away from speechlike patterns; the repetition, alteration, and syntactic breakdown of the text—also contribute to alienating the singing of the words from any plausible speaking of them, any context in which they might function as a speech act. In song, speech act becomes song act.²²

Because voice is central for my exploration of ecofeminist ideas in Chelsea Wolfe’s music and vocal expression, the feminist vocal philosophy of Adriana Cavarero becomes a powerful tool to understand how voice relates to gender. Because the patriarchal symbolic order identifies the

²⁰ Lawrence Kramer, ‘Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry’ (Leiden and Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, 2017), 4.

²¹ Kramer, ‘Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry’, 8.

²² Kramer, ‘Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry’, 7.

masculine with reason and the feminine with body, it privileges the semantic over the physical sound. The voice, firmly associated with the body, thus becomes feminised; secondary and ephemeral. In short: ‘woman sings, man thinks’.²³ However, Cavarero maintains that it is the voice that carries speech, and as such voice alone is able to express what words only punctuate.²⁴ Since Wolfe’s particular musical and vocal style tend to obscure her articulation, the lyrics themselves are often hard to hear and their relevance can therefore be questioned. Cavarero shows us that the sung word is conquered by the vocalisation and she argues in her examination of gender, voice and song that the female voice can be understood as subversive, omniscient and impossible to domesticate.²⁵ The relationship between voice, speech, song and gender in Cavarero’s feminist voice philosophy contains several similarities to the ecofeminist tradition of thought, and where they intersect is where I root my analysis of womanhood, nature, body and voice in Wolfe’s music.

Music’s intimate relationship with the body becomes acutely relevant for my exploration of gender, music and nature. Through the history of aesthetics, it becomes apparent that music’s inferiority to poetry stems from what Immanuel Kant maintains as the supposed inferiority of sensation to reflection. Kramer asserts that the ‘palpable and impulsive in musical sensation [transfers] to the detached realm of reason, culture, meaning; it intrudes bodily pleasure into the space reserved for thought’.²⁶ This denial of meaning in music through the severing of pleasure from meaning makes the analysis of musical expression all the more relevant. I am convinced that most of us do find meaning in sensation, as well as in pleasure, but how do we practically perform an interpretation of meaning in music?

The execution in this study adheres to the methodology of Critical Musicology, where critical analysis of music fits within broader fields of cultural studies; such as gender, queer and postcolonial studies. Critical Musicology focuses on the cultural study, aesthetics, criticism and hermeneutics of music. Lawrence Kramer describes how the ‘hermeneutic attitude [...] works by assigning to discourse the nondiscursive opacity that is supposed to belong to music’.²⁷

Much like how close reading works as methodology for the ever-broadening definition of ‘text’, my study utilises the same attention to expression, technique and embodiment that produces and convey meaning.²⁸ When it comes to music as ‘text’, the close reading concerns the textual inclusions and structural tropes of Wolfe’s musical, vocal and textual expression.

²³ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 6.

²⁴ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 121.

²⁵ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 118.

²⁶ Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California, 1993), 4.

²⁷ Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, 6.

²⁸ Jonathan Culler, ‘The Closeness of Close Reading’, in *ADE Bulletin*, No. 149, 2010.

Selection and Material

In an exploration of nature and gender in music, I find the amalgamations of genre conventions that Chelsea Wolfe explores through her music – from industrial, to surreal, to acoustic – intriguing, and especially the notion of a singer-songwriter who operates within the strange combination of genres that is gothic rock, doom metal and folk music. The specific combination of traditional folk music, inverted by pessimistic and gloomy doom metal invokes ideas and sensations of an apocalyptic destruction of nature that the ecofeminist perspective could render comprehensible. At the same time, Wolfe’s lyrics heavily reference nature in a sort of romantic way, similar to the poetry of Victorian women who experienced a kinship with nature, and a melancholy over its destruction.

Because of these notions, I find the study of ecofeminist ideas expressed in Wolfe’s songs relevant within the field of aesthetics. And since there is no previous academic research of Chelsea Wolfe, I found it all the more important to bring her works into the academic fields of research by focusing my study on how her songs relates to nature.

Wolfe’s body of work consists of seven studio albums and a smattering of singles and bonus tracks.²⁹ From these I have opted for a selection of songs that I find representative of a musical and vocal relationship to the natural world.³⁰ Although there is a discernible evolution in her discography that progressively embrace and explore a relationship to the natural world, that perhaps can be said to peak with her latest album *Birth of Violence* (2019) which contains several explicit connections to nature, environment and gender, these tendencies are prevalent much earlier, buried deep within more industrial albums, thematically centred around topics like mental health, sexual violence and sleep.

Instead of limiting this study to a singular album I have opted for a thematic selection that highlights how concepts of nature and femininity appear and are conceived and embodied in her music, throughout her discography. Because the primary focus of my analysis is Wolfe’s vocal expression, this contributes to define the limits of this study. A thematic selection enables a more nuanced and complex ecofeminist reading of different perspectives on the relationship between

²⁹ Wolfe composed the album *Mistakes in Parting* in 2006, which was never officially released, and thus will not be included in my analysis. In Part II of the thesis, I provide a comprehensive and chronological introduction to her entire body of work.

³⁰ Wolfe has collaborated on many albums and singles, such as an album together with King Dude, a couple of albums by her bandmates’ band Converge, her drummers’ side project Mrs. Piss, and on a couple of singles such as ‘Anhedonia’ together with Emma Ruth Rundle (Sargent House, 2021), and ‘Diana’, track 2 on *Dark Knights: Death Metal Soundtrack* (Loma Vista Recordings, 2021). While some of these are credited to Chelsea Wolfe, and would make an excellent addition to my analysis, I have opted to instead focus on her officially released solo albums and singles.

nature and womanhood, and shows that the connection to nature is found in unexpected places – like a dandelion growing through cracks in the asphalt.

To give an accurate representation of Wolfe’s lyrics, I cite larger textual inclusions for transparency and to allow the reader a fuller impression. Although Wolfe’s official website provides access to the lyrics on most of the songs, some songs are absent and their accuracy cannot be verified. In the instances where songs absent from the lyrics section on her website become the focus of my study, I include an elaborated reflection in a footnote for transparency. Furthermore, while the official website is a reliable source for the lyrics themselves, the formatting leaves something to be desired in terms of readability: the lyrics are written out entirely in uppercase letters, and there is no differentiation between the different parts of the songs, such as verse and chorus.³¹ As such, I have opted for the most frequently used formatting of Wolfe’s songs found online, with space between different stanzas, most commonly verse and chorus. Because her official webpage stylises the lyrics with uppercase letters, making it difficult to follow where sentences and lines begin and end, I have opted to consistently stylise the lyrics in lower case letter for the sake of readability, leaving the sentence structure equally as open as the official lyrics. Sections with significantly different sound or emotions are separated from each other with a paragraph break to enhance the accuracy of the reader’s impression and reflect how the text is actually sung.

Previous Research

When it comes to specific previous research on the works of Chelsea Wolfe – apart from the plentiful reviews of her songs and albums – there are no peer reviewed studies or analyses, no further explorations of her music within any academic fields that I could find. Because of this, the categories of relevant previous research have to be broadened to include adjacent and some not so adjacent fields and topics.

On research pertaining voice, Roland Barthes’ reflection on vocality and textuality in the 1977 essay ‘The Grain of the Voice’ has gained considerable influence on contemporary thought. Barthes theorises the ‘grain’ that is inherent in spoken and sung vocalisation, and how it is ‘the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs’.³² Moving focus from the breath to the oral cavity with the throat, tongue, muscles and membranes, the grain is

³¹ Chelsea Wolfe. *Lyrics*. Chelsea Wolfe Official Webpage, accessed January 4, 2022. <chelseawolfe.net/lyrics>

³² Roland Barthes, [1977] ‘The Grain of the Voice’, in *Image, Music, Text: Essays*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 188.

understood as more than merely timbre – it is the language of sound; the sung writing of language.³³ For Barthes, song becomes a place of phonic and musical texture from where language grows, and Adriana Cavarero opposes this understanding of voice in what she claims as in service of language, reduced to a bridge between body and speech: ‘It is not enough to tune into the sonority, into bodily pleasure, into the song of the flesh, or into the rhythmic drives from which this song flows; this attunement alone will not suffice to pull speech itself from the deadly grip of logocentricism’.³⁴

Previous research into specifically feminist readings of female singer-songwriters includes three doctoral theses that all concern female subjectivity in the context of popular music culture.

In *The Representation of the Feminine, Feminist and Musical Subject in Popular Music Culture* (2001), Emma Mayhew explores the representation of female subjectivity through an analysis of three different subject positions related to popular music culture; the feminine, the feminist and the musical performer. Mayhew argues that women are still understood in the mainstream music press as patriarchal stereotypes, such as the femme fatale, androgyne, the little girl, the mother figure and the temperamental diva. These stereotypes constitute icons of feminine performance, visually as well as sonically. Furthermore, the identities of the feminine, feminist and female creative subject are negotiated through contradictory social discourses that provide alternative spaces for the interpretation of women’s musical performances, such as how the singer’s voice can be identified with many different subject positions, depending on the meaning attached to it.

In *Voice, Body and Performance in Tori Amos, Björk and Diamanda Galás: Towards a Theory of Feminine Vocal Performance* (2009), Esther Zaplana Rodríguez examines the meaning of the voice in the vocal and music performances of three women artists. In a cultural analysis of the relationship between the visual and vocal, Zaplana Rodríguez argues that vocalicity in musical production becomes the means for the female performer to construct her own (self) representation, thus affirming herself as a speaking subject in culture. The theoretical framework consists of French feminist philosophy and the ideas of Irigaray, Cixous and Kristeva, where Irigaray emerges as the main theorist.

In *A Gendered Musicological Study of the Work of Four Leading Female Singer-Songwriters: Laura Nyro, Joni Mitchell³⁵, Kate Bush, and Tori Amos* (2012), Levent Donat Berköz studies the role of gender in popular music by exploring representations of different female subjectivities and a feminine mode of writing. Berköz’ thesis aims to constitute a theoretical bridge between musicology and feminist theory through the examination of the relationship between text and body. Similar to Rodríguez’

³³ Barthes, ‘The Grain of the Voice’, 182 and 185.

³⁴ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 15.

³⁵ Of the covers that Chelsea Wolfe officially has released or performed live, the latest happens to be a cover of Joni Mitchell’s ‘Woodstock’; Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Woodstock’, track 1 on *Woodstock/Green Altar* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

thesis, the theoretical framework draws primarily upon French feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis through the ideas of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous.

During the Victorian era there was an increased aesthetic interest in nature, and romantic era artworks and literature portray the awe-inspiring vastness and wilderness of oceans and mountains. In *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (1998), Barbara T. Gates explores how Victorian and Edwardian women relate to science and nature in a society that constructed women *as* nature. As such, Gates' book constitutes 'a feminist cultural study intended to re-cuperate and spotlight women's contributions in an effort to revise history'.³⁶

While the women in Gates' study are shown struggling with the social attitude that forced an identification of women with nature, in *Reconceiving Nature: Ecofeminism in Late Victorian Women's Poetry* (2019), Patricia Murphy reveals anxieties of pollution in the poetry of Victorian women during the industrialisation and its reliance on coal. As the cities became visibly dirtier from unregulated coal burning; the sky darker and the rivers and buildings covered in soot, the longing for unspoiled nature permeated the collective consciousness during the time. Women poets contested the exploitation of the natural world and challenged the prevailing assumption of nature's inferiority. Murphy's study is an example of how contemporary ecofeminist readings of art contribute to a wider understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature, and how this relationship is gendered.

Along the same line there have been several ecofeminist examinations and reconfiguration of nature and the sublime. It becomes apparent in the philosophy of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant that the experience of the sublime is exclusively masculine, and decades of feminist and ecocritical readings present several interesting points about masculinity and the desire to conquer nature, as well as the possibility of a feminine relationship to the sublime.³⁷

This study adopts a similar disposition as the ecofeminist readings of the Victorian women's poetry, while utilising a feminist application of Critical Musicology to discern how womanhood and body appear through an ecofeminist perspective.

Navigating This Study

In the analysis of the songs themselves, I have opted for a thematic structure, collecting individual sections of the analysis together under a cohesive theme. Before that, however, I begin Part II with an introduction, providing a comprehensive overview of Wolfe's voice, sound and album releases,

³⁶ Barbara T. Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 5.

³⁷ See Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime'.

giving the reader a grasp of what she sounds like, as well as the musical and vocal progression of her body of work. This aims to elucidate and make tangible the relevance of her vocal and musical expression for this study of how her songs relate to womanhood and the natural world.

After the introduction follows the four thematic and overarching chapters that constitute the study itself. The first chapter, 'Birth, Body and Voice', concerns the woman as origin, through the cultural and historical framing of nature as a female entity – Mother Earth, and the preverbal sphere where vocalic pleasure reigns, which Julia Kristeva calls the maternal *chora*. With these notions in mind, I analyse how Wolfe's songs relate to this maternal origin through Cavarero's ontology of voice – where the division of logos associate the feminine with body and sound as sign, and the masculine with thought and speech as signifying. Furthermore, this section contains a discussion of the ecofeminist revisioning of the sublime into a female experience, and how the sublime encounter with nature relate to Wolfe's songs.

Following a discussion of the ecofeminist critique of the sexualised language surrounding nature and its destruction, the chapter '(Sexual) Violence and Collective Pain' constitutes an exploration of the connection between (sexual) violence and nature in Wolfe's vocal and musical expression, where I analyse the embodiment of a collective subject, revolting against the violence inflicted upon it and seeking revenge. The destruction of the natural world and the subject's connection to it are further elaborated upon in 'The Self and the Natural World', in relation to the ecofeminist critique of human civilisation's idea of unlimited progress. The grief over the disconnect to the natural world can be sensed in how Wolfe's songs relate to the longing for unspoiled nature and embody a primal urge to connect. This leads to an exploration of how Wolfe embodies the feral and untamed through vocalisation and music by embracing the animalistic in voice and employing techniques that subvert the musicality of the instruments.

The final chapter, 'Ocean and Death', relates the ambivalent meaning and emotions associated with water and the ocean. Through Cavarero's reading of Homer's Sirens and an understanding of the patriarchal myths of femininity that conflate woman with both birth and death, I elaborate on the relationship between death and the ocean in Wolfe's songs. Framing it as ambivalent, as both alluring and ominous, there is something both beautiful and dangerous about the ocean, as it threatens to dissolve the self. Furthermore, this chapter is a reading of how the human subject of modernity lives in discontinuity with the earth, and the acceptance or even welcoming of death as a return to the earth that can be sensed in Wolfe's songs.

Part II

The voice and sound of Chelsea Wolfe

Chelsea Wolfe is soft-spoken, and her voice has an introverted quality to it.³⁸ Her singing voice is light, hazy and in the higher range it has an airy sonorous texture. The use of technical vocal effects on her more industrial albums are used liberally and there her voice is augmented and processed with reverb, echo or delay. It is often distorted, just like the heavy guitars. Her vocal style is rather unconventional in its understatement, a quality that is far from what is typically celebrated in a singer in popular music. This understated and raw style of vocals may be attributed to adhering to conventions of the genres that have influenced her music, primarily folk music and doom metal, as well as the vocal conventions of female singer-songwriters. I would like to argue, however, that her vocal style maintains a profound humanity in its expression. By not conforming to the ideals of a beautiful and/or powerfully belting feminine voice, she is able to express a human vulnerability, but at the same time this, along with heavy use of technical effects like distortion and reverb, gives her vocals an ethereal, otherworldly quality. The expression of her voice through this distortion plays with distance and harshness, sometimes matching the heavily distorted guitars, sometimes contrasting them. Although this sounds like a paradox, Adriana Cavarero writes about vocalisation as the flux of soul to mouth – for the soul and not the ear.³⁹ This is something I believe is useful to keep in mind when it comes to understanding musical and artistic expression. In the academic fields of art and aesthetics, we are long past the conviction that art is simply an expression of beauty. But this notion becomes more complex when it comes to popular music. Yes, thrashing guitars and thundering drums can be as full of meaning as a power ballad that brings tears to the eyes of the listener, but there is still a preoccupation with the ideal female voice. Although this notion varies with musical genre, ideals of range, power and pitch remain whether we're speaking of opera, jazz, power metal or pop. However, Cavarero maintains that the female voice resists subjugation and is impossible to domesticate. Therefore, it carries a subversive potential in how it disturbs the system of reason – voice alone has the ability to express what words only punctuate.⁴⁰ This subversive potential is further actualised in a female voice that resists the notion of the traditional ideals of a feminine voice.

