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Walking Out of Dualisms: Material Ecofeminism in Olivia Laing's *To The River* (2011)

By Sarah France¹

Abstract

This article positions Olivia Laing's novel *To The River* (2011) as a feminist alternative to the patriarchally-coded concepts of psychogeography and flânerie, which, I argue, do not allow for female inclusion. By demonstrating how the text displays theories of material ecofeminism, I establish how *To The River* works to determine commonly accepted ontological binary divisions as, in fact, permeable. That is, instead of rejecting her female connection to the body and to nature, Laing fully embraces it, walking into nature and writing her lived experience. By walking into nature specifically, Laing is able to walk out of phallogocentric urban space, both physically and metaphysically. In doing so, she resists the structures of male urban space, exploring spaces in nature that instead allow her the potential to write her mind and her body. She rejects the reason, structure and control of oppressive patriarchy, walking and writing around these structures. She does this by "going beneath" the male gaze, playing with surfaces and the use of liminal spaces, and through an interaction with the freeing and uncharted space of nature. More specifically, she goes to the river: the place of womanly, watery rebirth in which identity can be lost and potentially, reformed.

Keywords: Material ecofeminism, dualisms, psychogeography

Introduction

This article argues that Olivia Laing's novel *To The River* (2011) establishes a rejection of the commonly accepted yet destructive ontological dichotomies on which Western society has been structured. I will examine how Laing's text engages with a material ecofeminism which seeks to reject patriarchal order, through an exploration of ambiguous states and spaces within nature. This results in a challenging of the dichotomous patriarchal frameworks which devalue women, nature, and the body, and ultimately demonstrates the fallacious nature of these binary terms. *To The River* is an account of Laing's experience as she attempts to walk the length of the River Ouse. Part memoir, part history book, the text follows Laing as her physical wanderings are interspersed with accounts of the people and characters (both real and fictional) that are associated with the Ouse. Having experienced a string of hardships, Laing turns to the natural landscape around the river in an attempt to distract herself from her troubles back home, taking this opportunity as a time of self-reflection. Her journey is both literal and metaphysical, and her physical journey very much corresponds with her mental wanderings, in a way which evokes notions of previous walking methods such as flânerie and psychogeography. These theories have similarly understood the act of walking as an embodied, cohesive action of mind and body, yet these concepts exclude feminine

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participation due to the very nature of their definition: requiring a masculine figure walking in the city, the walker takes ownership of all that he sees, including the women he observes as part of the scenes of the city. I suggest that Laing's journey and the subsequent narrative which details her experience presents a feminist alternative to these masculinist walking theories. That is, by walking specifically into nature and out of the male urban space, Laing forges her own walking experience which is not exclusionary. In doing so, she resists the toxic mentality of a culture which has not only denied women access, but has consistently devalued women, nature, and the body in the very structures of its framework.

Laing's physical journey into nature and the reciprocal relationship she develops with her surroundings demonstrates a consideration of how three of the subjugated aspects of patriarchal society - women, the body, and nature – can interact with one another in order to defy their marginalisation. I will first expand on the theories of material ecofeminism which inform this reading, and demonstrate how Laing's text provides an instance of engaging with women's associations with the body and nature in an attempt to evade their marginalisation. Laing's text displays a return to materialism and a return to nature which, rather than privileging either of the nature/culture or material/discursive terms, strives to deconstruct them by showing that these divisions are permeable. Instead of rejecting her assumed female connection to the body and to nature, Laing engages with it in order to provide a new optic that seeks to reject the derogatory associations placed on the body, women, and nature. I aim to demonstrate how Laing's articulation of her embodied experience in nature reveals a cohesion of mind and body, as opposed to understanding them as disparate entities. Laing ventures into ambiguous spaces of liminality and abjection, examining the propensity they have for threatening borders and boundaries. As such, she engages with a nature that is uncontrollable and uncontainable, and so acts as a threat to the structures of society. She demonstrates a personal identification with the boundless nature of the River Ouse, recognising the associations water has with the female body and femininity, and consequentially utilising the river as a space in which to create outside of patriarchal structures. The text provides examples of literal destruction and metaphysical destabilisation, leaving behind a space where opportunity arises for reimagining the oppressive structures, in a sense reminiscent of Helene Cixous' theory of *l'écriture féminine* – translated as “female writing” (1973). Finally, I look to how Laing engages with the origins of patriarchal civilisation's delegation of woman and nature. Laing explores how women and nature's procreative power and their associations with beginnings have the capacity to expose humanity's mortality, and as such, they are rejected and devalued in an attempt to deny the reality of that mortality. Laing's unflinching descriptions of multiple accounts of death and devastation (both fictional and from history), many of which occur within the space of nature, thus defies the patriarchal act of forgetting and rejecting mortality. By embracing the concepts of death and mortality, Laing is able to undermine the phallic structures which have continually devalued women, the physical body, and nature, instead embracing that which has made them “other”, and in doing so, encourages the reader to do the same.

