Since its beginnings in the 1970s, the field of ecocriticism, or “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty xviii), has been associated with the feminist movement. Ecofeminism – the fusion of ecocritical and feminist scholarship – is concerned with the analysis of the traditional image of nature-as-woman and its concomitant connections with the oppression of women and the environment. In her influential essay “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” the anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner explains that the association of woman with the lower end of the nature/culture paradigm automatically assigns her a secondary position within the dualistic system of patriarchy. She argues that humanity, equated with the concept of “culture,” is identified with men, while woman’s body, her role as mother and even her emotions bring her closer to “nature.” According to such a scheme, dominion over nature (perceived as female) and women is justified, since it perpetuates culture, the superior realm to which men belong.

There are feminists who disagree with the practice of relating women to nature. Val Plumwood explains that “[t]he very idea of a feminine connection with nature seems to many to be regressive and insulting, summoning up images of women as earth mothers, as passive, reproductive animals, contented cows immersed in the body” (20). Ecofeminists, however, argue that a critical revision of this trope is necessary to come to an understanding of women’s difference. An ecological feminist position would then challenge the dominant hierarchically structured model of (masculine) society. This project entails a re-evaluation of the belief in the inferior status of the non-human world and the conception of women as fully human beings, equal to men.

With the foundation of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (ALSE), the acknowledgment of ecocriticism by the Modern Language Association and the foundation of the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* (ISLE) in the
mid-1990s, the focus on the interconnections between women and non-human nature made its appearance in literature. Ecofeminist literary critics are concerned with discussing the symbolism that links women and nature. What tropes are used to establish the woman-nature interconnection? Do they perpetuate, subvert or reconfigure the concept of “nature as nurture” (Merchant 2)?

Against the postmodern doubt about the possibility of representing ideas about human relationships to nature through language, there is a revival of interest in nature especially among writers of creative non-fiction and poetry. Writings about nature by contemporary poets can be described as espousing the oppositional tendency to return to nature on the one hand, and the ways in which poets invent new ways of addressing nature on the other. Bonnie Costello argues that the “impulse to return to nature as a retreat from cultural excess persists in the literary imagination” (571) among poets she calls “primitivists” or “poets of place” (572). And there are those poets who “take nature as a concept itself unfixed” (570) and who establish new ways of entering into contact with nature.\(^5\)

The contemporary “primitivist” poet Mary Oliver is known for engaging the human in celebrations of the wonders and pain of nonhuman nature. By affirming the human body and conceiving it in terms equal to the human spirit, she challenges dichotomies which privilege mind over matter. In “Poem,” she announces this central concern by asserting that “[the spirit] needs / the metaphor of the body,” and that “it needs the body’s world” (Dream Work 52). Oliver shifts the idea of the human body from the human context to the conceptually connected context of the body of nature. As we shall see, in both cases that body is gendered “female.”

Among the French feminists who in their critical approach align themselves with the bodily experience of women as a means of defining female subjectivity, Hélène Cixous’ theory of the voice as a particular instance of feminine discourse is particularly interesting. Cixous is haunted by the image of woman as non-being. In “Sorties” she argues that in the hierarchical binary system that dominates our culture, woman symbolizes the passive, supportive, emotional. It is a scheme that privileges man and swallows up the female in its shadow. Smashed by the power of a phallogocentric worldview, the female shamefully hides behind the dominant male principle and is relegated to a position that is not truly hers. Thus woman withdraws from Cixous’ field of view.
"Where is she?" (66), Cixous cries out in exasperation while surveying the ruins of the "universal battlefield" (67) of an incompatible couple unable to conceive of a system of equal relations, seemingly sacrificing everything to the destructive hierarchical order. But she can find her again by creating a language that is true to the nature of female subjectivity. Although there is resistance on behalf of Cixous to the theoretical description of what she calls "Writing Femininity Transformation" (68), the extra-phallogocentric territory in which it takes place can be visited.