³⁸ Sargent House, 'Chelsea Wolfe – "Birth of Violence" Tour Documentary (Official),' YouTube Video, 29:59, September 21, 2021, accessed November 29, 2021, https://youtu.be/6CBRGCrZ_Bc.

³⁹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 44.

⁴⁰ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 118f.

Musical sensation intrudes bodily pleasure into the space that Immanuel Kant claims to be reserved for thought, and sensation and musical pleasure must therefore be severed from meaning.⁴¹ However, the oral expression of thoughts and ideas through speech travel via the body. It is not only musical pleasure that intrudes bodily pleasure into this thought-space, it is the voice itself. Cavarero asserts that voice places speech back into the body and the physical realm: 'Unlike thought, which tends to reside in the immaterial otherworld of ideas, speech is always a question of bodies, filled with drives, desires and blood.'⁴²

Kramer further elaborates on the pleasure of music and how it resonates with the listener to create a synergy, and how this is a synergy of gender:

In the receptive ear, willing or unwilling, at the threshold of synergy, music brings to life Jacques Lacan's cryptic formula that the Unconscious is the discourse of the Other. The music identifies the 'innermost,' most 'authentic' feelings of the listener with the feelings of someone else, and reveals that these feelings can be authentic and innermost only and precisely because they are those of someone else. For the listener, the resulting position of derivativeness, of secondariness, corresponds to the repressed feminine position embedded within gender-polarized masculinity. But it also corresponds to a position of absolute pleasure, a site of fullness, identity, and bodily vitality rather than of loss, dissociation and castration. The music charges (entrusts and electrifies) the listener with the desire of synergy; it carries out pied-piper-like, a violation or coercion or seduction or suffusion or liberation or *jouissance*.⁴³

Music resonates with us physically and invokes sensation, in a way that Cavarero's idea of flux of soul to mouth that claims that voice is for the soul and not the ear renders comprehensible. Music is for the soul and not the ear, much like visual arts are for the soul and not the eye. As such I believe it can be attributed to the resonance of the sound of Wolfe's music. Her sound oscillates from acoustic and intimate, to incessant and thrashing, to surreal soundscapes. The musical expression aligns the sound with a seemingly depthless emotional core, something primal that resonates with a fury and desperation, or melancholy and longing. And the idea of music as a sensation that bypasses the ear and resonates within the listeners soul becomes highly relevant for an understanding of Wolfe's vocal and musical expression as something raw and feral that refuses to be domesticated.

⁴¹ Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, 6.

⁴² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 134.

⁴³ Lawrence Kramer, *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 110f.

‘Flux, Hiss, Welt, Groan’

In Chelsea Wolfe’s discography, there is a discernible movement in the exploration of themes and ideas that develop musically as well as vocally over her body of work. Different albums draw from a variety of genres that influence her musical style, most prominently folk music, doom metal and gothic rock, but she also experiments with industrial, darkwave and noise rock elements. This section consists of a brief description of her seven officially released solo albums, their sound as well as some of their influences, to give a comprehensible and chronological overview of her discography. Here, I also point out some of her recurring musical, vocal and textual ideas that are relevant for the following analysis of how the natural world is conceived through her songs.

As the first album she composed, *Mistakes in Parting* (2006), was never released, her first official album is *The Grime and the Glow* (2010).⁴⁴ For most of it, it is just Wolfe and her guitar, disturbing riffs and haunting voice, the songs unsettling and uneasy. There is something nightmarish over the album, from the dirty and dismal sound of the recording, to the dreary themes of the lyrics.

Her second album *Apokalypsis* (2011), stylised as *Ἀποκάλυψις*, has been labelled as doom-folk and features re-recordings of two of the songs from *The Grime and the Glow*. Aesthetically centred around the doomed bleakness of a dystopic and desolate wasteland, the sound of the music is raw and primal. Songs like ‘Tracks (Tall Bodies)’ and ‘The Wasteland’ draw on the machine-like and artificial, where the lyrics depict an empty and mechanical world, devoid of humanity. The album carries a fatalist melancholy while featuring a rather natural sound, lacking the heavy distortion and liberal use of other technical effects on the guitars, drums and vocals that characterise Wolfe’s later releases. Instead, the musical atmosphere on *Apokalypsis* creates a shift in perspective to an internal one, rather than becoming a musical projection of the machine-like artificiality of the world that is discernible in certain songs, hope is replaced with a defeatist dread of never experiencing joy again.

Her third album is *Unknown Rooms: A Collection of Acoustic Songs* (2012), and is considered to be a compilation album rather than the next thematically cohesive full-length album.⁴⁵ It is a quiet and vulnerable collection of songs, alternating acoustic guitar and piano as the main instrument.

In contrast to the acoustic understatement of *Unknown Rooms*, her fourth album, *Pain is Beauty* (2013), heavily features synthesizers and the sequenced beats of drum machines, lending a more electronic edge to the gothic and oppressive atmosphere.⁴⁶ Madder and wilder than the previous albums, the sound oscillates between suffocating and harsh with drum machines and synthesizers

⁴⁴ Chelsea Wolfe, *The Grime and the Glow* (Pendul Sound Recording, 2010, compact disc).

⁴⁵ Chelsea Wolfe, *Unknown Rooms: A Collection of Acoustic Songs* (Sargent House, 2012, compact disc).

⁴⁶ Chelsea Wolfe, *Pain is Beauty* (Sargent House, 2013, compact disc).

on ‘The Warden’ or ‘Feral Love’, to the hollow and echoing twang of guitars and reverbed vocals on ‘Reigns’ and ‘They’ll Clap When You’re Gone’.

The fifth album is *Abyss* (2015) where the collision of genre influences becomes apparent, blending darkwave with elements of doom metal, folk music and gothic rock into a sound that grinds with distorted guitars and is enhanced with the low, static, staccato of violas, fleshing out the sound together with heavy drums, synthesizer and ambience.⁴⁷ It is a sound that can be considered deeper than on any other album, a mirror of the title, an abyss that stretches from Wolfe’s wind-like upper vocal register, down to that distinct grinding growl of the guitars and fuzzy bass of the beat that creates a musical texture that can be felt physically in the body of the listener, such as the pulsating heartbeat of ‘After the Fall’ that explodes into the chorus, showing off the seamless range of Wolfe’s vocal register. While the lyrics are thematically centred around sleeping, dreaming and waking up, the principal lyrical motif is sleep-paralysis, which is musically enhanced and accentuated by the abyssal depth and dreamlike fluidity of the sound, placing the listener in the space of a dream turning into a nightmare and then back again.

Wolfe’s sixth studio album *Hiss Spun* (2017) has a distinct grinding, industrial metal sound to it.⁴⁸ She mixes heavily distorted guitars and vocals with twisted, noisy soundscapes. There is a discernible shift in her song-writing that encompasses a tangible feminine perspective, a rage at injustices and the oppressive nature of gendered violence.⁴⁹ Thematically the songs concern mental health, family matters and sexual violence; and while the album itself is not the primary focus of my exploration of nature and womanhood in Wolfe’s music, the textual inclusions of *Hiss Spun* may elucidate something about the way her vocals and sound can be understood. The lyrics include several short words that are recurring throughout the track list. Most notable are ‘flux’, ‘hiss’, ‘welt’ and ‘groan’, as seen in track titles like ‘Welt’ and ‘Particle Flux’. But they are also featured in the lyrics of the songs themselves. ‘The Culling’ ends with:

flux
hiss
welt
groan⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Chelsea Wolfe, *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

⁴⁸ Chelsea Wolfe, *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2017, compact disc).

⁴⁹ Wolfe spoke about the influence of anger on *Hiss Spun* in an interview, stating: ‘There’s anger that’s directly expressed from the viewpoint of a woman, and thinking about what my foremothers had to go through, and what I had to go through sometimes. [...] Basically, my great-grandfather was a pedophile and fucked up every woman in my family. I don’t always feel that it’s my story to tell, because it was an older generation of women who had the worst of it.’ Quoted in Steve Appleford, ‘Chelsea Wolfe: In Search of Brutal Honesty,’ *RevolverMag*, August 31, 2017, accessed December 7, 2021. <<https://www.revolvermag.com/music/chelsea-wolfe-search-brutal-honesty>>

⁵⁰ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘The Culling’, track 5 on *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2017, compact disc).

And the entirety of the lyrics of ‘Welt’ consists of:

flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan
flux, hiss, welt, groan⁵¹

I find these words a particularly interesting thematic inclusion that permeates the album. There is something mechanical about them, that can be associated with the buzzing and whirring of machines, especially as the sound of the album is distinctly industrial, where the instruments are incessantly grinding, whining or screaming in a sonically devastating realm. However, as at least three of the words can be interpreted as directly related to the mouth and the voice, they evoke Cavarero’s assertion that the voice places speech firmly back into the body: ‘The voice vibrates, the tongue moves. Wet membranes and taste buds are mixed up with the flavor of the tones.’⁵² In a letter that has been quoted in several online music magazines, Wolfe writes:

A way for me to bring the songs together on this record was a list of short words with big meanings: flux, hiss, welt, groan, swarm, spun, scrape, [and] strain. They became a sort of guide. Flux represents movement and flow. Hiss is life force and white noise. Welt is the brutality of life, [and] groan represented sensuality and death.⁵³

The mechanical and organic associations of the words and the heavy and grinding sound of *Hiss Spun* create an interesting juxtaposition that encompasses the complexity of these deceptively simple ‘big words’. While they are prominently featured as textual inclusions on the album, they also contain ‘big meanings’, I would argue that they also remain closely related to an understanding of Wolfe’s particular vocal and musical style. In songs like ‘The Culling’ and ‘Welt’ these four recurring and repeated words have a haunting quality to them, but they can almost be said to be expelled rather than said, sung or whispered – perhaps onomatopoeic in their utterance. Like an expulsion of energy and meaning. From her letter, we can relate these ‘big meanings’ of the words, like movement and flow, life force and white noise, sensuality and death directly to the voice. Similar to how Cavarero maintains that the voice plays a large part in the infant’s first breath, the rhythmic movement and cadence of relations in the vocalic sphere and the animal’s yelp or cry in the pre-semantic realm of *phone*; flux, hiss, welt and groan situate the body and the voice at the

⁵¹ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Welt’, track 10 on *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2017, compact disc).

⁵² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 134.

⁵³ Quoted, Dianca London, ‘Chelsea Wolfe’s New Album Finds Stability in Chaos,’ *Vice*, August 14, 2017, accessed November 21, 2021. <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/gyygew/chelsea-wolfes-new-album-finds-stability-in-chaos-16-psyche>>

heart of Wolfe's musical expression.⁵⁴ Although these words and meanings permeate the entirety of *Hiss Spun*, and seem so integrated in her vocal and musical style, they are not explicitly present on any of her other albums, apart from the stanza 'let it burn / hear it groan / restrained desire / cast it down' on the song 'Be All Things' from her seventh and most recent album *Birth of Violence* (2019).⁵⁵

Since *Unknown Rooms*, the sound of Wolfe's music has continuously grown and been gradually fleshed out, album by album, and developed into the relentless soundscape of *Hiss Spun* where the sound grows massive and heavy with industrial and doom metal influences. As such, her seventh studio album *Birth of Violence* takes a pivotal turn in its entirely acoustic sound (apart from 'Deranged for Rock & Roll', which features familiar distorted, screeching electric guitars).⁵⁶ As the technical effects of Wolfe's voice are dialled back, the songs gain an intimate feel as her voice is perceived as more natural and closer to the ear of the listener. While the sound is stripped and quieted down, it still blooms with hollowness in the reverb, strings and ambience, allowing Wolfe to display the richness of her vocal expression. We can see a return to her slow, deliberate, acoustic roots of *Mistakes in Parting* and *Unknown Rooms*, embracing the naked and natural sound while it still feels evolved and mature, more contemplating. There is a conscious shift on the album towards an expression of more clearly defined themes of destruction of nature, a gendered connection to the earth as well as other ecofeminist ideas that are expressed and embodied musically and vocally. While *Hiss Spun* has a distinct feminine perspective, *Birth of Violence* explores both masculine and feminine aspects of the human subject's connection to the earth.⁵⁷

The journey of Wolfe's body of work shows the evolution of a songwriter experimenting with, and exploring, her musical, vocal and textual expression through the acoustic and intimate, the industrial ringing and whirring and then back again. Through soft whispering to more powerful singing to screaming and then to the intimate and naked voice. The wide range of her musical sound and vocal timbre utilises the multitude of ideas that can be expressed through her distinctly ethereal and hazy voice, constantly embracing new ideas, sounds and genres.

⁵⁴ The use of the German word *welt* (*world*) on *Hiss Spun*, as well as *erde* (*earth*) on *Birth of Violence* are very interesting as they may allude to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, where the notions of *earth* and *world* are integral to his critique of aesthetics in *On the Origin of the Work of Art* (1950). While further analysis of Wolfe's German textual inclusions falls outside of my study, it would certainly be an interesting point of departure for a wholly different analysis of Wolfe's songwriting.

⁵⁵ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Be All Things', track 5 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

⁵⁶ Wolfe, *Birth of Violence*, 2019.

⁵⁷ Steve Appleford, 'Chelsea Wolfe on New Acoustic Album, "Embracing the Feminine and Masculine"', *RevolverMag*, March 12, 2019, accessed January 1 2022. <<https://www.revolvermag.com/music/chelsea-wolfe-new-acoustic-album-embracing-feminine-and-masculine>>

Birth, Body and Voice

‘Woman Is the Origin’

‘Woman is the origin’, sings Chelsea Wolfe.⁵⁸ Then the line is repeated, multi-tracked and spoken over the last held note, to end the second verse. We hear it as both sonorous and semantic – song as well as speech.⁵⁹ The two verses are punctuated by interjections of the word ‘erde’, the title of the song and *earth* in German, along with ‘all-dirt’. Earth is the overarching theme of the song, and the only two lines that are both sonorous and semantic are these: ‘woman is the origin (woman is the origin) / all-dirt (all-dirt)’.⁶⁰

Cavarero notes that in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the notion of logos as *phone semantike* is what separates the animal and human voice; while an animal has a voice, *phone*, it is not a voice that is signifying, *semantike*. Instead, the animal voice is a sign, *semeion*, of pain or pleasure; a voice prior to speech.⁶¹ Aristotle’s division of speech and sound carries gendered connotations, as briefly mentioned in the ‘Methodology’ section: because the symbolic patriarchal order identifies body with the feminine and reason with the masculine, voice as associated with the body becomes feminised; secondary and inessential.⁶² In Wolfe’s ‘Erde’, the difference between meaning carried in *phone* and *semantike* becomes irrelevant; the connection between earth and womanhood is shown to be an undisputable fact in the feminine *phone* as well as in the masculine *semantike*.⁶³

When Cavarero asserts that voice places speech back into the body, it becomes tangible; physical; matter: ‘speech is always a question of bodies, filled with drives, desires and blood. The voice vibrates, the tongue moves. Wet membranes and taste buds are mixed up with the flavor of the tones matter; desires, physicality, flesh, blood.’⁶⁴ It is *erde*; earth, all-dirt. Origin, matter and end – birth, life and death.

The concept of a Mother Earth permeates humanity’s collective consciousness, with roots in the ancient Greeks who gave their Earth goddess the name Gaia. In most cultures throughout history, this understanding of our planet personified as a feminine entity with life-giving and nurturing aspects is uncontroversial and comprehensible.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Erde’, track 6 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

⁵⁹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 35.

⁶⁰ Wolfe, ‘Erde’, 2019. With my addition of the spoken repetition in parenthesis.

⁶¹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 34.

⁶² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 6.

⁶³ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 107.

⁶⁴ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 134.

⁶⁵ Patricia Murphy, *Reconceiving Nature*, 6f.