Material Feminism and Ecofeminism

Material feminism is a theoretical response to the structure of hierarchical dualisms on which dominant Western thought has been built. One of the most enduring dichotomies is that of the mind and body, with the mind historically being given esteem over the body. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick write that “the status of the body [...] has largely been one of absence or dismissal [...] the processes of theorising and theory itself have proceeded as though the body

itself is of no account, and that the thinking subject is in effect disembodied” (1999, p.1). Attempts to regulate the self (particularly in Judeo-Christian society) often focus on a subjugation of the unruly, passionate body, governing the physical being in order to prioritise the mind and soul. This has raised problems for feminist theorists, due to the cultural associations of the physical body with the female. This negative association has resulted in certain feminist approaches supporting a rejection of the female-body connection and finding liberation through focus on discursive and purely theoretical analysis. Elizabeth Grosz explains how the hostility directed towards women, particularly “the depreciation and derision of women’s bodies”, largely “explains the initial feminist suspicion of or hostility to re-exploring [and] re-examining, notions of female corporeality” (1993, p.1). This rejection of the corporeal within feminist thought has however been criticised for relegating the body and emotions, and reactive movements have moved towards a re-centring of lived experience. That is, a material feminism which is explicitly embodied, foregrounding the material body and presenting an understanding of the self as a unified whole.

The subjugation of women and the body also extends to nature. Nature has equally been devalued in patriarchal society, and so a connection has been drawn between the three. Ynestra King writes:

we live in a culture that is founded on the repudiation and domination of nature. This has a special significance for women because in patriarchal thought, women are believed to be closer to nature than men [...] the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing. (1989, p.18)

Ecofeminism interrogates how the dualistic hierarchies of society have enabled a devaluation of both nature and women, due to this forged link between them. It examines the potential of this link, rather than dismissing it. Material feminism seeks an alternative to the linguistic turn, proposing a return to an engagement with materialism and the body. A material ecofeminist approach therefore refuses to fully sever the link between woman, nature and the body, instead making use of “a vantage point for creating a different kind of culture and politics that would integrate intuitive, spiritual, and rational forms of knowledge [that] enable us to transform the nature-culture distinction and to envision and create a free, ecological society” (King, 1989, p.23). There is a complex balance to remain aware of here, as both ecofeminism and material feminism have been criticised for reverting to essentialism. Consequentially, mainstream feminist theory has often “relegated ecofeminism to the backwoods, fearing that any alliance between feminism and environmentalism could only be founded upon a naïve, romantic account of reality” (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008, p.4). However, this rejection of an ecofeminist approach risks becoming implicit in the destructive nature of dualism itself, reinforcing the split. Stacy Alaimo & Susan Hekman continue:

the more feminist theories distance themselves from ‘nature’, the more that very ‘nature’ is implicitly or explicitly reconfirmed as the treacherous quicksand of misogyny. Clearly, feminists who are also environmentalists, cannot be content with theories that replicate the very nature/culture dualism that has been so injurious [...] we must reconceptualize nature itself. (2008, pp.4-5)

Texts such as Laing's *To The River* avoid essentialism by encouraging a complete reconceptualization of approaches to these concepts, walking out of the frameworks themselves and attempting to wipe the slate clean, so they can reconfigure the theories themselves. By refusing to adhere to the negativity of dichotomous binaries, and calling for "a deconstruction of the material/discursive dichotomy that retains both elements without privileging either" (Price & Shildrick, 1999, p.6), feminist criticism and texts such as Laing's are able to challenge the structures of society which relegate the natural, female body, without risking a reversion to further destructive methods of thinking.