It is her theory of the voice as a particular instance of female discourse and its realization through the medium of the body, which is appropriate for the analysis of the ecopoetry of Mary Oliver. Cixous argues that the order of feminine writing is imaginary; it is dominated by the figure of the mother. And it is manifest in language through the mediation of the body. By "writing the body," a specifically feminine writing is implemented: "Listen to woman speak in gathering," Cixous writes,

she doesn't "speak," she throws her trembling body into the air, she lets herself go . . . she goes completely into her voice, she vitally defends the "logic" of her discourse with her body. (233)

Female discourse exceeds phallogocentric thinking and foregrounds voice as a privileged site of "conveying meaning with the body" (233). The concepts of writing and voice are intertwined with the idea that the Voice has its powerful origins in what Cixous poetically describes as "the deepest, the oldest, the loveliest Visitation" (234). It is the force of the mother, which is conceived as an essential driving force of feminine écriture.

In Mary Oliver we witness the tendency to abandon a stance according to which the world is viewed in anthropocentric terms towards the creation of a new and exciting identity achieved through the surrender of the human body to the natural world. Among her fantasies about fusing psychical attitudes with representations of the body in nature is the desire to return to a maternal nature. One can argue here that the visionary direction pursued by Oliver (though herself not a feminist) has much in common with Hélène Cixous' voice-body-mother triad. Cixous writes:
Text, my body: traversed by lilting flows; listen to me, it is not a captivating, clinging “mother”; it is the equivoice that, touching you, affects you, pushes you away from your breast to come to language . . . it is the rhythm that laughs you; the one intimately addressed who makes all the metaphors, allbody(?) – bodies (?) possible. (234)

In a number of poems, Mary Oliver turns her attention to the “equivoice,” the mythic lost mother who is the central source of femininity and female writing. Again and again, the female physical subject seeks to meet the lost mother. The body longs to return to maternal earth. The poem “Sleeping in the Forest” (*New and Selected Poems* 181), for example, is controlled by the already mentioned image of “nature as nurture.” Carolyn Merchant characterizes it further as the ancient identification of “nature, especially the earth, with a nurturing mother: a kindly beneficent female who provides[s] for the needs of mankind” (2). It is this kind of earth-mother which Oliver evokes in the lines

```
I thought the earth
remembered me, she
took me back so tenderly, arranging
her dark skirts, her pockets
full of lichens and seeds.
```