The framing of reproduction as an exclusively female property rather than something profoundly human likens motherhood and birth to a biblical genesis, a divine creation, undisturbed by male involvement, separate and severed from the sexual union of man and woman. Mies and Shiva therefore claim that patriarchal civilisation can be understood as men's desire to take part in creation, a vain replacement for the reproduction of human life: "They are not the beginning. This was still evident to the old Greeks. Mothers are *arche*, the beginning of human life. Therefore men invented a technology for which mothers are not necessary. Technologies like the atom bomb and genetic technology or the Internet are such 'motherless children'."⁶⁶

The concept of woman as origin makes the connection between nature and womanhood divine. It has taken root in the eco-/feminist discourse as well; nature is the Mother Earth from whom we are born, and to whom we shall return after death:

Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her; she is the source of his being and the realm that he subjugates to his will; Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself. Now ally, now enemy, she appears as the dark chaos from whence all life dwells up, as this life itself, and as the over-yonder toward which life tends. Woman sums up Nature as Mother, Wife and Idea; these forms now mingle and now conflict, and each of them wears a double visage.⁶⁷

The concept of nature as mother, wife and idea is intimately bound up in the idea of nature as giving and abundant. However, in the ecofeminist tradition of thought, nature's abundance and generosity have been exploited; man has violated nature in an egregious breach of trust. Ynestra King writes that in order to build the Western industrial civilisation, nature had to be made to serve the needs of men, dominated and overcome: "She was stripped of her magical powers and properties and was reduced to "natural resources" to be exploited by human beings to fulfil human needs and purposes which were defined in opposition to nature."⁶⁸

Passages like these reveal the intimate connection between nature and womanhood in the ecofeminist discourse. In the writings of King, de Beauvoir, Mies and Shiva, and many before and after, nature becomes a divine, feminine entity with magical powers, feared by men with the desire to control her. Nature becomes an ancient and omniscient Mother Earth who rules over life and death – she gives life, and takes it away. And women are understood to have a unique relationship with nature; while men fear and desire to dominate her, women experience something more akin

⁶⁶ Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, xxvi.

⁶⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Random House, 1968), 144.

⁶⁸ Ynestra King, 'The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology', 20.

to a kinship.⁶⁹ In Mies and Shiva's opinion, women are nearer to the spiritual ecofeminist perspective than men, and working women in the South are nearer to it than urban, middle-class women in the North. The proximity of work to the earth and its natural cycles corresponds to the nearness to this ecofeminist perspective; growing food, rather than buying it from a supermarket, cultivates an understanding and respect for the Earth and her life-giving properties.⁷⁰

The maternal origin can be related to music and vocalisation as well – after all, the first voice one hears is a woman's, maintains Cavarero.⁷¹ Before the unlimited phonic expressions of babies become tamed into speech, they exist in what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic *chora*, the preverbal sphere where rhythmic and vocalic drives reign, before entrance into the symbolic order inhabited by the paternal law of the sign.⁷² Cavarero further elaborates on the significance of the maternal semiotic *chora* for the separation of *phone* and *semantike*:

[T]he pleasure rooted in the acoustic sphere has above all a subversive function; that is, it destabilizes language as a system that produces subject. [...] Language, in short, exploits, reduces and regulates the marvelous exercise of the infantile voice. Stripped of its excesses and its imagination, the infant's emission is frozen into the syllables and tones that language permits.⁷³

Because of the association of language to the paternal symbolic order, vocalisation carries with it an implicit drive to return to this untamed maternal *chora*, to shed language and return to its physical origin.

'Goddess Flesh'

The personification of nature as a divine mother is explored in the themes of ancestry and woman as origin in Wolfe's music. Alongside 'Erde', these themes are heavily featured on the largely acoustic album *The Mother Road* (2019). It opens with the title song and the line 'took the mother road / down to goddess flesh', sung in a lower register which lends an assertiveness to Wolfe's voice.⁷⁴ The guitar does not make its entrance until the last word, and thus her voice carries the melody on its own, without discernible vocal effects, against the ambient synthesizer soundscape. The absence of effects, as well as the clear pronunciation of the words, give her voice a quality that is profoundly human, embodying the solitary, but determined, search for the human subject's own

⁶⁹ See Gates, *Kindred Nature*.

⁷⁰ Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 20.

⁷¹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 106.

⁷² See Julia Kristeva, *Revolutions in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

⁷³ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 132f.

⁷⁴ Chelsea Wolfe, 'The Mother Road', Track 1 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc). The mother road can also be understood as a referral to Route 66 in America.

origin, through the line of mothers down to the divine source of origin – and in finding the goddess flesh, she finds the piece of herself that is missing, a divine connection and a power that has the ability to reshape her into something else.

guess I needed something to break me
guess I needed something to shake me up
guess I needed someone to break me
guess I needed someone to shake me out
it was you
it was you

bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform
bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform
bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform
bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform

bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform
bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform
bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform
bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform

guess I needed someone to break me⁷⁵

The last half of ‘The Mother Road’ becomes almost a chant wherein the subject finds what they need; to be broken down before being reshaped and rebuilt. In the final part, the border between the ‘I’ and the ‘you’ seem to have collapsed and the subject has become one with the goddess flesh, the mother and the origin. The transformation is described as a rebirth through the power of nature; a budding flower blossoming. And the sound of this transformation, through the repetition of the same line, same melody with increasing variation, becomes a chant – a spell or a prayer. The song becomes almost religious in its reverence and rapture, as the mother roads leads to worship of the goddess flesh, as well as becoming one with it.

This religious connection with a divine nature that gives and nurtures is prominent in ‘Green Altar’ from the single *Woodstock/Green Altar* (2021).

in this house of rapture, I am fit to love
the language of nature in sine curve
the shimmer beating heart of universe
the shimmer beating heart of universe

your love is a waterfall
your love is the bait

⁷⁵ Wolfe, ‘The Mother Road’, 2019. The official lyrics end after the first four lines of ‘bloom and eclipse them, wake up and transform’. I have added the last four repetitions as well as the final ‘guess I needed someone to break me’, to more accurately and transparently represent how the text appear in the song itself.

I'll teach you my language
you'll show me your magic
your love is a waterfall

lay down on that green altar
like a bride, like a flower
slowly unfolding
binging and purging
your love is a waterfall
your love is a waterfall

the moment came, and I'd been waiting long
and then I heard their voices like a song
I'd been waiting, I've been waiting long
such love could make an atheist turn to God

lay down on that green altar
like a bride, like a flower
slowly unfolding
binging and purging
your love is a waterfall
your love is a waterfall

your love is a waterfall⁷⁶

The textual themes of 'Green Altar' are centred around the abundance and love of nature. Here, Wolfe's voice is accompanied only by silence, wind-like ambience and the soft plucking of acoustic guitar strings. A soft rumbling, reminiscent of waves of thunder, is faintly audible in the background ambience throughout the song. The first line is sung in silence before the first G minor chord. The guitar continues to punctuate her vocal lines, but lets the words ring out and stand by themselves. The ending of the second verse, 'such love could make an atheist turn to God', is followed by silence, further reinforcing the religious experience of nature, alongside the images of laying down on a green altar like a bride, opening up like a flower, to receive an abundance of love. It is a love so powerful and overflowing that it cannot be contained, as illustrated by the need to binge and purge; to let oneself be filled again and again. It is a drive to unite with nature, eliminate the separation that culture and reason imposes on us.⁷⁷ And this desire for connection has the implications of marriage, a union for life.

Wolfe gives nature a voice and a language. It speaks in sine curve; the wave pattern of soundwaves present in nature like wind and waves. The universe has a rhythm and a pulse in its

⁷⁶ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Green Altar', Track 2 on *Woodstock/Green Altar* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc). These lyrics are unavailable on Wolfe's official webpage. This formatting is used in the most commonly available version of the lyrics, with my adjustment to lower case letters.

⁷⁷ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 71.

beating heart. Voices can be heard, like a song. Her own voice oscillates between soft, hazy and airy in the higher range, and clear and articulate in the lower. When she sings that ‘your love is a waterfall’, the line softly cascades into the ear of the listener, higher and lower, later accompanied by harmonies to create a vocal waterfall, stretched wide, and almost ethereal by its airy quality. Here, the theme of abundance become musicalized in a song that is otherwise almost naked, stripped back to the bare essentials; Wolfe’s acoustic guitar and her natural, undistorted voice.

‘Friedrich’s Little Forest’

In the European Romantic tradition, male writers most commonly associate the sublime with mountain scenery, and the concept of the sublime was configured as an aesthetic quality in nature. Distinct from beauty, the sublime is understood as a quality of greatness that, when encountered, exceeds our comprehension. Closely connected with awe-inspiring terror, the staggering greatness of vast oceans, towering mountains and the divinity found in nature inspire the experience of the sublime in the subject, where fear or danger becomes pleasurable. The notion of the sublime as distinct from beauty was brought into prominence by writers such as the Earl of Shaftesbury, John Dennis, and Joseph Addison, prior to Edmund Burke who is generally considered to have unequivocally established the mutual exclusivity of the beautiful and the sublime.⁷⁸

The notion of the sublime has been scrutinised and revisioned by ecofeminists critiquing it for being conceived as masculinist and Anthropocene. In his discussion of Percy Bryce Shelley’s poem ‘Mont Blanc’, Patrick D. Murphy points out that the sublime experience of nature’s power for Shelley, of mountain snow melting into water, is still perceived through the Anthropocene notion of the human benefit of harnessing this natural power:

Thus, as frequently is the case, the Romantic male poet ends up emphasizing through the trope of transcendence the intellectual appropriation of natural experience as symbol rather than sensuous, literal engagement with a material reality. For such a poet, the sublime reinforces perceptions of a naturalized hierarchy whereby nature is reduced to an inspirational vehicle for the benefit of men capable of engaging in potentially sublime activities.⁷⁹

This differs from how Barbara T. Gates identifies the sublime in the poetry of late Victorian women writers. Gates asserts that the ‘Victorian female sublime emphasized not power *over* nature but the power *of* nature in a given place, and not a rhetoric of presence so much as a rhetoric based in absence, especially absence of the self.’⁸⁰ The power of nature that is emphasised, in addition to

⁷⁸ Murphy, ‘An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime’, 81f.

⁷⁹ Murphy, ‘An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime’, 83.

⁸⁰ Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 170.

the experiences of vastness, infinity and time that Burke describes, is a loss of human distinctiveness, of individualistic identity. However, Murphy recounts that the women in Gates' study treat this loss as a gain, as a 'sense of integration, inhabitation, identification, and relatedness denied them by the patriarchal societies in which they lived and which emphasized their separateness in order to maintain illusions of individualism and autonomy for their male counterparts'.⁸¹ On the other hand, Murphy proceeds to suggest that Gates' 'Victorian female sublime' not actually defines the sublime experience, but rather something different that has been internalised and interpreted from a different vantage point than the traditional masculinist conception of the sublime.⁸² He further asserts that an ecofeminist revisioning of the sublime should focus on feminist interpretation rather than female experience:

It also requires a rethinking of the masculinist attitudes toward power and violence that seek out and infuse near death events and reckless behavior with delight and an egotistical illusion of mastery. It challenges the hierarchical domination that places beauty and women on a lower level than sublime terror and the men who experience it.⁸³

Regardless of whether or not the women in Gates' study experience the sublime in the traditional Burkean or Kantian sense, the loss of human distinctiveness and individualistic identity that is emphasised in the 'Victorian female sublime' can be discerned in how Wolfe depicts the encounter with the power of nature in her songs, alongside more traditional aspects of the sublime. Connections to the greatness of space are present in the open plains of 'Flatlands', the dark depths of 'The Abyss', as well as the cathedral-like conception of nature in 'Green Altar'.⁸⁴ Similarly, the use of technical effects like reverb and echo on Wolfe's vocals opens up the musical space of the songs, expanding into great landscapes and open realms where the sound of her voice travels, traversing the soundscapes. These, and other examples contain themes of unity, of dissolving the self and being one with nature, both as a frightening and comforting experience, such as on songs like 'Green Altar' and others that will be explored in the subsequent chapters.

On 'Friedrichshain' from *Apokalypsis* (2011) Wolfe may allude to the German Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich whose landscape paintings frequently depicted the sublimity of being in the presence of the landscape; of encountering the staggering divinity in nature. When Wolfe sings about an encounter with 'Friedrich's little forest', 'a forest of purest green', the breathtaken subject of the lyrics is unable look away.⁸⁵ However, the textual inclusion of 'little forest' seemingly diminishes the sublime in the experience of the forest, perceiving it here as small

⁸¹ Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime', 87.

⁸² Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime', 89.

⁸³ Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime', 92.

⁸⁴ Chelsea Wolfe, 'The Abyss', track 11 on *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

⁸⁵ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Friedrichshain', track 8 on *Apokalypsis* (Pendulo Sound Recording, 2011, compact disc).

rather than great, whereas in Friedrich's paintings it is the people that are small, juxtaposed against looming fearsome landscapes. At the same time, the musical sound of 'Friedrichshain' lacks many of the haunting, heavy or ethereal qualities that characterise Wolfe's musical expression. Instead, it features the raw sound of drums and guitar, with synthesizer ambience, almost overpowering Wolfe's rather natural sounding vocals. Among the songs on *Apokalypsis*, this song then becomes an expression of the human perception of the breathtaking in nature, 'of purest green', almost artificially presented – like a picture or a painting, a 'door to something so pure', 'a window / water like crystal'.⁸⁶

The lines between dream and reality are frequently obscured in Wolfe's songs, contributing to the dreamlike and otherworldly atmosphere that permeate the majority of her work, further enhancing the uncanny sense of space. In several songs the natural world retains the vastness and sense of danger that facilitate the experience of the sublime, such as on 'Hypnos', where the subject of the lyrics swims in fjords described as mouths.

all the world moves inside my baby,
I see it there
rows and rows, mouths of fjords –
I swim in them in my dreams⁸⁷

Wolfe's voice shivers throughout the song, processed through an effect that leaves her voice a spectral caress over the words, accompanied by firm guitar strings. She gently bends the sung notes, glides up and down the pitch, the subject of the song determined to 'put up a fight with death' as they are threatened to be swallowed by mouths, drowning in the fjords in their dreams.

Other aspects related to the notion of the sublime can be discerned in how the power of nature can be sensed in the agency of nature in Wolfe's songs. I argued in the previous sections that the search for the goddess flesh in 'The Mother Road' leads the subject to surrender, finding that being broken down and shaken up lead to an experience of transcendence, a moment of excess as the subject blossoms into the most realised version of the self. The musical and vocal composition of the repeated lyrics in the final stanzas further enhance this experience of an encounter with the power of nature, in the transcendence of the self into unity with nature.

While the vastness and greatness in the power of nature experienced in the encounter with it can be sensed, it is the aspects that Gates maintains as belonging to the 'Victorian female sublime' that really can be said to permeate Wolfe's songs, in the dissolution of the self and kinship as unity with nature that will become apparent throughout the following sections of the analysis.

⁸⁶ Wolfe, 'Friedrichshain', 2011.

⁸⁷ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Hypnos', track 12 on *Abbyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

(Sexual) Violence and Collective Pain

‘A Nymph Defiled’

In the conclusion that woman and nature have historically been conflated in patriarchal society because women represent ‘a “natural resource” and “an asset to be owned and harnessed, harvested and mined”’, the relationship between woman and nature have become an area of conflict in regards to a sort of muddling of culture and essence.⁸⁸

There is a difference between the idea that women *naturally* are closer to nature through their reproductive abilities, but that this relationship is a source of power that patriarchy attempts to suppress and exploit, and that women *culturally* and *historically* have been reduced to nature, because their reproductive abilities are claimed as resource. Even Val Plumwood, who strongly opposes dualism and refutes the notion of essentialism in the ecofeminist discourse, recognises that social identities are a source of empowerment and connection, and that they are ‘capable of liberatory or subversive reconstruction without total demolition and abandonment’; ‘Affirmation is essential to counter the logic of the master subject, who inferiorises women both individually and culturally, backgrounds and devalues their work, and defines them as peripheries to the master’s centre.’ As such there must be a balance between affirmation and critical reflection in the maintenance of a healthy feminist identity.⁸⁹

While the symbolic fusion of women with nature can be understood as a source of power for women in an exploration of their own relationship to the natural world, as well as the exploitation of the natural world that is mirrored in their actual life, it comes with several ideological and philosophical problems.⁹⁰ Much of the critique of the sex-typing of earth as Gaia revolves around the problem that it renders the, now female, Earth passive, as Patrick D. Murphy asserts, because the designation of an entity as female in patriarchal culture guarantees its subservient status. This problem also permeates the discourse surrounding the climate crisis with regards to how ‘man’ can ensure ‘her’ survival.⁹¹ Culturally, both the land and women have been considered property, and deemed as lacking agency, speech and ability to resist.⁹² This naturalisation of women and feminisation of nature makes it difficult to know where the oppression of one ends and the other

⁸⁸ Dorothy Dinnerstein on Donna Coffey, quoted in Murphy, *Reconceiving Nature*, 6.

⁸⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 63f.

⁹⁰ See Carolyn Merchant, “Earthcare: Women and the Environment, Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development” (62:3, 2020, 17-27, DOI: 10.1080/00139157.2020.1750918), about the writings of Susan Griffin.

⁹¹ Murphy, *Literature, Nature and Other*, 60f.