Walking Theories

Many theories suggest that the act of walking engages both body and mind with the exterior landscape, and so consequentially enables a blurring of the constructed barriers between the mind and the body. Rebecca Solnit writes that "the rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts" (2001, p.5). This concept suggests that walking possesses the ability to challenge the mind-body split by positioning the mind in constant communication with the body and its exterior surroundings. This theory reflects material feminist positions on the body; Trinh T. Minh-ha argues that:

we do not have bodies, we are our bodies, and we are ourselves while being the world. We write, think and feel (with) our entire bodies rather than only (with) our minds or hearts. It is a perversion to consider thought the product of one specialized organ, the brain, and feeling, that of the heart. (1989, p.36)

As opposed to an understanding of the self which splits the mind and body into separate entities, this theory encourages an understanding of the self as a complete entity: a body which is connected with the thinking part of the self and works in tandem to process experiences and feel emotions. Through walking, this engagement between the mind and the body is intensified. Laing's physical wanderings therefore draw together the binary entities of mind and body and demonstrate the potential in moving away from identifying them as discrete. Laing evidences this theory when she writes of:

nature's particular gift to the walker through the semi-mechanical act of walking [...] is to set the mind jogging, to make it garrulous, exalted, a little mad maybe -- creative and super-sensitive, until at last it really seems to be outside of you and as it were talking to you, while you are talking back to it. (2011, pp.90-99)

She uses the descriptor "jogging" to describe the mental actions of the mind as physical, breaking the barrier between the two and demonstrating the effect the act of walking (particularly in nature) has on the boundaries of the body; for Laing, the mind gains the ability to efficiently communicate with the body, moving fluidly with a positive and "creative" result.

Laing's physical and emotional wandering also draws on the concepts of the flâneur and psychogeography. These terms however are largely complicated by the presumed gender of the walker, to such an extent that they can be interpreted as exclusionary. Charles Baudelaire's figure

of the flâneur is described as an urban wanderer who would silently observe the life of the city (1964). The role of the urban wanderer is one of masculine privilege, as the wanderer must move through the city unobserved and invisible. The problematic nature of the female walking the urban space is that she is too visible due to her positioning within society; in fact, the flâneur has been described as needing to “[take] visual possession of the city” as “the embodiment of the male gaze” (Wilson, 1993, p.98). For women who live under the constant critical glare of the male gaze, it is seemingly impossible to take possession of the spectacle of a city, when she is relentlessly and inescapably perceived to be part of that spectacle. For example, Baudelaire referred to “the smooth rhythmical gait of the women” as an example of the many observations made by the flâneur, which positions women as being a part of the landscape of the city itself, an object which the flâneur comes to possess via his observations (1964, p.2). The figure of the flâneur, in its very definition, excludes female participation. Some critics proposed the possibility of a flâneuse once it became more socially acceptable for women to access urban spaces; however, as Janet Wolff suggests, the problem with the figure of the flâneuse was “not so much women’s lack of access to the street but rather the distortions of cultural theory and social history which foreground certain male activities” (2006, p.18). These distortions are still in place, thus complicating the figure of the flâneuse and making it increasingly difficult to allow women the potential to participate.

Psychogeography is largely indebted to the figure of the flâneur, and shares much in common with the concept. Guy Debord defines it as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (1955, p.1). The psychogeographer wanders the spaces around him and takes note of his surroundings, taking pictures and analysing the things he encounters. Will Self understands the walker in the city to be a figure of masculine privilege, as he compares psychogeography to be like a fraternity: “middle aged men in Goretex, armed with notebooks and camera, stamping out boots on suburban train platforms [...] prostates swelled as we crunch over broken glass” (2007, p.12). This obscenely masculine diction, suggesting the necessity of certain biological requirements and inciting images of soldiers marching through a warzone, disallows the potential for female participation, or as Lauren Elkin puts it, “[creates] a reified canon of masculine writer-walkers [...] as if a penis were a requisite walking appendage, like a cane” (2016, p.20).

Being denied access to both flânerie and psychogeography, those seeking to engage in a similar act must look elsewhere. Grosz suggests that “perhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a masculine concept, but to redefine the concept itself” (Grosz, 1993, p.11). Laing’s answer is to seek an alternative through an exploration of the associations which exclude women from flânerie and psychogeography in the first place: their relation to the body, their relation to nature, and their subjugation. The traits which, to Baudelaire, denied women’s participation – their “smooth rhythmical gait” (1964, p.2) – are in fact utilised: it is, for Solnit, the rhythms of walking working with the rhythm of thinking that allows walking the capacity to threaten the mind-body split (2001, p.5). By walking into nature specifically, Laing is able to walk out of the phallogocentric urban space, both physically and metaphysically. In doing so, she resists the structures of the male urban space that disallow her participation in flânerie and psychogeography, exploring the spaces in the female-associated nature that allow her the potential to write her mind and her body.

Liminal Spaces

Laing rejects the reason, structure and control of oppressive patriarchal structures by walking and writing around the structures themselves. She does this by “going beneath” the male gaze, playing with surfaces and the use of liminal spaces, and through an interaction with the fluctuating and uncharted space of nature. The landscape Laing encounters is a shifting one, and largely unstable: she writes how “the land had lain open to the morning, and now it seemed to close up like a clam” (2011, pp.32-33), constructing an image of a living, breathing environment that is sensitive to its surroundings and capable of change. This instability is exacerbated by the presence of liminal spaces within the text, threshold places where reality appears to be threatened. Liminal spaces are ambiguous; they are flux to change and are often envisioned in literary representation as being in-between states, existing at the threshold and consequentially refusing direct categorisation. In this sense, they have the potential to challenge oppressive borders and boundaries and therefore threaten the patriarchal binaries that subjugate the body, women and nature. These liminal states threaten reality, and as such, threaten the cultural binds society has been built on. It is these in-between and underground spaces which Laing is frequently drawn to during her journey. She envies Virginia Woolf of her ability to “[descend] beneath the surface of the world”, saying “I wanted to know how the trick was mastered” (2011, p.10). She desires Woolf’s apparent ability to move out of the restrictive world they both reside in, through the act of writing. Laing attributes this ability to the dreamlike spaces she encounters, acknowledging the points where reality appears to be insubstantial. Laing begins her walk on the Solstice, “the hinge point of the year” when “the wall between worlds is said to grow thin” (2011, p.10). It is at this time of weak borders between worlds that Laing is able to move away from the male gaze and into a subterranean space “beneath the surface of the daily world, as a sleeper shrugs off the ordinary air and crests towards dreams” (Laing, 2011, p.6). There is a higher potential to inhabit these transitory states of liminality through the bodily act of walking, specifically in the uncharted spaces in nature. Laing notes the “uncanny state” that is entered upon walking:

those trances that come from walking far, when the feet and the blood seem to collide and harmonise [...] the lone walker feels that he is moving backwards in time, and sometimes that he stands at the threshold of a different world [...] The landscape hasn’t changed, not in any way that can be articulated, but a sense of strangeness seeps up from all around. (2011, p.73)

The physical movement of walking has an effect on her mental state, transporting her to a different kind of reality. At the permeable thresholds of culture, she has a greater chance at breaking through to the liminal spaces which have the potential to provide her an alternative to the current restrictive structures which have constrained her.

The increased feeling of instability and unreality prompted by walking is especially exacerbated within nature. Laing becomes unnerved as she walks through Henfield Wood, and notes that woods often seem like “the entrance to a different world, subterranean or set aside” (2011, p.59), a space existing outside of reality. The artificial effects of human culture on this seemingly natural space can be clearly seen: the woods are “intensely managed, the paths clearly marked, the wide road carrying a swooping run of telegraph poles [...] parcelled and divided, immaculately tidy, every square yard accounted for” (Laing, 2011, p.59). The markings of human intervention are evident: the manmade telegraph poles, the artificial division and tidiness, the woods mapped out and chartered. However, Laing notes that this natural space can never be fully

restrained, as “no matter how prettified it becomes, a wood retains in its shadows a glint of something less than tame” (Laing, 2011, p.59). Despite mankind’s attempts to dominate and control nature, its innate wildness is always visible just below the surface. This can be seen as reflective of society’s attempts to similarly dominate and curb both women and the body. Laing often describes her desire to “somehow [...] get beneath the surface of the daily world”, leaving the spaces which control and devalue her (Laing, 2011, p.5). Through the physical act of walking through the uncontrollable spaces in nature, Laing is reminded of the part of her identity which is controlled and repressed by society. These spaces allow an opening in which she can more closely reach the potential of the liminal spaces, which to her, “in that spoiled wood [...] seemed very near” (Laing, 2011, p.74), intensifying the feelings of unreality and instability she experiences. Moving into these spaces allows her the potential to reject the subjugation of the body and leave behind the destructive repudiation of body and nature, challenging the binaries which enforce them.

Abject Waters

The river itself provides an even stronger threat to ordered culture. Laing writes of folk tales which include the flooding of towns, and proposes that the recurrent return to the motif of the flooding river stems from:

a long and painful struggle for control, in which the town and its outlying fields were periodically encroached upon by water [...] a way of charting the same ancient, ongoing battle, or at least of managing the fears and fantasies that water’s wilfulness engendered (2011, p.152).