⁹² Murphy, *Reconceiving Nature*, 6.

begins.⁹³ As women in patriarchal and Anthropocene culture represent a natural resource, the language surrounding nature is allowed to become gendered and sexualising:

The identification of women and nature implicit in phrases like “virgin lands,” “man’s war on Mother Nature,” “penetrating the secret springs of Nature,” and “wrestling with Nature herself to decode her messages” are suggestive of sexual assaults that render both women and nature passive and submissive.⁹⁴

While the specific phrasing of nature as ‘raped’ and ‘destroyed’ by man’s technological advancement in the name of unlimited profit is aimed to accurately capture the severity and depravity of man’s crimes against nature in a way that mirrors the taboo of sexual assault, it has been criticised as furthering the reinforcement of the identification of nature with woman, and continues to deprive the earth of agency.⁹⁵ It only mirrors the historical depictions that feminises nature, such as Nikolaus Copernicus who asserted that ‘Earth conceives from the Sun, and is made pregnant with annual offspring’.⁹⁶ The need to speak about injustices against nature in the same sexualised language is claimed by Murphy to reflect the domination of patriarchy in linguistic patterns and authorial habit, and reproduces the same patriarchal patterns they aim to criticise.⁹⁷

While it is true that our life is sustained by nature through the food that grows from the ground, swims in the ocean and runs on the fields – it is also the creator of floods, storms and droughts. Nature provides, but also destroys. This is an aspect of nature that is often left out of ecofeminism and becomes the focus for Patricia Jagentowicz Mills’ critique of both the ecofeminism of Ynestra King and the New Left neo-Hegelianism of Isaac Balbus on what she calls their ‘abstract pro-nature stance’; a political view that Jagentowicz Mills argues romanticises nature and frames it as ‘benign, cooperative and sharing with humans a form of consciousness that is to be emulated’.⁹⁸ She maintains how this abstract pro-nature stance ignores the notion of nature as ‘red in tooth and claw’.⁹⁹

Here, the dualism of human/nature becomes apparent. In order to urge us to protect and save nature, nature is constructed as passive, in distress – in some ways domesticated and dependent on humans to survive. On the other hand, we must understand that nature is an active subject, we do not ensure ‘her’ survival, we ensure our own, because nature is indifferent to human struggles.

⁹³ See Karen J. Warren, *Ecological Feminist Philosophies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 20 and Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 238.

⁹⁴ Carolyn Merchant, “Earthcare”, 2020.

⁹⁵ One example of this can be found in Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 93, where they describe how the myth of unlimited progress suggests that we can ‘rape and destroy living nature’ without suffering any consequences.

⁹⁶ Nikolaus Copernicus, quoted in Murphy, *Reconceiving Nature*, 7.

⁹⁷ Murphy, *Literature, Nature and Other*, 61.

⁹⁸ Patricia Jagentowicz Mills, ‘Feminism and Ecology: On the Domination of Nature’, in *Hypatia*, Vol. 6, No. 1, *Ecological Feminism* (Spring 1991), 163.

⁹⁹ Jagentowicz Mills, ‘Feminism and Ecology: On the Domination of Nature’, 166f.

‘Growing From Repeated Crimes’

In Wolfe’s songs, (sexual) violence and other injustices are often expressed in ways that evoke nature and its destruction. Thus, the exploitation of women, marginalised people and nature is depicted in similar ways. While I have shown how nature is depicted as life giving, abundant and almost holy in the previous chapter, here I focus on how nature, once wronged, retaliates and exacts vengeance. Here we can see just how red in tooth and claw nature can be.

In ‘Scrape’, the line ‘a young nymph defiled then’ conflates the victim of sexual violence with the nature deities of Greek mythology, most often young and female, serving as personifications of nature. Understanding this through the statement that ‘because women have been “naturalized” and nature has been “feminized,” it is difficult to know where the oppression of one ends and the other begins’, the young nymph in ‘Scrape’ represents both woman and nature.¹⁰⁰

The song starts with deliberate, low vocals over grinding guitars only to grow higher, faster and more incessant over the course of the song until Wolfe almost screeches the final part in a rage and/or panic. Her voice is processed through a distortion effect that almost completely obscures the lyrics and blends it in with the distorted instruments to create almost a deafening, hysterical soundscape:

you carrier
you repulse me
heard the sound
of her knees scrape against the street
you, the dirty one, what you took from me
there was nothing left but hypocrisy
holy odium, blotted memory
but my regret will never consume me
the ocean’s licking tongue
the letting of the blood
vile prophecy
scrape it out of me

The heavy distortion throughout the song twists the music, and especially the vocals, into something distinctly unnatural, further from speech, from song, from music and into noise, filling the space with sound that drowns out everything else. Here, *phone semantike* breaks down, until the vocals become almost non-human, closer to *phone* alone, an animal cry.¹⁰¹ The lyrics in this final stanza cannot accurately convey the horror and revulsion of sexual violence that is expressed

¹⁰⁰ Warren, *Ecological Feminist Philosophies*, 20 and Tong, *Feminist Thought: A More Comprehensive Introduction*, 238.

¹⁰¹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 35.

through the tempo, pitch and distortion of the vocals and musical sound. As Cavarero asserts: the words can only punctuate what voice alone is able to express.¹⁰²

An interesting thing to note is the juxtaposition of the association of a young nymph with nature, to the unnatural and distorted sound. The heavy use of technical effects to process sound and voice is the complete opposite of 'Green Altar' where nature is embodied through the use of acoustic guitar and clean vocals – a naked sound, if you will. Here, the contrasts between the mechanical and distorted sound and the natural, naked voice further disconnects the voice from the body, as it 'fights itself inside'.

The consequences of the sexual violence of 'Scrape' are that something is being taken from the victim, but also something taking root inside her. The attacker is a dirty carrier that pollutes the victim with disease and a dirt that must be cleaned or scraped out, expressed through a musical frenzy. Here, the violence against women and nature becomes the same, musicalized to express the victim's violent panic and disgust: 'led me here / said "hold my hand" / a young nymph defiled then / my body fights itself inside / I feel it bow / this mortal hold'.¹⁰³ This frantic desperation and panic is further emphasised through one of Wolfe's rare instances of the word 'fuck', in the line 'you stay the fuck away from me'.

In Cavarero's assertion that the female singing voice resists domestication, it pushes pleasure to the limits of what is bearable. As such, a singing woman is always a Siren; a creature of pleasure, potentially lethal. She disturbs the system of reason with her voice, which reminds us from where it flows – the passionate rhythms of the body.¹⁰⁴ In 'Scrape', the domination and sexual violence against nature/woman are met with fury and disgust rather than submission. The violent reaction in the final part of the song becomes an act of resistance and the distorted and screeching vocal style can be said to be an attempt at erasing the pleasure of the female voice. In resisting the stereotypes of an ideal feminine voice, Wolfe embraces the animalistic cries associated with *phone*. While the pitch of the voice remains associated with a traditional female voice, the timbre of it twists into something disconnected from the human body, resisting the pleasurable to become distinctly unpleasurable, as the body 'fights itself inside' – but becoming closer to nature in the dissolution of *semantike* in speech. Not subjugated and domesticated, but 'red in tooth and claw'.¹⁰⁵ As such, the final vocal part of the song becomes the ocean's licking tongue itself; the act that washes, purges and scrapes.

¹⁰² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 121.

¹⁰³ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Scrape', track 12 on *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

¹⁰⁴ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 118.

¹⁰⁵ Jagentowicz Mills, 'Feminism and Ecology: On the Domination of Nature', 166f.

In contrast to the incessant frenzy of ‘Scrape’, the theme of a creeping vengeance as ‘slow and relentless’ is embodied in ‘Carrion Flowers’ from *Abyss* (2015). Over grating guitars, Wolfe’s voice is slow, and over the course of the song, a cold anger or disdain can be sensed that progresses and builds with the song. During the second verse her voice comes closer to the ear of the listener, it becomes more assertive and her words more pronounced and articulated as revenge draws near. The music pulsates with an industrial tone, highlighting the steady heartbeat of the ‘carrion flowers / growing from repeated crimes’.

we learned how on our own
never needing help from you
reaching out with eyes closed
we felt the light, it taught us to grow

(hold, hold, hold on)
(hold, hold, hold on)

creatures of habit, carrion flowers
growing from repeated crimes
the afterglow in full bloom
slow and relentless, we’re after you

hold on to the pain
of love taken from you –
a plague

(hold, hold, hold on)
(hold, hold, hold on)¹⁰⁶

The emphasis and articulation of the verses place the words front and centre, close to the ear like a whispered warning. Here, the relationship between song and speech become important, firmly rooted in *phone semantike*. As Cavarero writes that the myth of the Sirens teaches us that ‘song is heard as naturally feminine, just as speech is naturally masculine’, she continues by noting that when men’s voices disappear in the mute labour of thought, they substantiate themselves in the semantic.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps, then, it could be said that the slow and deliberate articulation of the verses of ‘Carrion Flowers’ becomes an emulation of the patriarchal idea of masculine speech, addressing the ‘you’ in a way that emphasises the semantic, the meaning of the words.

During the chorus the several ‘hold’ rise in pitch, echo with reverb, overlap, and thus become obscured by vocalisation, similar to ‘Scrape’ in pitch and intensity, although still in the same slow, deliberate tempo. The movement of the melody of the ‘(hold, hold, hold)’ and ‘hold on to the pain / of love taken from you – / a plague’ stretches the words into vocalisation, away from speech,

¹⁰⁶ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Carrion Flowers’, track 1 on *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc). With my addition of the second repetition of ‘(hold, hold, hold)’. Parenthesis in original.

¹⁰⁷ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 118.

becoming layered with multi-tracks repeating the words, embodying the 'we' that can be discerned in the lyrics, as the two final stanzas are repeated on top of each other. In contrast to 'Scrape', where we can discern a singular subject; a clear 'me' in opposition to the 'you', the lyrics of 'Carrion Flowers' concern a collective subject; a 'we' and an 'us' in opposition to the 'you'. Here, there is an interconnectedness, a collective nature to the injustice and oppression, as well as to the revenge. Similar to how Gates identifies the loss of individualistic identity and human distinctiveness in the Victorian women poets' encounter with the power of nature, these songs vocally and thematically reject humanity and individuality in the patriarchal conception of the masculine *semantike* of song.

But rather than violently letting the blood or scraping it out, here we're holding on to the pain that connects us, much like how Wolfe sings in 'When Anger Turns to Honey': 'in moments like this I can understand you / for pain is the great connector'.¹⁰⁸ Although the pain in 'When Anger Turns to Honey' functions as a bridge between differences, promoting listening and mutual understanding, and in 'Carrion Flowers' pain unites the 'we' in opposition to the other, this leads us into an interesting point about Wolfe's music in relation to womanhood and nature; the collective subject and the interconnectedness. Anger and grief can be shared, and there is something to gain from it, a unity and a healing that is affirming and productive.

'Women Know What It Is to Endure'

At first the search for the divine Mother in 'The Mother Road' may seem to evoke a sense of reverence, but there is a complexity in the expression of the themes of ancestry. The second half of the second verse of 'The Mother Road' expresses a unique connection between women:

I do not have a child
but I'm old enough to know some pain
and I'm hell bent on loving you
women know what it is to endure¹⁰⁹

Woman is not only understood as the origin; she is persistent, constant – enduring. Here we can infer that even though the subject does not know the love and pain of having a child, she knows the pain of being a woman in a patriarchal society. Even though woman is persistent, she is also enduring a female suffering, as seen in textual inclusions like 'I am the daughter of sorrow' and 'generations of sadness', where this female suffering is seemingly inherited, echoing through the

¹⁰⁸ Chelsea Wolfe, 'When Anger Turns to Honey', track 7 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

¹⁰⁹ Wolfe, 'The Mother Road', 2019.

generations.¹¹⁰ Much like how the ecofeminist discourse elucidates the similarities between the exploitation of woman and nature, Mother Earth can also be understood as enduring – persistent but suffering. However, in ‘The Mother Road’ it is not a singular woman who knows what it is to endure. In contrast to the ‘woman is the origin’ of ‘Erde’, here, women as a collective know what it is to endure. The relational aspect of voice that Cavarero maintains as useful for feminism can be discerned through the embodiment of a collective subject. While Wolfe’s music more often than not concern a singular, individual subject, an ‘I’ and/or a ‘you’, I believe that it much can be inferred from paying attention to the who that is singing.

When Cavarero writes about Hélène Cixous’ plural dimensions of voice, and her insistence on a vocalic sphere that is relational, Cavarero emphasises that this sphere is centred on the maternal figure – ‘making itself heard as rhythm, reverberation, echo’, and this is the original opening to the other.¹¹¹ The vocalic relationship is one of movement, of echo and rhythm, back and forth, with the (m)other. As the etymology of the Latin *vox* is *vocare*, ‘to call’ or ‘invoke’, the voice is relational, for the ear even before it becomes speech and, in Cavarero’s words, ‘addressed to the other and that entrusts itself to the ear that receives it’.¹¹² Even this is emphasised in the infant’s first cry, where it invokes the first sonorous bond, the first breath of air and the first communication; a call and a response.¹¹³ This cadence of vocalic exchange is a resonance that confirms that the voice is for the ear, and that the ear is for the voice.¹¹⁴ Listening closer to how Wolfe sings about the individual and the collective subject, these tendencies of embodying a ‘we’ and an ‘us’, as opposed to an isolated and individualised subject, opens the possibility of an interconnectedness and a unity through a shared sorrow or anger, which is a comforting and reassuring aspect in her otherwise rather bleak and dreary music.

‘We Cried Together’

In Timothy Morton’s book *Ecology Without Nature* (2007) he argues that the ‘idea’ of nature stands in the way of proper ecological forms of society; in politics, philosophy and art. This ‘idea’ of nature is a fantasy that has been reproduced in art, and was popularised during the Romantic era.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁰ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Dirt Universe’, track 8 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc) and ‘Color of Blood’, track 10 on *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

¹¹¹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 143f.

¹¹² Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 169.

¹¹³ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 169.

¹¹⁴ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 170.

¹¹⁵ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature, Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 5.

But to escape the maze of romanticisation and heal-the-world mentality, Morton suggests adopting a *dark ecology*, the idea that we want to stay with a dying world and that we should embrace the grief over the death of the world:

Now is a time for grief to persist, to ring throughout the world. Modern culture has not yet known what to do with grief. Environmentalisms have both stoked and assuaged the crushing feelings that come from a sense of total catastrophe, whether from nuclear bombs and radiation, or events such as climate change and mass extinction.¹¹⁶

While Morton has little consideration for ecofeminism, which he calls essentialist, I believe that his idea of embracing grief may resonate within the feminist branch of ecological criticism. While grief is often framed and configured as a lonely experience, there is paradoxically a unifying aspect in the notion of a shared pain.

Returning to 'Erde', there is something eerie and desolate over Wolfe's vocals and lonely guitar, which can be felt as a grief that permeates the song. Not only does the song state that 'woman in the origin', it evokes a loneliness in the soft sound of the acoustic guitar, as well as in Wolfe's otherworldly and ethereal vocals that trail out in an echoing reverb. The melody constantly returns down to 'erde', in pitch and in the repetition of the word. After the first verse, her voice is accompanied by multi-tracks that speak alongside the melody, parallel or trailing after, most prominent in the final stanza where the repetitions of 'erde, rip my heart out' alternate, overlap and oscillate between *phone* and *semantike*. Most of the lyrical lines in the beginning of the song, apart from 'erde', are somewhat difficult to discern, even though Wolfe's voice is only accompanied by an acoustic guitar and faint background ambience. As if the words have too many syllables to fit into the melody. As if the sung word is drowned in or conquered by the vocalisation. The nature of song pulls and twists of words and melody, deforming speech without negating its basic linguistic shape.¹¹⁷ The song is an area of conflict, a contest of musical and poetic meanings, where the disintegrative effects of music on words is a point of contention.¹¹⁸ In Cavarero's assertion that the voice carries speech, even when it renders the words incomprehensible or breaks down their syllabic textures, *phone* is *semantike*, carrying the meaning towards its destination; speech. In opera, speech is the intersection or tension between the sonorous texture of the voice and the verbal signified it is bound to express. Thus, what is conquered in song is not speech, but the 'register of thought to which the metaphysical tradition subjugates speech'.¹¹⁹ And this is what

¹¹⁶ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 185.

¹¹⁷ Kramer, 'Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry', 9.

¹¹⁸ Kramer, 'Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry', 7. While Kramer's assertions concern the art song as a genre, he suggests that question of interpretative response is also raised elsewhere.