This fear is of a lack of control over nature, a feeling that the incessant rush of the water might obliterate all that society has created, an “ancient, ongoing battle” that implies the fear of the destruction of culture and society itself. Similar to the woods, rivers refute any attempts to map and order them, “[rising] from hidden places and [travelling] by routes that are not always tomorrow where they might be today” (Laing, 2011, p.7), as they are open to flux and movement. She describes rivers as existing “without regards to the landlocked chronology historians hold so dear” (Laing, 2011, p.8), uncaring of the maps and structures that patriarchal structures have attributed to them as part of their domination of nature.

The fears incited through this threat can be usefully understood through Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection. Kristeva describes abjection as “what disturbs identity, system, orders. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (1982, p.2). The feeling of disgust directed towards the disturbance of the order consequently protects it, acting as “safeguards [...] of my culture” (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). By including descriptions which incite feelings of abjection, Laing’s text threatens the order of the dualistic system the text aims to deconstruct, and as such, becomes destructive in itself. Kristeva argues that bodily fluids are abject, as the body sheds waste at the borders of the corporeal being and exposes the fragility of the boundaries of our bodies. Abjection is not limited to bodily fluids however, as the abject feelings directed towards certain fluids stems in part from them being a “borderline state, disruptive of the solidity of things, entities, and objects” (Kristeva, 1989, p.195). Not all fluid is abject, for example the water of the river is not necessarily abject, yet Laing’s experience of the river is not of crystal clear purifying waters. Descriptions allude to the milky sediment that lies within it, the waters “stinking of salt and carrying clotted creamish foam and a waste of rotten thistles” (2011, p.132). The river does not run fluidly, but

becomes a viscous in-between state of mud and marsh. Mary Douglas writes that “viscosity repels in its own right [...] a state half-way between solid and liquid [...] to touch stickiness is to risk diluting myself into viscosity” (1980, p.38). The in-between state of the river threatens the stability of bodily borders, as its viscous nature incites feelings of abjection. Laing explains the origin of the name Ouse, exploring the connotations of the river being described as “oozing”:

ooze: meaning soft mud or slime; earth so wet as to flow gently. Listen: *ooooze*. It trickles along almost silently, sucking at your shoes. An ooze is a marsh or swampy ground, and to ooze is to dribble or slither. I liked the slippery way it caught at both earth’s facility for holding water and water’s knack for working through soil: a flexive, doubling word. You could hear the river in it, *oozing* up through the Weald and snaking its way down valleys to where it once formed a lethal marsh. (2011, pp.18-19; emphasis in original)

The solid earth becomes “so wet as to flow gently”, defying its physical state and embodying something between solid and liquid. The oozing, slipping river sticks to the body, threatening to cling and seep into the subject. Mary Douglas identifies this anxiety when she writes of the threat felt as viscous liquid “attacks the boundary between myself and it” (Douglas, 1980, p.38). For Laing, the river becomes an ambiguous threat: a deadly, snaking, slithering body of water that seems alive and deadly, threatening to destroy the physical borders (its riverbanks) which attempt to control it, and the metaphysical borders which Laing is attempting to eschew.

The viscous marshlands are another source of abjection within the text. The muddy boundary between land and water is constantly susceptible to change of form, and so disrupts the boundaries of the river and its banks. The marshlands are made doubly abject due to their association with death. Laing describes the skeletons found in mass graves within the marshland, how:

numbers were drowned and others suffocated in the pits of mud, whilst from the swampy nature of the ground, many knights who perished there were discovered, after the battle, still sitting on their horses in complete armour, and with drawn swords in their lifeless hands” (2011, p.125-6).²

The dead body itself is abject, an absolute reminder of mortality and the death that will encroach on the physical being. It embodies both “imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us” (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). The uncanny description of the dead knights, swords raised as if in an eternal battle, paired with the real engulfing threat of the viscous marshlands, represents ultimate abjection. The bloody events of the past are described as having a physical effect on the land, as it “seemed to have fallen across the landscape like a body that though voiceless somehow still leaked or bled its language without pause. The horror of what had happened here had seeped into the soil” (2011, p.129). Abject language is used to define the horror of the events embedded in the landscape, (the cadaverous “body”, the corporeal fluid of blood, the viscous fluidity in “leaked” and “seeped”), depicting the land as porous, sucking up the blood and the memories of death. The instability of the land disturbs the reader in its abjection, as it allows both physical and mental reminders of death to seep into it. The water’s contents are equally disturbing, containing an incongruent array of discarded items. Laing describes the water as

² The mass graves described by Laing here are those left from the Battle of Lewes (1264).

containing “prayer books, children’s toys, underwear, the sodden bodies of rats. And then there were the things you couldn’t see: the rumour of asbestos, farm fertiliser and pesticide; the leached-out contaminants from graves and crypts” (2011, p.148). These descriptions speak largely of abjection, as “what is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid [is] its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper” (Grosz, 1993, p.300), thus inciting feelings of repulsion at the hidden dangers to the body that lie in wait below the surface of the water. The threat of death, poison and decay – bloated rat corpses – and the fear of infection and disease, paired with children’s toys and prayer books is a further form of abjection, as seemingly binary concepts (youth/death, faith/disease) exist simultaneously. The river, respecting no borders and “[slipping] in anywhere, though the doors might be barred against it” (Laing, 2011, p.148), combines these disparate epitomes of cleanliness and youth with death and filth, forging an ambiguous collection of life and decay. Laing writes that the “great weight of waters [...] carry with them the risk of annihilation” (2011, p.195). Submerged in the murky waters, where “you couldn’t see the bottom; you could barely make out your own limbs” (Laing, 2011, p.4), the boundaries of the body begin to blur. The subject is unable to distinguish between the self and the water surrounding it, thus losing identity and becoming absorbed. Laing notes the potential in being submerged in the boundless space of the river, asking “is it not necessary to dissolve the self if one hopes to see the world unguarded?” (2011, p.195). She describes “the pleasure of abandoning [herself] to something vastly beyond [her] control” (2011, p.4), finding freedom in the overwhelming capability of the river. By dissolving the self within the waters, there remains no space for rigid binaries, leaving instead only the potential for recreation and rebirth.

Destruction and Renewal

The untamed and uncontrollable nature, the boundless spaces of liminality, and the border-crushing abjection of the river: the inclusion of these concepts in Laing’s text act as challenges to the patriarchal order which marginalises and dominates nature, woman, and the body. Through a deconstruction of society’s oppressive dualisms, there arises an opportunity to explore and develop new, non-hierarchical frameworks on which to understand societal concepts. Kristeva notes the potential that abjection leaves in the residues of its destruction: the “potential for renewal, remainder and fresh start [...] defilement as well as rebirth” (1993, p.76). She draws on the Hindu myth depicting reconstruction following devastation, specifically: “after the flood, in the shape of the serpent that becomes the supporter of Vishnu and thus ensures the rebirth of the universe” (1993, p.45). Following destruction, an opportunity arises for renewal and recreation, an image mirrored in the de-creation myths Laing describes in the texts: the Christian flood which wiped out all but those with Noah on his Ark; the myth of the drowned city of Atlantis; and the sunken city of Lyonesse from Celtic mythology. It is of little surprise that the vehicle for destruction in these myths is water; these stories of drowned or sunken spaces articulate a prevalent anxiety regarding water’s ability to encompass and drown a kingdom, a city, or even an entire world. Yet it is only through this submersion that some form of reconstruction can follow – the “fears and fantasies” (Laing, 2011, p.152) that arise relate not just to the capacity of the waters to destroy, but the potential they have to wipe clean in order to recreate. In both the Hindu and Christian flood myth, the sinful world is decimated; yet following the identity-dissolving submersion in murky waters, the world is able to be made anew.

Laing’s rejection of the rules of the male urban writer and her allusion to the potential for reconstruction, particularly through writing, evokes Cixous’ theory of *l’écriture féminine*. This