¹¹⁹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 127.

drowns in the sonorous texture as the syllables can't conform to the tempo, melody or musical structure.

Even though the sound and the vocals of 'Erde' appear as desolate and lonely, the lyrics are more populated than many of Wolfe's other songs. They point to a collective, a we:

young children running blind
erde
broken frame of mind
intertwined
from the vales of eden
to the swelling tide
we cried together
erde
woman is the origin (woman is the origin)
all-dirt (all-dirt)¹²⁰

This suggests that there is a collective aspect of grief that connects us to the constant, *erde*, earth. While the themes of 'Erde' are earth and origin, in the repeating of the German word for 'earth', it also evokes a sense of an end of the world, and a grief over it. The lyrical imagery paints pictures of devastating floods, burning rivers and swelling tides; catastrophes of rising water levels that we associate with the biblical flood as well as consequences of the current climate crisis. The biblical connotations of 'Erde' can also be found in the mention of 'the vales of eden', a symbol of the human origin, juxtaposed against the heavy notion of 'got a baby on death row', where we at birth are inevitably marked for death. The song thus connects the beginning and the end, and the sorrow of the end of it is also a melancholic reminiscing over what has been.

The political implications of 'Iron Moon' connects a similarly desolate sound to the ruthless conditions of hyper-capitalist society. Explicitly inspired by the poetry of Xu Lizhi, a Chinese poet and Foxconn factory worker whose poems were posthumously published after his suicide, the haunting sound of 'Iron Moon' evokes a hopelessness in a world where everything is dead.¹²¹ The musical dynamic shifts between loud and distorted guitar and vocals, and whispering vocals accompanied by slow plucking. The first verse, sung very quietly over guitar strings, sounds almost musically dry without the use of discernible effects, mirroring the apathy or melancholia of the lyrics, before rising in pitch into the chorus:

¹²⁰ Wolfe, 'Erde', 2019. With my addition of the spoken repetition in parenthesis. One thing to note is that the official lyrics state 'from the vales of Eden' while she begins the line with 'to' on the recorded album. On live recordings, however, she can be heard singing 'from': Brian Barlow, 'Chelsea Wolfe – Erde (Live),' YouTube Video, 03:10, August 1, 2020, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://youtu.be/DQY20M-6DIE>.

¹²¹ Geist, Brandon, 'Chelsea Wolfe Details New Album, Streams Haunting First Single "Iron Moon",' *RollingStones*, April 28, 2015, accessed November 29, 2021. <<https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/chelsea-wolfe-details-new-album-streams-haunting-first-single-iron-moon-53205/>>

a dead sun, a pale glow
upon the walls I feign to know
we bear no fruit, no flowers, no life
and we get sick but never die
become an echo
resounding 'let go'¹²²

The lyrics evoke the unnatural in the inclusions of 'a dead sun, a pale glow,' 'we bear no fruit, no flowers, no life,' 'in all the world's decaying / is there a place that's safe for us?', 'the people here become machines'.¹²³ All organic life is dead and/or has been assimilated into something mechanic. Wolfe's heavily distorted voice over the equally distorted guitars during the grinding chorus that follows highlights the hopelessness and desperation in the vocals that state: 'my heart is a tomb / my heart is an empty room'. Here, the distortion in her voice further emphasises the mechanical aspect of the lyrics, 'the creatures here become machines', in a dreary, dead world.

A common consensus within large parts of ecofeminist tradition is the opposition and criticism of rampant capitalism and obsession with perpetual growth. In Mies and Shivas' words, they oppose the capitalist patriarchal structuring of the world around 'fictions and abstractions like "capital", "corporations" and "growth"' in what they call a war on the natural world.¹²⁴ The exploitative nature of globalism and capitalism treats the natural world like raw, dead material and people as bodies for labour. Plumwood describes the self in relation to human domination and colonisation as repeated and confirmed in the reducing of nature to an instrument:

The same basic structures of self which appear in the treatment of nature as lifeless instrument also underlie the rational egoism and instrumentalism of the market, the treatment of those supposedly less possessed of reason as inferior, and as instruments for their more civilised western neighbours (as in slavery, colonialism and racism), and the treatment of women as inferior others whose norms of virtue embody a thinly disguised instrumentalism.¹²⁵

This reducing of people to instruments and resource echo in 'Iron Moon' where the meaninglessness and hopelessness of barren, empty walls and rooms where people become machines can be felt. Similar to 'Erde', there is a collective aspect even in the loneliness and desolation, as inferred by 'we bear no fruit, no flowers, no life', 'and we get sick but never die'. Here it is shared by the oppressed with no control over either their own life, or the state of the world, firm in the grasp of the instrumentalism of the market. There is an 'us' and a 'we' struggling

¹²² Chelsea Wolfe, 'Iron Moon', track 2 on *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

¹²³ Wolfe, 'Iron Moon', 2015. The lyrics on Wolfe's official webpage state 'is there place that's safe for us'. However, she can be heard singing 'is there a place that's safe for us' on the recording.

¹²⁴ Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, xxi.

¹²⁵ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 143.

with our place in a dying world. As opposed to the ideal of individualism that permeates Western culture, here, there is a unity in the grief of being treated as lifeless instruments or as ‘resources’.¹²⁶

Lastly, there is another facet of the collective aspect in Wolfe’s lyrics and music. While I have shown the relational and communal tendencies of the inclusion of a collective subject, where there is a ‘you’ in opposition of the ‘we’, there are also motifs and themes of forgiveness and bridging difference in her songs, showing a different side to the lust for revenge. Pain itself can be discerned as a connecting aspect, a unifying and collective experience.

This becomes even clearer on ‘When Anger Turns to Honey’, where pain has the ability to become an experience that cultivates empathy and bridges difference. Wolfe’s voice rings hollow in a musically sparse space, accompanied by an acoustic guitar, the opening of the song a repeated vocal calling in the silence. While the theme of anger is highly ambivalent during most of the song, the lyrics stating that ‘their anger has them under a spell / their hatred is like a poison / that makes them feel again’, the sound of the song has the distinct acoustic and contemplative air that characterises the sound on *Birth of Violence*. While anger and hatred can be understood as blinding as well as addictive, during the moments that it disperses a connection can be made. During the final two stanzas, Wolfe’s voice is accompanied by a harmony that reinforces the theme of the song, of what happens when anger turns to honey:

when anger turns to honey
in moments like this I can understand you
for pain is the great connector

they treat you like prey
but you’re the hunter
you’re the hunter¹²⁷

The harmony underscores the relational aspect of pain as the great connector, as it bridges difference and sees the hurt mirrored in the other. Similar to the ‘hold on to the pain’ from ‘Carrion Flowers’, there is a power to pain where it possesses the ability to cultivate empathy. As the themes of ‘Carrion Flowers’ center around revenge and injustice, it may seem contradictory to claim that pain cultivates empathy rather than resentment, but I would argue that there is an aspect of the connecting quality of pain that cultivates empathy for the self and the victims of injustice.

¹²⁶ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 145.

¹²⁷ Wolfe, ‘When Anger Turns to Honey’, 2019.

The Self and the Natural World

‘A Spider in Chernobyl’

afraid to live, afraid to die
building a broken but precious web
like a spider in Chernobyl¹²⁸

The mention of the subject of ‘The Mother Road’ as a spider in Chernobyl, whose ability to spin webs have been affected by the radiation, reveals what it is like to live in a world that is fundamentally broken. An overall look at how Wolfe configures the world in her lyrics paints a rather bleak picture, especially accompanied by her haunting, melancholy sound. Most textual inclusions invoke imagery of an ugly or dying world: ‘we could be two straight lines in a crooked world’,¹²⁹ ‘living in dirt universe’,¹³⁰ ‘dark, dark world’,¹³¹ ‘destruction makes the world burn brighter’,¹³² ‘in all the world’s decaying / is there a place that’s safe for us’,¹³³ ‘in a world so dirty’, ‘world in a daze’,¹³⁴ ‘I’d save you but the world is bent’,¹³⁵ ‘hell is on earth’,¹³⁶ ‘we were born unto chaos’.¹³⁷ These textual fragments are scattered throughout Wolfe’s songs, ranging from 2013 to present day. Only a couple of songs contain a more ambivalent depiction of the world, and even there the world is described in more neutral terms, rather than positive: ‘we’ll be given the world in the right time’,¹³⁸ ‘all the world moves inside my baby’,¹³⁹ ‘lost worlds and endless night’.¹⁴⁰

These textual inclusions make the subject of ‘The Mother Road’, a metaphorical radiation damaged spider in Chernobyl, a habitant of this bend and dirty world. Reading and listening to the words Wolfe uses to depict the world in her music, we can discern a connection to women’s fears and concerns surrounding climate change, nuclear disasters and pollution.

In the ecofeminist discourse, the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl has been the topic of several discussions of the disregard of the health and safety of nature and women in the name of unlimited

¹²⁸ Wolfe, ‘The Mother Road’, 2019.

¹²⁹ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Tracks (Tall Bodies)’, track 3 on *Apokalypsis* (Pendulo Sound Recording, 2011, compact disc).

¹³⁰ Wolfe, ‘Dirt Universe’, 2019.

¹³¹ Wolfe, ‘Dirt Universe’, 2019.

¹³² Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Destruction Makes the World Burn Brighter’, track 5 on *Pain is Beauty* (Sargent House, 2013, compact disc).

¹³³ Wolfe, ‘Iron Moon’, 2015.

¹³⁴ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Maw’, track 4 on *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

¹³⁵ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘16 Psyche’, track 2 on *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2017, compact disc).

¹³⁶ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Preface to a Dream Play’, track 10 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

¹³⁷ Wolfe, ‘The Abyss’, 2015.

¹³⁸ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘The Waves Have Come’, track 11 on *Pain is Beauty* (Sargent House, 2013, compact disc).

¹³⁹ Wolfe, ‘Hypnos’, 2015.

¹⁴⁰ Wolfe, ‘The Color of Blood’, 2015.

progress of technological advancement. According to Mies and Shiva, it is primarily women who are affected by technological failures such as nuclear disasters like Chernobyl where radiation affects reproduction and food supplies. Similar to times of war, the time following the Chernobyl disaster was filled with more work and more worry for women, having to keep children indoors, searching for cereal and milk powder from before the disaster. Especially pregnant women felt guilty and isolated, worrying about the safety of their unborn.¹⁴¹ Mies and Shiva describe that it was the women who felt responsible for life, rather than the men of science, politics and economics who are usually perceived as the responsible ones. Women feared they would contaminate their families through exposure to radiation in food, and felt guilty and responsible if they were unable to obtain uncontaminated food. Thus, women were forced to carry the fallout as well as the fear and uncertainty of the future of themselves and their children: ‘Men seem to be experts for technology, women for life, men make war, women are supposed to restore life after the wars.’¹⁴²

After the Chernobyl disaster, trees, flowers and grass could only be enjoyed by viewing them. They could not be experienced physically and those who experience a closeness to nature, primarily women and children, according to Mies and Shiva, suffer from this sudden separation from nature and feel it as a deep loss, and a sense of deprivation.¹⁴³

This feeling of living disconnected from the natural world, and perceiving the world as decaying is shared by post-war, post-Chernobyl generations, as well as young people today whose futures seem full of climate catastrophes as a direct consequence of global warming; we are all spiders in Chernobyl, building our broken but precious webs, carrying on even though we are irreparably damaged by everything wrong with the world.

In Wolfe’s music, the musicalization of this dystopic world tends to have a desolate and quiet sound to it, as most prominent on *Abyss* (2015) and *Birth of Violence* (2019). While the sound of *Apokalypsis* (2011) cannot be said to be as cohesive and pronounced in its musical expression of a dystopic world, several of the songs relate to the natural world and its destruction, as evident by the title of the album. Here, the sound is raw and feral, and there is something primal over the connection to nature that contrasts the later, more contemplative compositions.

Both ‘Tracks (Tall Bodies)’ and ‘The Wasteland’ from *Apokalypsis* draw on the mechanical and artificial in different ways. While the lyrics of ‘Tracks (Tall Bodies)’ paint the picture of a machine-like and artificial world, the music and vocals feel rather natural, the guitars, drums and vocals lack heavy distortion or other technical effects standing out in the composition. This creates a musical

¹⁴¹ Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 92.

¹⁴² Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 93.

¹⁴³ Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 92.

atmosphere that is centred on the internal life of the subject, rather than a projection of the machine-like artificiality of the world.

it's a machine we're up against – devoid of reason, devoid of sense
it's a system full of regrets
we wear it on our shoulders because someday, we'll win

we could be two straight lines in a crooked world
we could be two straight lines in a crooked world they've created¹⁴⁴

Wolfe's vocals are backed by the faint sound of the deeper, male, voice of her long-term bandmember Ben Chisholm, which further adds a duality to the lyrics of the chorus. The addition of a second voice also further embodies the relationality of the voice as Wolfe's voice is no longer for the listener's ear alone. Instead, they embody the collective subject of the lyrics, the 'we', the 'straight lines', against the 'crooked world they've created'.¹⁴⁵ This crooked world and its machine-like imagery is not only devoid of reason and sense, it is devoid of humanity, creating a thoroughly unnatural sensation of the world. This is further emphasised in 'The Wasteland' where the music and vocals are heavily processed through technical effects like distortion. The song opens on wind-like and metallic clanging ambience that soon accompanies droning, fog horn-like guitar riffs, before the heavily distorted echo of Wolfe's multitracked voice enter, stating:

it's gonna be a wasteland, it's gonna be a dark and narrow road
it's gonna be a fire, it's gonna be a heat you've never known

it's gonna be a wasteland, it's gonna be a gray, gray dawn
gray like the winter, a thousand years, lost and gone¹⁴⁶

The layering of her vocal tracks, as well as the slow doom metal tempo, allows her to express several different emotions at the same time, ranging from the cold and bitter statement of the lyrics, to the harsh treble of despair over the destruction of the natural world. This creates a more complex listening experience, where the nuances of the attitudes and outlooks on the pending apocalyptic future. The songs on *Apokalypsis* that musicalize themes of the world ending contain more indifferent and distant-sounding emotions in the vocals, like a twinge of bitterness and

¹⁴⁴ Wolfe, 'Tracks (Tall Bodies)', 2011. The chorus is then repeated twice before the first verse is repeated a second time.

¹⁴⁵ 'Tracks (Tall Bodies)' references Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, 1957, and the line 'we could be two straight lines in a crooked world' refers to two people walking down a train track together, into the horizon. Charles Mallison, 'Chelsea Wolfe in a Crooked World – Presented by Swoon,' YouTube Video, 12:13, October 3, 2012, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXrSN95K9LQ>.

¹⁴⁶ Chelsea Wolfe, 'The Wasteland', track 6 on *Apokalypsis* (Pendulum Sound Recording, 2011, compact disc).

frustration at the state of the world, and the individual's inability to take action: 'like humanity a cancer, never sow more than we reap'.¹⁴⁷

This creates an interesting contrast to how Wolfe write and musicalize the destruction of the natural world in her more recent works. While the image of the world remains similar, the musical and vocal relationship to it grows into a closer connection to nature itself. Rather than a frantic and/or machine-like sound, such as the one characterising 'The Wasteland' and *Hiss Spun* (2017), the musical and vocal thematization of the dying world on *Abyss* (2015) and *Birth of Violence* (2019) most often follows a slower tempo, with sparse strumming and soft drums, allowing Wolfe's distorted and/or reverbed voice to embody a grief or melancholia over the loss of a vibrant, living world. In the repetition of the line 'hell is on earth' during the end of 'Preface to a Dream Play', her natural voice rings firm and strong, clearly emphasising the syllables between the quiet and breathier parts of the song, the *phone semantike* convincing in its vocally carried meaning.¹⁴⁸ Her distinctly airy voice that echoes with reverb in the emptiness can be clearly discerned on 'Simple Death', where the static, ticking beat and synthesized ambience allows the dynamic of Wolfe's voice to become the focus of the musicalization of a bleak world, where 'dangerous religion' reign, and the singular subject finds herself in an empty and dead world. After announcing 'empty within, empty without / but a voice keeps on whispering,' the ticking drums stop to make way for a distant, guitar and Wolfe's slightly distorted voice, sounding fragile and almost brittle, carefully singing:

blue haze
white light
a desert storm
midnight¹⁴⁹

Then the stanza is repeated, her voice growing stronger and rising during the final 'midnight', inviting the percussions back in. Towards the end of the song, her voice rises to its characteristically hazy and wind like timbre, chanting, before the music fades out, leaving her voice a breeze over a desolate emptiness, like a musical tumbleweed, lamenting 'the end of the beauty of it all'.¹⁵⁰

Similarly, and as I have discussed previously, 'Erde' is full of imagery evoking an apocalyptic world and a bleak future, between the repetitions of 'erde' and 'all-dirt', reminding us that this is what has become or will become of our home: a crooked river on fire, swelling tides and waves of devastation.¹⁵¹ The textual inclusion of children in the lines 'got a baby on death row' and 'young

¹⁴⁷ Wolfe, 'The Wasteland', 2011.