concept refers to a language written through the body of the female, which opposes the rigid, ordered structure of phallogocentric language and allows women to create a discourse without having to resort to using male dominated language. Particularly significant to this article is Cixous' association of women with the unleashed and boundless nature of water: "unleashed and ravishing, she belongs to the race of waves [...] she has never "held still"; explosion, diffusion [...] she takes pleasure in being boundless" (Cixous, 1975, p.65). Feminist theorists such as Grosz have examined how women's bodies have been positioned as susceptible to corporeal flow and leakage, for example through the shedding of menstrual blood, through amniotic fluid, the flow of the menstrual cycle, of breastmilk (Grosz, 1993). Here Cixous draws on women's wateriness to examine its potential, specifically in its uncontainable, unrelenting and destructive nature. She states that this form of writing would "burst partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes [...] go beyond the discourse with its last reserves" (1975, pp.94-95), and as such, go beyond the constraints of phallogocentrism. Female writing is therefore linked to the seeping, unleashed and naturalistic power of the water. The female body becomes a source of abject fear, and the uncontrollable leaking nature of women's bodies parallels the uncontrollable rushing of the river, threatening the manmade structures which lie in its path. Laing notes the correlation between water and writing: "I do not think it a coincidence that the advent of the written word was nourished by river water" (2011, pp.6-7). Laing writes through her body; her physical journey mirrors her emotional journey, and is transcribed onto the page; moments she experiences physically impacts her mental wanderings, and vice versa. This openness to a fluidity in structure suggests a rejection of the ordered rigidity of normative narrative structure. Instead Laing's writing flows forward, directed by the river, her story drifting from tale to tale as she follows the seeping, flowing and unlimited path of the water. This creates a fractured narrative unified by the revitalising, boundlessness of the river, the metaphor for female writing and the female body as a source of recreation. Laing's text therefore not only provides a space in which she can enact an alternative to the generally-masculinised flâneur, but an alternative to the phallogocentric structures of literary narrative itself, instead experimenting with an exploration of story and writing akin to Cixous' *l'écriture féminine*.

Death and the Afterlife

In a text engaging with concepts of destroying societal structures, it is no surprise that Laing's text frequently returns to death and potential afterlives. She describes various concepts of the afterlife, from the Catholic notion of Heaven and Hell, to the Roman concept of Hades, to Dante's interpretation of Heaven, Hell and Purgatory in *The Divine Comedy* (1472). "Is it any wonder we persist with the idea of an afterlife?" she asks, "from Hades [...] to the heaven and hell of the Bible. Can this really be all there is amid the darkness, this coloured and insubstantial realm?" (Laing, 2011, p.95). This desire for an image of an afterlife potentially stems from a need to access a world beyond seemingly inescapable structures, a world that might provide an alternative society in which neither Laing, nor her body, nor nature, would be devalued. Laing notes that the walker often "stands on the threshold of a different world, though whether it is heaven or hell is anybody's guess" (Laing, 2011, p.73). At the threshold of reality, Laing envisages alternative worlds which are specified as spaces of the afterlife, her physical and mental wanderings out of the male urban space having brought her to the potential of these places.

Laing frequently centres on the subject of death itself, often in a blunt and unflinching manner. The text contains direct descriptions of suicide. For example, Virginia Woolf, whose

cause of death was “immersion in the river [Ouse]” itself (Laing, 2011, p.206); an unnamed midwife local to the Ouse who died similarly, who “one day when the tide was high killed her dog and dropped herself into the water” (Laing, 2011, p.208); the figure of Mouse, the son of children’s literature author Kenneth Grahame, who lay down on a set of train-tracks and “was decapitated by a train” (Laing, 2011, p.69). She describes the “burning of seventeen Protestant martyrs in Lewes [...] in a grotesque parody of the midsummer bonfires” (Laing, 2011, p.144), and the grotesque murder of the Earl of Leicester Simon de Montford, following his success in the Battle of Lewes: his “head, his hands, his feet and his genitals were lopped off [...] they lie by his side, his head topped with curls, his neck gushing blood” (Laing, 2011, p.127). These descriptions of brutal and tragic instances of death seem to lean towards something more than simply a desire for an alternative world. Laing’s preoccupation with death also relies on the associations that death has with women, the body, and nature. As King writes: “patriarchal civilization is about the denial of men’s mortality – of which women and nature are incessant reminders” (1989, p.21). The generative power associated with women and nature acts as a stark reminder of humanity’s mortality, and is consequentially shunned in an attempt to deny acceptance of the inescapable fact of death. This attempt at denial leads to what King describes as “the degradation and vilification of woman and nature”, which “is related [...] to the fact that woman, as the source of biological continuity, embodies the natural process of birth and death [...] consequently men associate women with nature, and mortality” (1989, p.21). Women’s bodies and nature are the sources of life that act as an incessant reminder that death is a necessary consequence of life itself. The associations nature has with accepting death is examined when the suicidal figures in the text are seen to return to the source of creation, the life-giving spaces in nature, in order to finally accept their mortality and commit suicide. Woolf, weighed down by stones in her pockets, walked into the Ouse, as did the both local midwife and Tom, the character in A.S. Byatt’s *The Children’s Book* (2009), who “walks into the waves” (Laing, 2011, p.71). Mouse, although ran over by a manmade train, walks to the track “through the meadowsweet and buttercups” (Laing, 2011, p.69), and dies lying in the grass, surrounded by nature. In seeking out death, these figures seek out nature due to the subconscious associations the two concepts share. In writing about these deaths in particular then, Laing starkly demonstrates this correlation and demands its acknowledgement.