¹⁴⁸ Wolfe, 'Preface to a Dream Play', 2019.

¹⁴⁹ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Simple Death', track 8 on *Abyss (Deluxe Edition)* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc).

¹⁵⁰ Wolfe, 'Simple Death', 2015.

¹⁵¹ Wolfe, 'Erde', 2019.

children running blind’ further emphasise the bleakness of the future. An entire generation, and generations to come, can be said to have been placed on death row, and their future is full of burning rivers and waves of devastation.

In the line ‘we bear no fruit, no flowers, no life’ from ‘Iron Moon,’ ‘we’ are likened to nature, as we are interconnected, one, suggesting the decaying of the world that takes root in our very bodies – from radiation poisoning, endocrine disruptors and microplastics to the mental toll of joyless, machinelike production that leaves no room to breathe and enjoy life, as well as making us complicit in the destruction of the natural world. This is the lesson that Mies and Shiva writes can be learned from disasters like Chernobyl that pertain to the interconnectedness of it all; no one is *alone* in the world, and no one is truly separate from it. Consequences of technological advancement, such as global warming and nuclear fallout, can never be isolated.¹⁵² We leave a world to future generations where they have to live with melting ice caps, forest fires, sweltering heat and nuclear waste that will stay radioactive for thousands of years.

‘I Want Flatlands, I Want Simplicity’

I want flatlands
I never cared about
money and all its friends
I want flatlands
I want flatlands
I don’t want precious stones
I never cared about
anything you’ve ever owned
I want flatlands
I want simplicity
I need your arms
wrapped hard around me
I want open plains
and scattered trees
I want flower fields
and I want salty seas
I want flatlands
soft and steady breeze
bringing scents of lined-up orchard trees
dripping heavy with pears and dancing leaves
I want flatlands
will you go there with me
when it’s said in the dark
and you know it’s always there
when it’s dead in our heart
but your mind is unafraid
when it’s said in the dark
and you know it’s never comin back
when it’s there in your heart
in your mind you set it free¹⁵³

¹⁵² Mies & Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 93f.

¹⁵³ Wolfe, ‘Flatlands’, 2012.

During the 18th and 19th century, seekers of the sublime with leisure time and personal freedom to travel for pleasure and edification traversed the Alps and other parts of nature seen as wild and natural.¹⁵⁴ The idea of the natural world became central in art, aesthetics and philosophy, sharply contrasting the industrialised cities of Europe, as a place and a symbol of aesthetic experience in the world. As these endeavours were not generally available to women, or men of lower class, they can therefore be understood as men's recreational utilisation of wild nature, travelling to write about and study nature.¹⁵⁵ However, as touched upon in 'Friedrich's Little Forest', Barbara T. Gates writes in *Kindred Nature* that the women writers who did have the means to experience vast mountains tended to relay their experience differently.¹⁵⁶ They are shown to experience more of a kinship with nature, rather than a desire to domesticate and tame the wilderness, and depicted their relationship with nature as such. However, Gates firmly asserts that the title of the book, as well as the term 'kinship', is not meant to 'suggest kinship in terms of "natural" womanhood but kinship in terms of familiarity that was mentally and artistically apprehended and consciously and deliberately embraced'.¹⁵⁷ This understanding of a different relationship with the natural world lends a different perspective to the tendency of women artists to embody nature, beyond essentialist notions of women's 'natural' relationship to the earth. Rather, the separation of nature and culture creates a disconnect between the human and the natural world.

Val Plumwood describes this problem with humanity's relationship with the natural world as one of radical exclusion, or hyperseparation, as a result of dualism that constructs an unbridgeable separation between nature and culture:

A dualism is an intense, established and developed cultural expression of such a hierarchical relationship, constructing central cultural concepts and identities so as to make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable. Dualism is a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled, which treats the division as part of the natures of beings construed not merely as different but as belonging to radically different orders or kinds, and hence as not open to change.¹⁵⁸

When nature becomes merely background and environment that exists behind society and people, we are separated and disconnected from it. And from this, historically and philosophically, we have separated and ordered all things to make them comprehensible; nature/culture, body/mind, female/male, emotion/reason, passive/active, etc. The hierarchical aspect of this radical exclusion

¹⁵⁴ Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime', 81f.

¹⁵⁵ Murphy, 'An Ecological Feminist Revisioning of the Masculinist Sublime', 82.

¹⁵⁶ Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 179f.

¹⁵⁷ Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 47f.

that Plumwood notes, results in the need to value one category over the other. Perceiving the human as separate from nature also constitutes what is human in opposition of nature, severing any kind of connection to it. Instead of the interconnectedness of the world, we feel this disconnect as a grief and a longing for something that has been constructed as background. This is something that can be felt embodied throughout Wolfe's body of work.

'Flatlands' is currently Chelsea Wolfe's most popular song on Spotify, and it is distinguished as perhaps the most romanticising of nature out of them all. Deliberately acoustic, with the distinctly warmer acoustic sound characteristic of *Unknown Rooms: A Collection of Acoustic Songs* (2012), she softly sings in longing for a simpler world, her voice echoing with a slight reverb, and is given body by duplicating the vocal track. The triplets in the plucking gives the song a lilting, dancing rhythm that is enhanced by the soft, skipping drums. Both the music and vocals are simple and stripped back, with the chords alternating between B flat major and G minor in standard D tuning during the majority of the song. Timothy Morton notes that a 'guitar note brings to mind the wood out of which it is made', and in the simplicity of the composition, the guitar and the voice become the sole bearer of meaning.¹⁵⁹ After asking 'will you go there with me?' Wolfe's voice evokes the soft breeze present in the lyrics, holding the last note while strings begin to accompany the steady guitar as the chords change slightly. Even though she sings in a comfortable register and articulates the words, the duplicated voice and reverb gives it a dreamlike quality that is only emphasised during the end where the strings accompany her vocals as it travels in pitch and register:

when it's said in the dark
and you know it's always there
when it's dead in our heart
but your mind is unafraid
when it's said in the dark
and you know it's never comin back
when it's there in your heart
in your mind you set it free¹⁶⁰

In stark contrast to the bleak hopelessness at the industrial instrumentalization of people and nature in 'Iron Moon', 'Flatlands' is a colourful dream of something that is hidden in your heart. But at the same time, there is a desperation in the longing for flower fields and salty seas, soft and steady breezes. The longing is just as much about the 'here' as the 'there', just as much about flatlands, open plains and scattered trees as it is away from the materialism of money, diamonds and worldly possessions. While the guitars steadily play on, situating the music in the here and the

¹⁵⁹ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 40.

¹⁶⁰ Wolfe, 'Flatlands', 2012.

now, the placement of the strings accentuate the dreamlike feeling of the final stanza, embodying the breeze that leads elsewhere, to flatlands and simplicity. The simplicity of the song, from the chording to the vocals mirrors the theme of the lyrics, frames it as a longing for something simpler; connection and sharing with other humans as well as the natural world.

While the sound of 'Green Altar' is similar to 'Flatlands' in its warmth and simplicity, as well as carries much of a romantic nature aesthetic, 'Flatlands' becomes an inversion of its thematization of love and abundance. Where 'Green Altar' embodies the captivating and reverent aspect of a connection to nature, 'Flatlands' embodies the lack and disconnect to nature, and the desperate wish to connect that is hidden so deep within that it's hard to even vocalise.

A different aspect of the longing for a connection to nature can be discerned in 'Be All Things' from *Birth of Violence* (2019), seven years after the release of 'Flatlands'. 'Be All Things' embodies and musicalizes a primal urge to simply be all things. Just as acoustic and subdued as the rest of the album, it expresses the need for a connection with the natural world. There is something reverent in the rise of the melody during the repeated line 'I want to be all things,' to being vividly alive:

walking the old path turned me towards death
the ravens woke at dawn
and daylight plumed my skin
then the air was full, simply composed of prey

I cannot stop
I want to be all things
I've got to let go
I want to be all things¹⁶¹

The natural world in 'Be All Things' has a distinct agency, and rather than being separated from it, the subject is firmly situated as a part of nature. Here, nature is not a background for human life – it is an interconnected web, a root system that connects all living things, which echoes the philosophy of a spiritual culture that is expressed and shared by many indigenous people in the world.¹⁶² Plumwood describes further how in spiritual cultures like these, nature is understood as a companion, intensely alive, rather than a lifeless resource to be drained for profit:

The difference between those who have found in nature a sustaining companion, and those who see in it a dead machine or a slave, is that the first group see and are part of a nature intensely alive with beings engaged in various kinds of mindful, purposive, directional activity; this is not a world populated by human subjects and the left-overs, but a world where humans can encounter nature as non-alien other.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Wolfe, 'Be All Things', 2019.

¹⁶² Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2001), 225f.

¹⁶³ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 137.

While Plumwood promotes a sustainable attitude and relationship between humanity and the natural world, Wolfe takes this sentiment further in that the subject in 'Be All Things' not only find a sustaining companion in nature, they want to be one with the natural world, united with it. The lyrics give nature agency; daylight pluming the subject's skin and likens them to the ravens, waking up at dawn to an air full of prey, thus connecting themselves to the world.

warriors, newborns, and queens
the lion and the wolf
gnarling at eternal sleep¹⁶⁴

Here, we are vividly alive, in tune with the natural world, embracing something primal and feral within the self, a reminder that our place in the world is an interconnected one.

'The Wolves Howl Their Song'

The desperate longing for a connection to nature is expressed in other ways, in themes of the untamed and animalistic within the self. In patriarchal culture's identification of woman with nature, there is a conception of an innate wildness, an endless changeability and chaos within her that she shares with the natural world, inferior to the human intellect and behaviour, resisting control.¹⁶⁵ Squirming against the constraints of patriarchal society is here understood as something that requires conforming, through submission and control, rather than something to be acknowledged and affirmed. In the previous section, I mentioned the women writers of Gates' *Kindred Nature* that expressed a familiarity with nature, and consciously and deliberately embraced it.¹⁶⁶ A similar sort of kinship is artistically apprehended and explored in Wolfe's music, where she embraces the wild and untamed within the self, as can be heard on 'Be All Things', but it also expresses itself in several other ways. Sometimes through the textual inclusions, other times in her vocal expression, through calling, snarling and shrieking.

Wolfe's exploration of a relationship with nature frequently embraces the feral and animalistic in her music and vocals, sometimes soft and acoustic as on 'Be All Things', sometimes wild and untamed, as on 'Scrape'. It can be seen explicitly in lyrics like 'but I was only rock, dust, water, and ice / and animal instincts all along'¹⁶⁷ and 'keep looking – you're gonna find me / teeth ready,

¹⁶⁴ Wolfe, 'Be All Things', 2019.

¹⁶⁵ Murphy, *Reconceiving Nature*, p. 7f.

¹⁶⁶ Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Spun', track 1 on *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2017, compact disc).

sharp, snarling’,¹⁶⁸ as a textual depiction of a closeness to the feral part of the self that civilisation and culture has tamed. This is similarly explored on ‘Primal/Carnal’, the intro track to *Apokalypsis*, consisting only of animalistic vocal sounds, such as snarling and roaring, layered and processed through distortion and other effect to create a grating and shrieking sound. Other instances of similar tendencies to subvert the humanity inherently present in the singing or speaking voice can be found in examples like the liberal use of distortion on her voice, the growling metal vocals of guest singer Aaron Turner on ‘Vex’,¹⁶⁹ and the vocal effect on ‘Color of Blood’ that deliberately gives Wolfe’s voice a prominent lisp.¹⁷⁰ In most of these examples, I would argue that she actively evades the semantic function of speech and embraces the feral, animalistic in *phone*, thus situating herself closer to an animal mode of communication, rejecting the signifying realm of *semantike*.¹⁷¹

There are similar instances where Wolfe musically pushes the limits of what can be considered pleasurable for the ear and conventionally beautiful in music, where the instruments shriek, whine, grate and grind with or without technical effects, such as distortion, reverb, echo or feedback. Here, the instruments actively reject the musicality of their own sounds, turning into noise, as can be heard on the screaming, distorted guitars in the outro of ‘Deranged for Rock & Roll’, underscoring the madness of the theme of the song.¹⁷² It can also be heard in the dense sound on ‘Dragged Out’ from *Abyss*, with its oozing bass and saw-toothed guitars. It is very prominent in the machine-like whirring and grinding that permeates *Hiss Spun* (2017), most prominently on ‘Welt’ and ‘Strain’ as well as the metallic twang of both guitar and voice on ‘The Whys’ and the first recording of ‘Moses’ from *The Grime and the Glow* (2010). This rejection of the conventional in the musical sounds, towards noise and untamed sounds, explores musical ideas beyond cultural expectations of music. In a way, it is an evasion of civilisation and culture through the expression of musical ideas outside of song and music.

The ideas of longing for a connection with nature and embracing the feral that are thematically developed on ‘Be All Things’ has a snarling and menacing precursor in ‘Feral Love’ from *Pain is Beauty*. Here, the ideas of exploring the untamed and animalistic within the self are expressed vocally as well as musically, through a distorted and distressing sound that is underscored by a static, sequenced beat. While the instruments and vocals on top of the relentless beat are rather slow and deliberate, the hammering of the drum permeates the feel of the song with a tangible

¹⁶⁸ Wolfe, ‘Dirt Universe’, 2019.

¹⁶⁹ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Vex’, track 3 on *Hiss Spun* (Sargent House, 2017, compact disc).

¹⁷⁰ Wolfe, ‘Color of Blood’, 2015.

¹⁷¹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 182.

¹⁷² Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Deranged for Rock & Roll’, track 4 on *Birth of Violence* (Sargent House, 2019, compact disc).

urgency, almost evoking the triggering of a sensation similar to a flight response in the listener as the chase is on.

run from the light
your eyes, black like an animal
deep in the wander

and care for no one but the offspring of your might
run from the one who comes to find you
wait for the night that comes to hide

your eyes black like an animal
black like an animal
crossing the water
lead them to die

we press for the water, press for the river, press for the rain
we press for the water, press for the river, press for the pain

we press for the water, press for the river, press for the rain
we press for the water, press for the river, press for the pain¹⁷³

Especially towards the end, where the repetition of the ‘we press for the water’, sung in Wolfe’s upper register, is layered on top of the static rhythm of ‘we press for the water, press for the river, press for the rain’, there is something instinctual in pressing for the water, any water, creating a vocal chaos of urgency as the animal instincts take over any rational, human thought. The smattering drums further enhances the sense of danger, of the instinct to run from the light and head for water. Throughout the song, Wolfe’s voice remains in her lower register until the final part where the treble in her voice participates in the creation of the layering of ‘we press for the water’. While there is nothing particularly animalistic and rejecting of *semantike* in her voice on ‘Feral Love’, unlike the examples I mentioned above, her inflection and the meaning of the words together with the whining guitars and smattering words create the musical sensation of embracing the feral, shedding human rationality and civilisation and roam the wilds.

A musical contrast to ‘Feral Love’, yet a thematic parallel, can be discerned in ‘Lone’, where Wolfe’s wind-like vocals and airy guitar plucking at first seem similar to ‘Green Altar’ in its musical and vocal style. But while ‘Green Altar’ has a warmth and a reverence in its composition, ‘Lone’ gives an impression of desolation, of a lonely environment that is melancholic, yes, but peaceful; where ‘sorrow is all gone’, ‘buried in the soil’.

¹⁷³ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Feral Love’, track 1 on *Pain is Beauty* (Sargent House, 2013, compact disc). With my addition of the repetition of the final two lines, according to how the lyrics appear on the song itself.

when the wind takes 'em all
away from here, away from me
when the sorrow is all gone
it is buried in the soil
when the wind takes em all
away from here away from me
when the sorrow is all gone
it is buried in the sun
when the wolves howl their song
and the whole earth is done
when the wolves howl their song
and the wind still carries on¹⁷⁴

The echo of Wolfe's heavily reverbed voice creates a sense of a large, empty space which only further emphasises the feeling of loneliness and desolation. There is nothing here but the quiet strumming of the acoustic guitar and her voice that echoes like a wind on a grey winter's day. After the final line, there is still around two minutes left of the song. Here, the deep but soft chords of a distorted electric guitar as well as ambient synthesizer enter to accompany the acoustic strumming. After a while Wolfe calls out in a repeating, wordless vocalisation, evoking the howl of the wolves in the lyrics, calling out in the emptiness. As this vocalisation is not explicitly written out in the lyrics, it means that only the half of the song that is semantic is textually represented. The vocality of *phone* remains hidden, yet it is still vivid with meaning when heard.

Cavarero states that logos strives to prevent the voice from entering the realm of meaning, vocality belongs to nonsense; a *phone* that evades its semantic function becomes meaningless, irrational and animal, as opposed to the signifying *semantike* of speech derived from thoughts.¹⁷⁵ However, as Cavarero writes, the voice subjectivises the one who emits it, even animals. It belongs to the living, as it is situated in the body, it is always a matter of the presence of an existent in flesh and bone. And because the voice it is destined for the ear of another, it is always relational.¹⁷⁶ But communication is not always about a need, like an animal's cry or a yelp of pain, or an infant's hunger or discomfort. Before communicating need, there is a need for communication, and babies' cries call for rhythm, reciprocity and uniqueness.¹⁷⁷ The rhythmic cadence of a call and response, such as a 'hello' and a 'hello' that echoes back in acknowledgement, shows the expression of uniqueness and reciprocity, stating that 'I' see 'you'. A musical vocalisation can thus be heard similarly, as an expression of uniqueness and a call for rhythm, reciprocity and a connection that a studio recording severs before it can be established, but is re-established in a live performance setting. In light of this, Wolfe's wolf-like calling into the desolate soundscape echoes with the

¹⁷⁴ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Lone', track 12 on *Pain is Beauty* (Sargent House, 2013, compact disc).

¹⁷⁵ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 182.

¹⁷⁶ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 177.

¹⁷⁷ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 181.

loneliness of severed communication. It is a melancholy vocalisation establishing uniqueness. When everything is gone, the dust settled and the wolves' howl their song, the 'I' remains, and the voice is the reminder of the existence in flesh and bone.

Ocean and Death

‘La Mer – Haunted Sexuality’

Water is a recurring motif in the music and lyrics of Chelsea Wolfe, from the Sirens of ‘Sirenum Scopuli’ on *The Grime and the Glow* (2010), to the likening of love to a waterfall on ‘Green Altar’. The water, in the forms of oceans, rain, fjords and waterfalls accompany distressing, personal, themes of swimming, drowning, being dragged down to the bottom, as well as comforting themes of healing, accepting and letting go.

Cavarero writes in her chapter on the Sirens in Homer’s *Odyssey* about how in modern interpretations, the Sirens drag sailors to the bottom of the ocean with one last passionate kiss: ‘Born from the water of a woman, he thus returns to the water with her to die. It is the common, ancient patriarchal fable of Eros and Thanatos, with the maternal body functioning as both cradle and tomb, both as origin and end of the living body.’¹⁷⁸ This echoes how de Beauvoir describes the connection between womb and tomb, but in Cavarero’s text it is placed in relation to the Sirens, and the ocean. While the connection between the ocean and the amniotic fluid might be a patriarchal construction, the connection between water and death can be clearly discerned in the music of Chelsea Wolfe. Interestingly enough, she also has a song titled ‘Sirenum Scopuli’ that directly references Homer’s *Odyssey*, as Sirenum Scopuli is the name of the islands of the Sirens.

Wolfe’s rendition of the Sirens is completely *a cappella*, allowing her multitracked voice to become the sole bearer of musicalized meaning. While Cavarero writes about how our contemporary understanding and interpretation of the Sirens is far from Homer’s actual text, Wolfe sings from the perspective of the Sirens themselves.¹⁷⁹ As there is no instrumental music accompanying her vocal tracks, all the more attention is drawn to the inflection and distance from the listener’s ear. The choir of voices echo with dialled up reverb, evoking something angelic or similarly mythic and ethereal creatures like fairies and mermaids. This use of harmonies, reverb and *a cappella* voices lend something mysterious, powerful and ominous to this otherwise simple and stripped back composition. During the progression of the song, Wolfe’s voice(s) drift(s) closer and closer, growing more incessant and demanding, coaxing and urging ‘you’ to come to her, ending with the repetition of ‘I need your heart inside of me’, an ominous sentiment in the intertextual context of the song title.

¹⁷⁸ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 108.

¹⁷⁹ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 103 and 114f.

sailing, sailing on the sea
won't you, baby, sail to me?
you told me my name was the sea
so baby, baby, sail to me
oh baby, baby, sail to me

I miss those eyes so blue and green
those eyes that seemed to save me
baby, baby, sail the sea
I need you darling, sail to me

swimming, swimming, make my arms
become so strong to carry yours
and may you also carry me
oh baby, baby, swim to me

how I miss you baby, baby
swim the sea and talk to me
oh, I'm drowning out here without you
my arms won't last so long
without your touch, oh baby, baby
sail to me, oh sail the sea

baby, baby, you're so sweet
I need your heart inside of me
I need your heart inside of me
I need your heart inside of me¹⁸⁰

In this way 'Sirenum Scopuli' remains rather ambivalent. From the title, the listener can infer the lurking danger of the voices calling, through the intertextual connection to the *Odyssey*, but at the same time, the sensual but increasingly desperate attempt to persuade the 'you' evokes a genuine distress call. The line 'you told me my name was the sea' conflates the singer with the ocean, opening the possibility for the ocean to be the one calling the 'you' home to die or return to the womb.

This ambivalence is symptomatic of Wolfe's musicalized relationship to water and the ocean, and these watery themes seem to be utilised to express and explore a complex relationship to life and death. While 'Sirenum Scopuli' remains an ominous and unsettling love song themed around the beauty and deceptiveness of the ocean, other songs express a similarly discernible complex relationship to the ocean, representing the relationship to the alluring aspects of life and death. On the following album, there is a similar, seductive connection to the ocean on 'Mer,' in the pleasing rhythmic staccato of the vocals, where Wolfe sings of 'la mer – haunted sexuality, curves, angles, charcoal to paper'.¹⁸¹ Conceiving of the sexuality of the sea as haunted echoes the ambivalence and complexity of the ocean like on 'Sirenum Scopuli', creating a point of departure for future

¹⁸⁰ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Sirenum Scopuli', track 12 on *The Grime and the Glow* (Pendulum Sound Recordings, 2010, compact disc). These lyrics are unavailable on Wolfe's official website, and I have opted to use the most common formatting available online.

¹⁸¹ Chelsea Wolfe, 'Mer', track 2 on *Apokalypsis* (Pendulum Sound Recordings, 2011, compact disc).

explorations of the multi-faceted aspects of the ocean that is both sensual and dangerous, soothing as well as suffocating, where life begins and ends.

The title of the album *Abyss* from 2015 alludes to the depths of the ocean. While there certainly are many other meanings contained in the word, such as the album's themes of sleep, the hazy fluidity of dreams and the subconscious, the titular song 'The Abyss' that closes the album opens on the lyrics 'watch your thoughts in the dark / they'll drag you down to the deep blue sea', thus likening the deep recesses of the mind to the ocean.¹⁸² Almost overpowered by sharp, dissonant twinkle of a piano that evoke the sound of water droplets falling, Wolfe sings in her distinctly soft and introverted voice that only enhances the dreamlike musical space of the subconscious. 'The Abyss' is a dreamworld where the oppressive, yet soothing, sound creates an unsettling mood. The absence of drums or other percussions creates a soundscape that, with only the harsh piano and ambience, feels almost like being under water, sinking deeper and deeper into the abyss. The outro consists of a dissonant, unrelenting viola, playing just as harsh as the piano, growing more frantic and incessant over the course of the outro, pushing the limits of what is pleasurable in a sound. Here, the sea becomes an oppressive and frightening void in which the subject is weighed down, sinking deeper and deeper into the darkness, overpowered and helpless. Yet there is still something rhythmic and soothing in the soundscape and Wolfe's vocals that remain subdued and rather static. Without the dynamic shifts in vocal power and intensity, she contains its introverted softness, staying close to the listener's ear, the reverb making her voice echo in the void.

In sharp contrast to the tangible edge of danger sensed in the alluring aspects of the ocean in 'Sirenum Scopuli', 'Mer' and 'The Abyss,' that threatens to dissolve individualistic identity, there is the final aspect to the themes of water and ocean where it is conceived of as healing and comforting. From the cleansing of the ocean's licking tongue in 'Scrape', to 'water cuts through the rock and the hurt / begging for healing, surging and thrumming' in 'Dirt Universe', there is a soothing and peaceful comfort to the water, that has the ability to heal and wash clean.¹⁸³ This can be sensed in the unifying abundance of love that flows like a waterfall in the marriage-like union of 'Green Altar,' where the dissolution of the self is conceived as an act of love. There is a unifying notion about the connection to the other, dissolving the individual and fuses into a collective subject. This shows a different aspect of the unifying ability of water, not framed as death of the body, but of individuality, similar to the loss of human distinctiveness and individualistic identity in the conception of Gates' Victorian female sublime, that allows for a strength in the togetherness of the collective.

¹⁸² Wolfe, 'The Abyss', 2015.

¹⁸³ Wolfe, 'Dirt Universe', 2019.

In this way, the water and depths of the ocean in Wolfe's songs can be understood as a unity that dissolves the self in the death of the individual. Submersion in water also constitutes a place that suppresses sound, rendering the human subject both deaf and mute. In this way, the loss of voice and language strips the subject of their humanity in an elimination of uniqueness that turns them into something no longer human.¹⁸⁴ While this dissolution of uniqueness, through unity or death, can be a frightening notion, there is also something satisfying and empowering in the fusion of difference in Wolfe's songs. The ocean in her songs is most prominently associated with the dissolution of the self in death, however, death is not always conceived of as something quite as frightening as one would think. Instead, the following sections elaborate on the notion of the ocean's relationship with death as one of continuity with earth, a peaceful acceptance of our return to the inanimate state from before birth.

'The Waves Have Come and Taken You to Sea'

The Western relationship with death is one of discontinuity, according to Val Plumwood. In Christianity, as well as in the philosophy of Plato, the meaning of death is that the meaning of human life is not found in the earth, but somewhere else, in a realm above and beyond the earth. Our real self is not the body, but the soul, and as such it is discontinuous from nature. As such, continuity can only be provided by the soul's persistence in a spiritual realm.¹⁸⁵ Human identity thus becomes discontinuous from nature, but also oppositional to it, in conflict with the fundamental conditions of its physical life.

Death so understood expresses continuity with this spiritual order, but it also expresses the opposition of the human essence to the contrasting order of nature. It teaches us that as natural beings we die, and that only as rational, cultural beings in opposition to nature (and hence to the basic conditions of our lives) do we live.¹⁸⁶

Plumwood continues, stating that this account of death is no longer plausible for modernity, as the contemporary Western subject has configured the afterlife as a human invention. However, after dispensing the other realm, disconnected from and opposed to nature, as the basis for human identity, Plumwood claims that it is the disconnection itself that has become the modern basis for human identity. While the spiritual realm has been lost, it has not been replaced and death in the modern Western context is thus separated and alienated from any order of significance.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁴ Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice*, 210f.

¹⁸⁵ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 100.

¹⁸⁶ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 101.

¹⁸⁷ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 102.

Modernity [...] has not provided an earthian identity which gives a life-affirming account of death, or comes to terms with death as part of the human condition and with the denials and exclusions inherited from the otherworldly tradition. It does not give death the significance of unity with nature, for the human essence is still conceptualised as discontinuous from nature; or to the extent that death can express a unity with nature, it is a unity with an order of nature conceived as dualised other, as itself stripped of significance, as mere matter. [...] Death is a nothing, a void, a terrifying and sinister terminus, whose only meaning is that there is no meaning.¹⁸⁸

Unable to embrace death as part of life and part of nature, Simone de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that patriarchy is men's denial of their own mortality, while women and nature remain incessant reminders of it. As such, the domination of nature, and woman as representative of nature, becomes a desperate attempt to transcend death. Civilisation is built to last; monuments of man's immortality that stands for centuries, resisting oblivion.¹⁸⁹ For de Beauvoir, woman's reproductive abilities represent the immanence of nature that calls man back into his body and reminds him of his own mortality: '[b]ut we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. He exploits her, but she crushes him, he is born of her and dies in her.'¹⁹⁰ As every birth inevitably ends in death, it reminds him of his own mortality. She pulls him back to earth, to the fragility of the human condition, and this is the source of the connection between womb and tomb.¹⁹¹

Wolfe's songs about death tend to lean on the more acoustic side. While grief and melancholy permeate the music and lyrics, the mood tend to be more subdued; romantic and accepting – in line with the spiritual cultures of indigenous people who live close to the land. Several indigenous philosophers have criticised the human-centredness of Western spirituality and its denial of ecological inclusion and connection.¹⁹² In Plumwood's discussion of the writing of Australian Aboriginal philosopher Bill Neidjie, she shows that indigenous spiritual culture radically differs from the dominant spiritual culture of the West: "Our story is in the land: it is written in those sacred places, that's the law [...] Earth ... like your father or brother or mother / because you born from earth. You got to come back to earth ... That's your bone, your blood. It's in this earth, same for the tree"¹⁹³ Plumwood asserts that this shows that the dominant spiritual culture of the West has not come to terms with the ecological facts of life and death and that the denial of unity with the earth severs our connection to it.

One of the most prominent examples of death and the expression of grief as accepting in Wolfe's music is 'The Waves Have Come', the penultimate track from *Pain is Beauty* (2013). At 8

¹⁸⁸ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 102.

¹⁸⁹ Jagentowicz Mills, 'Feminism and Ecology: On the Domination of Nature', 170.

¹⁹⁰ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 144.

¹⁹¹ Jagentowicz Mills, 'Feminism and Ecology: On the Domination of Nature', 170.

¹⁹² Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2001), 225.

¹⁹³ Bill Neidjie, 1986, 1989, quoted in Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, 226.

minutes and 29 seconds, it is currently her longest song.¹⁹⁴ The main instrument is piano rather than guitar, playing a rocking rhythm that evokes the sensation of lapping waves, accompanied by strings and drums from the second verse on. The song opens with something akin to white noise, like wind or waves, before the piano's first D major chord. After it rings out into the silence, it is followed by a F sharp minor, A, and then F sharp minor in a lower octave, before the vocals and the rocking rhythm enter on a D major 7. Although the key is F sharp minor, the first chord is a D major, setting an uncharacteristically positive tone for a song full of grief.

One of the most notable things about the vocals is the fact that there are two distinct voices, multitracked, singing in harmony, travelling around each other through the pitch. During the verses, they are processed to be almost equal in volume, making it difficult to discern which is the main melody and which is the harmony. They are not always perfectly in sync, as can be noted during the second verse, in 'they took your smell, they took your shadow', where the second 'took' has a slight stutter to it, further separating the voices into two autonomous vocal lines.

During the final stanza of the song, the vocals and lyrics become almost a stream of consciousness where the lines flow like a river that inevitably leads to the sea:

creation was the only word that made you feel you never were
an endless hope is all it was and holding sacred all were
and don't forsake the way we were and don't tell me you never would
and we don't need physical things to make us feel and make us dream
when earth cracks open and swallows then we'll never be tired again
and we'll be given everything the moment we realize we're not in control
and all you know gets older when
the sun goes down and everything begins to fade away the waves
have come and taken you to sea never to return to me

never to return to me¹⁹⁵

Here, the two vocal lines become somewhat unified, nestled into the music, the lyrics comforting and promising before returning to the notion of the permanence of death. But during the final vocal line, the top trails off, scatters into the wind, leaving the lower melody to land in the last 'to me', grounded – finding a home in the A major chord before the outro. The final part of the song remains bittersweet; grief is still present, but there is also an acceptance of death as part of life. Death is here understood as a continuity with the earth; as the ocean takes back, the 'you' has

¹⁹⁴ The second longest songs are 'Half sleeper', 7:18 minutes, performed live, track 1 on *Live at Roadburn* (Sargent House, 2015, compact disc), (originally 6:02, track 10 on *The Grime and the Glow*, Pendu Sound Recording, 2010, compact disc) and 'Pale on Pale' at 6:59 minutes, track 9 on *Apokalypsis* (Sargent House, 2011, compact disc).

¹⁹⁵ Wolfe, 'The Waves Have Come', 2013. This is how the lyrics appear written out on Wolfe's official website, with my own addition of the final 'never to return to me', as the line appears in the song itself.

returned to nature, not alienated from the earth, but in connection with it.¹⁹⁶ And here is where the acceptance lies, in the relinquishing of control and letting go with a sigh of relief.