The female association with the body also acts as a constant reminder of mortality: “the question of woman and death [being] the key to understanding this mind-set, since dualism is a strategy in patriarchy for avoiding death” (Ruth, 1987, p.157). By splitting the body from the masculine and associating it with the feminine, both death and the body are equally negated. The dualistic structures of society devalue the concepts associated with death, so as to eschew death itself in an attempt to conquer it. Bodies are constant reminders of our mortality, as “bodies are the things that die, visibly, right before our eyes, [...] Our bodies, which betray us to death, are therefore bad. In that case, if we wish not to die, we must separate from our bodies” (Ruth, 1987, p.157). Seeing the abject body which has the potential to die and decay incites anxieties inherent to the phallogocentric structures which has positioned death of the body as a source of utmost fear. Therefore, through subjugation of women and the accompanying suppression of the associated concepts of nature and their bodies, a society created on the structures of phallogocentrism ignores the reality of its mortality.

Laing however, in her often blunt descriptions of death, rejects the understanding that it is necessary to ignore and forget death, and in doing so, denies the devaluation of women, nature, and the body. Laing leaves no space for forgetting as she walks along the Ouse, positioning mortality as a central theme in her dialogue, even finding it in the nature she walks through: “the

past is not behind us but beneath, and the ground we walk on is nothing more than a pit of bones, from which the grass unstinting grows” (Laing, 2011, p.141). Death surrounds her, and she encourages an acknowledgement of this from both herself and her readers. She argues that mankind never actually possessed the potential to forget, stating that “no one ever forgets anything. It’s all piled up here somewhere, on the surface or under the ground” (Laing, 2011, pp.84-85). This implies that humanity’s desire to forget their mortality is an unsuccessful attempt at denial; the reality lies below the surface just as the items lie buried under the Ouse, ready to resurface at any point. Laing’s text walks the reader directly up to their mortality, establishing that it is only through an acceptance of death rather than its subjugation that will assist in the shift towards acceptance of the equal status of the devalued terms in phallogocentric society.

Conclusion

Ironically, Laing suggests that it is mankind’s domination of nature that will eventually lead to its extinction: she is affected by how humanity has “[carved] the world up with no thought to its consequences”, which “seems doomed to bring an apocalypse of floods and droughts upon us all” (2011, p.168). Concerns regarding humanity’s destructive impact on the environment continue to grow, with anxieties regarding climate change consistently at the forefront of the cultural consciousness – yet for some people there remains a refusal to accept responsibility for the devastation we have caused to the planet. It is more important now than ever to provide textual spaces which critique such a society which continues to marginalize, oppress, and subsequently destroy the natural environment in which we live. Laing defiantly addresses the patriarchy which has regulated her and the nature surrounding her, condemning our patriarchally-coded society for its part in the destruction caused to our planet, calling out “man the destroyer, man the wood [who] grubs up habitats” (Laing, 2011, p.235). Laing mourns the irreparable destruction and extinction of countless species, and demands that we all accept responsibility and take action.

However, Laing displays a sense of optimism in the potential for a move towards a material ecofeminism which embraces our link to nature instead of severing it, thinking “perhaps we will be able to accommodate ourselves to this world after all, instead of chipping away at it until the foundations collapse and the whole thing comes tumbling down” (2011, p.179). In this sense, Laing’s text attempts to incite much needed public engagement towards the environmental devastation we have caused, and encourages a dialogue which might stimulate action in order to avoid any further destruction. This then, for the concept of material ecofeminism, is the hope: the idea that we might accommodate ourselves in the world instead of dominating the nature that acts as a reminder of our mortality, and having been given “the tenancy of this shared realm, [...] we might pass it on, this small blue planet” (Laing, 2011, p.183), preserving it for future generations. It is only through an approach to the world that deconstructs dichotomies and embraces the female, body and nature connection that we can resist destruction, and retain the world to pass down to the next generation. This is what Laing’s text seeks to accomplish, and why it is essential to examine these types of texts as spaces in which to not only critique the destructive dichotomies, but attempt to write (and in this case, walk) out of them.

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