‘Our Rotting Bodies So Deeply in Love’

With the idea of continuity with the earth it follows that our connection to it is never severed. Instead, this connection follows even in death, and thus becomes a rather comforting thought that makes the idea of death less unknown. Just like Bill Neidjie describes death as a returning home to the earth it becomes a peaceful and soothing idea, free of uncertainty and fear. There is a musicalization in Wolfe’s songs that explores the idea of death as not just accepting, but as a peaceful and even a welcome return to the earth. Here, the associations to water and the ocean continue to permeate the imagery of the songs, just like in the two previous sections about ‘Sirenum Scopuli,’ ‘The Abyss,’ and ‘The Waves Have Come’.

In Elisabeth Bronfen’s book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, she recalls cultural myths of femininity that associate woman with death through the connection between womb and tomb, as a point of return to a fusion beyond any split; to a return to the primordial mother:

The lack of boundaries between concepts such as womb, tomb, home is traditionally linked to the analogy between earth and mother, and with it, that of death or birth, or death-conception and birth-resurrection. Death is here conceptualised as the return to a symbiotic unity, to the peace before the difference and tension of life, to the protective enclosure before individuation and cultururation.¹⁹⁷

The feminine other thus becomes a site from which life emerges, but it is a life that is instantly marked for death. The conjunction of womb-tomb marks unity and loss, the dissolution of the self.¹⁹⁸ The denial of mortality and the fear of death that de Beauvoir claims that woman and nature inspire in man is largely absent in Wolfe’s music. Instead, what is feared is the death of the natural world and the earth as our home. The waves take you back to sea after death as you are returned home to the water. Human death is depicted through a grief that blows you wide open, the sadness affirmed and recognized, but death itself is accepted as a continuity with the earth. Sometimes death instead becomes the solution, the end to a life of pain and suffering, and Wolfe frames it as something warm and comforting, like a sigh of relief.

¹⁹⁶ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 102.

¹⁹⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, [1992] *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 65f.

¹⁹⁸ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 67.

In Deborah Slicer's recount of how most ecofeminist writing has become considerably more self-conscious over time, she concludes that ecofeminist writers and thinkers more often than not manage to avoid essentialising biological men and women.¹⁹⁹ While there is a clear tendency in the ecofeminist discourse to romanticise the feminine, Slicer proceeds to clarify how Plumwood navigates through the theoretical terrain of essentialist notions of gender without romanticising the feminine. For Plumwood, the difference between men and women's different social and historical position has led women to lead a life that is less directly oppositional of nature than those of men. Because women are identified as a part of nature, rather than discontinuous with it, there is ontological value here for a rethinking of social and ontological assumptions.²⁰⁰ In Slicer's recount and discussion of Plumwood's theory of dis-/continuity, she attempts to consolidate the valuable and problematic aspects of the conflating the feminine with continuity with nature and the masculine with a discontinuity with it:

[T]he "discontinuous" masculine self employs "instrumental" reason, a distinguishing "human" ability, to extract use value from a feminized nature and naturalized feminine human beings [...] The way to untangle this construction is not to deny women's continuity with nature or to embrace it uncritically but to make these categories more permeable – women create culture, too, and culture is not radically discontinuous with nature – and to think carefully about the normative standards that fall out of these radically different socially constructed ontologies.²⁰¹

This connects to a different aspect of death where the consequences of dis-/continuity with nature are tangible, as can be seen in the works of writer and funeral director Caitlin Doughty. The industrialisation and professionalisation of deathcare in the early twentieth century made the 'visceral, primeval work performed by women [into] a "profession," an "art," and even a "science," performed by well-paid men'.²⁰² Thus, it can be said that the professionalisation of deathcare in the West has contributed to the experience of death as discontinuous with earth; we rarely or never encounter the body as a corpse, further placing the rational, cultural human in opposition to the natural. What emerges in Doughty's writing is the liberation found in the rotting body, especially for women; allowing the body to decompose is a radical act in a culture obsessed with preventing aging and decay. Thus, choosing how we return to earth after death is suggested as an attempt at reclaiming our corpses: "There is freedom found in decomposition, a body rendered messy,

¹⁹⁹ Deborah Slicer, 'Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory', in *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy*, ed. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 53.

²⁰⁰ Slicer, 'Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory', 54.

²⁰¹ Slicer, 'Toward an Ecofeminist Standpoint Theory', 54.

²⁰² Caitlin Doughty, *From Here to Eternity: Travelling the World to Find the Good Death* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 136.

chaotic, and wild. [...] Maybe we wish to become soil for a willow tree, a rosebush, a pine – destined in death to both rot and nourish on our own terms.’²⁰³

A similar sense of freedom can be discerned in Wolfe’s songs relating to death and the dissolution of the self. There is something intimate and gentle in allowing the self to let go and trust the earth. Kramer writes about the disintegrative effect of music on words, stating that phenomenologically, song is a partial dissociation of speech: ‘a loosening of phonetic and syntactic articulation and a dissolving of language into its physical origin, vocalization. If speech is taken as a norm, song is a regressive form of utterance, and its linguistic regressiveness seems to have a psychosexual dimension’.²⁰⁴ This psychosexual dimension refers to the primary function of song in social life to create intimacy, and Kramer exemplifies that the accidental overhearing of spontaneous singing is an intrusion of the singer’s privacy.²⁰⁵ Through the connections between song, intimacy, relationality and the dissolution of language into its physical origin in vocalization, there is something primal about the voice as *phone*, as can be understood manifesting in examples like soothing humming, almost lullabic in nature.

In the acoustic song ‘Virginia Woolf Underwater’ from *Unknown Rooms: A Collection of Acoustic Songs*, Wolfe’s voice calls out to the listener in a haunting vocalisation, enhanced with reverb that gives it an ethereal, floating quality over soft, rhythmic strumming of the guitar. The acoustic guitar has a warmer sound that characterises many of Wolfe’s earlier songs, and *Unknown Rooms*, specifically. The title evokes the suicide of author Virginia Woolf on March 28th in 1941, when she filled her overcoat pockets with stones and walked into the river. The sound of the song is comforting, almost a lullaby as the subject seems to find a sort of comfort or freedom in death, in the choice to dissolve the self and return to the inanimate, weightless freedom from before birth. A return to the water of the womb, where the pain of living is dissolved. Close to the sublime experience of losing the human distinctiveness and individualistic identity in the encounter with nature, described by Gates.²⁰⁶ The calling vocalisation has the same ethereal reverb that enhances the seductiveness of the vocals as the *a cappella* voices of ‘Sirenum Scopuli,’ the ocean calling the subject back to itself from beyond the ice-cold silence of the water that suppresses all sound. The harmonies underscoring certain textual lines that depict the painful facts of life, further promising the freedom and an end to grief. In a culmination before the final stanza, the Siren-like voices sing in harmony, offering ‘you’ their hand, urging ‘you’ to ‘Listen well, follow the sound’.²⁰⁷

²⁰³ Doughty, *From Here to Eternity*, 136.

²⁰⁴ Kramer, ‘Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry’, 7f.

²⁰⁵ Kramer, ‘Song Reconsidered: Words and Music, Music and Poetry’, 8f.

²⁰⁶ Gates, *Kindred Nature*, 170.

²⁰⁷ Chelsea Wolfe, ‘Virginia Woolf Underwater’, track 10 on *Unknown Rooms: A Collection of Acoustic Songs* (Sargent House, 2012, compact disc).

The ocean's associations with birth and death can be further discerned in the themes and motifs of 'They'll Clap When You're Gone' from *Pain is Beauty*. In sharp contrast to 'Virginia Woolf Underwater', this song is unsettling and uncomfortable in its musicalized depiction of depression and suicide ideation. While there is acceptance and grief over death in 'The Waves Have Come', here, the subject is unwillingly alive, longing to return to what Bronfen describes as the 'peace before the difference and tension of life'.²⁰⁸ In an inversion of the previous section, 'They'll Clap When You're Gone' depicts a squirming discomfort of being alive, as Wolfe's reverbed voice laments over clean guitar strumming:

when can I die, when can I go
when will I be free, when will I know
when can I run – my legs are bound
when can I go, when can I go

was born a blackened seed in the wild
and I never was a child
I was pulled right out of the sea
and the salt – it never left my body²⁰⁹

The absence of drums or percussions during the majority of the song also marks the absence of pulse or a heartbeat, enhancing the anhedonia within the subject, who is unable to feel anything at all. This sensation is further enhanced by the reverb on Wolfe's voice, creating a hollow and lonely space in the music, mirroring the void inside. In the second verse, the overpowering acoustic guitar that almost smothers Wolfe's voice is accompanied by faint, soft drums and a violin with a similar timbre as on 'Flatlands'. During the verses, there is a firmness to her pronunciation of the words in her lower register, growing into a brittle pleading as the guitars quietens on 'when can I die, when can I go,' allowing her voice to take on the majority of the musicalized meaning, echoing in the sudden sonic emptiness.

As Wolfe sings about being 'born a blackened seed in the wild,' there is a feral and untamed core inside the subject that has been domesticated and subjugated. The subject doesn't belong, their legs are bound and they cannot run, they are 'alive and ugly, alive and ugly / alive and ugly, alive and ugly'. The notion of being taken from the wild, from the sea, the place of origin, can be perceived in the conclusion that the subject's legs are bound because they were meant to swim rather than run. Thus being 'alive and ugly' has more to do with a sense of belonging elsewhere than anything else. The final stanza pivots in perspective, becoming bittersweet in the reassurance that everything will be alright after you are dead:

²⁰⁸ Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, 65.

²⁰⁹ Chelsea Wolfe, 'They'll Clap When You're Gone', track 10 on *Pain is Beauty* (Sargent House, 2013, compact disc).

they'll clap when you die
they'll love you when you're dead
and they'll understand
and you'll be forgiven then²¹⁰

While the imagery of the song is full of metaphors and things representing other things, examining these images in a literal sense contributes to a wider, comprehensible understanding of the meaning assigned to motifs of water, here in relation to depression and death as liberation or a sigh of relief. In other instances, death is depicted differently, with other images and words that still contribute to a romantic and peaceful impression of it.

'Simple Death' from *Abyss* (2015) and 'Half sleeper' from *The Grime and the Glow* (2010) do not contain any textual allusions to water, beyond the waters on 'Simple Death' rising and Wolfe's prayer to let her swim, alluding to the death of the world rather than the individual. However, they both depict the tragedy of death through a beauty in the imagery and sound, juxtaposing the two. 'Half sleeper' depicts a fatal car crash where the bodies are 'spread across the open road,' being given a dress of red and skin of grey.²¹¹ There is a morbid fascination in the almost slow-motion like engrossment in the scene of death, evoking the sense of a musical painting, depicting a moment frozen in time, enhanced by soft strumming, soft, vocalising harmonies and white noise ambience. There is something beautiful and reverent in the sound and vocals that conveys the power in the tragedy and sadness of death, where everything that happened before becomes meaningless.

'Simple Death' opens with Wolfe's voice singing the line 'simple death feels infinite / compared to the end of it all'. Closely followed by synthesizer ambience that very faintly evokes the sound of windpipes or a church organ and an oppressive atmosphere that together create a feeling of being submerged under water or trapped inside a dreamworld. This sonically oppressive realm is similar to 'The Abyss' and its characteristic sound that permeates most of *Abyss*. On the second verse the line 'we looked around / and all was dead / our rotting bodies so deeply in love' evoke a romantic image of a boundless love that reaches beyond death, even in the face of tragedy. In the almost one-minute-long outro, Wolfe vocalises on multi-tracks of echoes of her own voice, the spectral echoes haunting in the soundscape, disembodied and lamenting.

In contrast to 'The Waves Have Come' where there is grief but acceptance, these songs wholly embrace, or even long for, death, almost framing it as sublime at times. While there is a tangible melancholia in the chording and vocals, I would argue that the raw and deep-seated grief that permeates many other songs remains absent, reserved for the death of the world, but not for the death of the human individual.

²¹⁰ Wolfe, 'They'll Clap When You're Gone', 2013.

²¹¹ Wolfe, 'Half sleeper', 2010. See Mallison, *Chelsea Wolfe in a Crooked World – Presented by Swoon*, 2012.

Part III

Summary

In this thesis I have aimed to explore how the natural world manifests in the songs of American singer-songwriter Chelsea Wolfe and how it relates to notions of womanhood. Through the theoretical field of ecocritical feminism my analysis of Wolfe's songs is rooted in the understanding of patriarchal culture's naturalisation of woman and feminisation of nature in the identification of woman with nature, body, birth and death, in opposition to culture, reason, civilisation and the conceived masculine realm of thought. In the exploration of these ecofeminist notions and ideas in relation to voice and song, I utilised the feminist vocal philosophy of Adriana Cavarero, where the gendered division of speech as sound and meaning is examined and critiqued. And to further facilitate an understanding of the relationship between song, text and language, I employed the methodology of Critical Musicology as described by Lawrence Kramer. In the practical analysis of Wolfe's songs, while my main interest concerns her vocal expression, I have also taken the sound of her music into consideration, as well as the textual and intertextual inclusions, allowing a more diverse set of aspects to inform my understanding of how nature appears in her work.

Beginning in the notion of origin and birth, I elaborated on the connection between earth, motherhood and voice in the conception of woman as origin, echoed and interrogated in the ecofeminist critique of patriarchal culture's devaluation of nature and the feminine. Illuminated by Cavarero's understanding of the logocentrist division of speech that separates *phone* from *semantike*, sound from meaning, I explored the maternal origin in relation to the earth in Chelsea Wolfe's songs. Here, the identification of *phone* with the feminine sign and *semantike* with the masculine signifying relate to the sounds that infants make, belonging to the pre-verbal sphere where vocalic drives reign known as the maternal *chora*, inform my understanding of the themes of ancestry, divine nature and Mother Earth in Wolfe's songs.

Following the search for a divine mother in nature, the second chapter of the analysis focus on the (sexually) exploited aspects of nature. Illuminated by ecofeminist critique of sex-typing nature and sexualised language surrounding it, claiming that this ensures its subservient status, I explored (sexual) violence, revenge and the collective subject in Wolfe's songs. Here, a violated victim is conflated with nature, embodied as a nymph defiled, vocally expressed through the proximity to *phone* in *phone semantike*, by apprehending an alienation of the spoken or sung word.

Thus, the tension between sonorous texture and the verbally signified is strained as Wolfe vocally rejects comprehension, twisting and stretching her voice and pitch into something that fights against what can be considered song.

The third chapter concerns the grief over a disconnect to nature, expressed in songs that depict the world as fundamentally broken, exploited and dead. I have explored how Wolfe thematically depicts the destruction of the world, vocally and musically, playing with technical effect or their absence, heightening the sensation of loneliness or dystopic perception of the world.

This disconnect also manifests in the painful longing to connect to the beautiful natural world, to be in it, one with it. And finally, I explored how this belonging to nature is expressed through an embrace of the feral and untamed within, the primal urge to be wild and roam free within nature. This is musicalized and vocalised by rejecting the musicality of the instruments, and utilising the twisting and bending of the vocals into untamed animalistic sounds, such as snarling and shrieking, exploring and affirming the wild and feral straining against musicality and civilisation.

The final chapter connects the water and oceans with the ambivalence of danger and seduction. Here, the ocean is conceived as both the site of birth and death in Cavarero's reading of the Sirens in the *Odyssey*, closely identified with the feminine through the connection between womb and tomb. In the ecofeminist critique of the modern human's relationship with death, we are understood as living in discontinuation with the earth, in denial of mortality. As the soul is thought to be eternal, belonging somewhere other than to the earth, death does not signify a peaceful return home to it. Instead, it inspires a fear of death that is not shared by several indigenous cultures that relate death to the return home to the land that gave birth to us. This attitude towards death breeds acceptance and allows us a sense of peace, even in grief.

In Wolfe's songs, this ambivalence of death is expressed in the themes of water, where there is something soothing, peaceful and alluring about the ocean, as it also looms ominously, dangerous and threatening, muting all sound and eliminating the distinguishable human uniqueness inherent in the voice. The allusions to the Sirens, through multi-tracked *a cappella* voices, or the sensation of haunting vocalisation carried under water, calling out, further grounds the connection between death and bodies of water. Understood like this, the ocean becomes a place where the self is dissolved; a source of either relief or unease. In some songs death is welcome, and the thematical inclusions of water are musicalized and vocalised as comforting and sensual. In other songs it is life that is uncomfortable and there is a longing for death and the sea, as a release from the pain of living. Overall, there is a movement in Wolfe's songs towards an acceptance of grief and death. It is meant to be felt, respected as the immensely powerful force that it is, but death is ultimately understood as a return to a state of unity with the earth.

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