The lyrical “I” describes the return to maternal anthropomorphized nature, nestling comfortably in the latter’s body. The iambic rhythm that dominates the first three lines of the poem (which gets lost in the course of it) and the quadruple rhyme between the phrases “remembered me” and “so tenderly” evoke the pleasurable relation to “mother.” In the poem “The Sea” from the Pulitzer Prize-winning poetry book *American Primitive* (1983) the speaker discovers her self by returning, again, to the maternal body. This time she is immersed in the depths of the sea, which we can interpret as a metaphorical rendering of the mother’s womb. The poem opens with the speaker swimming in the sea. With each stroke she “remembers that life and cries for / the lost parts of itself –”:

```
Stroke by
stroke my
body remembers that life and cries for
the lost parts of itself   (*American Primitive* 69)
The capital "S" in the first word of the poem, the two-syllable rhyme between "Stroke by / stroke my" and the use of consonance announce the speaker's returning memories of her first home, the mother's uterus. Then, the speaker turns into a fish ("my legs / want to lock and become / one muscle") and finally settles in the mother's womb:

Sprawled
in that motherlap,
in that dreamhouse
of salt and exercise,
what spillage
of nostalgia pleads
from the very bones!  (American Primitive 69-70)

It is an experience of intense bliss to retreat into the maternal matrix. The speaker who is "Sprawled / in that motherlap" completely and trustingly opens herself up to the mother. The process of diving into the mother's womb is visually represented by the rhythmic flow of indented irregular lines, which is not interrupted by stanza breaks.

It has been mentioned that some feminists meet the return to nature as a counter-reaction to patriarchy with skepticism. After all, the association of woman with nature has justified the domination of nature and women in the past. I would argue that Mary Oliver's explicit invocations of the traditional image of nature as a nurturing mother do not undermine women's project of self-definition and self-extraction from the oppressive system of patriarchy. In her poetry, nature, though it is clearly gendered, is not at all portrayed as a passive recipient of male conquest and domination. Oliver convincingly comes up with new metaphors that are potentially liberating. Apart from metaphors invoking motherhood, she employs tropes that express the merging of human physicality with nature's creatures or nature's elements. Such depictions defy the allegedly patriarchal boundaries between self and nature, soul and body, subject and object. In the poem "August" (American Primitive 3) the unthinking yet finite self is carried to the infinite timeless other realm through the metaphorical ritual of an incorporation. The poet writes: "When the blackberries hang / swollen in the woods, in the brambles / nobody owns, I spend all day among the high / branches, reaching my ripped arms, thinking / of nothing." And then, voraciously, the speaker "cram[s] / the black honey of summer / into [her] mouth." Through the act of incorporating nature's juicy fruits,
the speaker celebrates a union with nature, which makes the body surface; it now assumes the function of consciousness. The body/mind duality is overcome. The "body / accepts what it is." When Oliver uses the metonymical expression "thick paw of my life" towards the end of the poem, we know that now the subject is governed by the principle of the animal.

Underneath the chain of transformations that occur once the "I" of the poem acknowledges its own physicality and immerses her self in nature is an undercurrent of eroticism. Catrin Gersdorf points out that the erotic is a "feasible concept to rethink the human place in nature and to change culture's fatal will to master nature into a will to know it lovingly" (180). The erotic can be a life force and an instrument of power for women. As such it is described in the poem "The Honey Tree" (American Primitive 81). The specific nature of sexual discovery the speaker embarks on is not evident. It might be autoerotic, heterosexual or homosexual. In any case, one can argue that the female subject makes the phallic principle her own. This is supported by the visual representation of the poem as a column, the phallic connotation of the tree image, the human derived natural imagery ("dark hair of the leaves," "the thighs of bees," "the body of the tree") and the frequent images of ingestion ("I . . . ate / the bodies of bees that could not / get out of my way . . . ate / the dark hair of the leaves"). This is an autonomous representation of sexuality, which leads the speaker to conclude:

Oh, anyone can see
how I love myself at last!
how I love the world!

*   *   *

In an age characterized by the subdual state of nature, the contemplation of the human/non-human boundary is inevitably deprived of its former idealist stance. Bonnie Costello asserts that poets who adjust to the diminished status of "modern" nature "have more to tell us about the possibilities for our relation to nature than do the latter-day Romanticists, primitivists, and 'poets of place' and mystical presence who are usually celebrated by ecologically oriented critics" (572). Costello is interested in the ways in which these poets experiment with finding definitions of "nature" and concludes that they ultimately "take
nature as a concept itself unfixed" (570). Likewise, she sees Amy Clampitt’s poems on vacant lots as explorations of the meaning of such wrecked natural sites being reclaimed by nature as opposed to the constructed industrial scene.⁷

In contrast to Mary Oliver, Amy Clampitt is indeed no longer sure if the concept of nature can be taken as a locus or metaphorical matrix of mystical union with nature. But it undeniably occupies a central position in her poetics as a source of meaning and value. What Amy Clampitt proposes is a newly gathered focus on a wilderness that is supplanted by the landscapes of civilization and urbanization. More than often, I would argue, this focus implies the notion of the uncanny: her speakers’ encounters with nature are transfigured into a dream-like, unreal vision.

Amy Clampitt is known for putting emphasis in her descriptions of nature on desolate European landscapes and to roam, in her imagination, the landscapes of the American continent. The extreme sensibility to space and place is revealed in imagery that seeks to yoke meaning from unusual, bleak and forgotten sites, for example in her series of poems dedicated to the vacant lots just mentioned or to the ostensibly dead landscapes of Greece, Italy and the Midwest.⁸ For example, in the poem “The Outer Bar” (which appeared in The Kingfisher in 1983), Amy Clampitt asks the reader to consider new dimensions of the human/non-human encounter. According to Clampitt, the subject of her poem is the “expedition to a bar island off the coast of Maine, as recalled in midwinter” (Collected Poems 435).⁹ It begins with the speaker wading in the “luscious mess” of a “shadow isthmus,” that is, a narrow area of shallow water connecting the main land with the island. The aim of this expedition is an encounter with the elements; the speaker is preparing for “an unplanned, headily illicit interview” by summoning up all available bodily strength:

```
you find yourself, once over, sinking at every step
into a luscious mess —

a vegetation of unbarbered, virgin, foot-thick
velvet, the air you breathe an aromatic
thicket, odors in confusion starting up
At every step like partridges

or schools of fishes, an element you swim through
```
Just as Clampitt’s “labyrinthine syntax” (Corn 30) coils and uncoils, the speaker thrusts her/himself — both bodily and psychically — into the uncanny experience of encountering “paradise,” which lurks inside a “prison rockpile.” This meeting with nature, pursued through “some lacuna, chink, or interstice,” makes clear that the environment Clampitt constructs is not only a surface concept and is not entirely devoid of metaphysical meaning. In this particular human encounter with nature, the speaker pursues with the imagination things of nature until s/he is able to catch up with them. With her highly sophisticated rhetorical mode Clampitt is able to establish a connection that indicates a new reference, a new ground for getting in touch with the non-human. Nature, in the end, does issue forth a response: The “interview” with nature contains a warning and impels the speaker to retreat.

The light out there, gashed
by the surf’s scimitar,

is blinding, a rebuke — Go back! Go back! — (Collected Poems 9)

Although our efforts to view Clampitt’s descriptions of nature as gendered are met with resistance, we do find in her nature poetry a desire to extricate meaning from her environs by involving both mind and the body in this quest. Though drained of the mystical and gendered meanings Oliver attaches to nature, Clampitt constructs a natural environs whose dynamism she can glean if aided by physicality — her own and that of nature. As described in the poem “Man Feeding Pigeons” (first published in Archaic Figure in 1987), the mind of the poet is concentrated on “the form of the thing” or the shape of a school of pigeons. As these concluding lines reveal, human perception again needs to be brought in accord with the body in nature in order for it to gain a glimpse of paradise. Although the speaker is not sure what to associate with the birds he is feeding and what to call them (“if a thing is what it was”), bringing it in some kind of accord with the body of nature promises a glimpse of what paradise (the “paradisal rose”) can be:
it was the form
of the thing, if a thing is what it was,
and not the merest wisp of a part of
a process – this unraveling inkling
of the envisioned, of states of being
past alteration, of all that we’ve
never quite imagined except by way of
the body: the winged proclamations,
the wheelings, the stairways, the
vast, concentric, paradisal rose. (Collected Poems 263)

Notes
1 The term ecofeminism was first introduced by the radical feminist D'Eaubonne in her book Feminism or Death (1974). An English translation of the chapter “The Time for Ecofeminism” is available in Merchant, ed., Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory.

2 Cf. Ortner's essay. In The Death of Nature, Carolyn Merchant discusses the move from an organic theory, which identifies nature with Mother Earth or the witch (symbolizing the violence of nature), to a “mechanically oriented mentality that either eliminated or used female principles in an exploitive manner” (2). Similarly, Annette Kolodny, in The Lay of the Land, argues that the conception of the land as nurturing or seductive female body justified its mastery and conquest.

3 For example, by using various voices – a paternal voice, the narrator’s voice, the voices of other women, and the voice of nature – Susan Griffin, in Woman and Nature, explores the woman-as-nature trope, ultimately acknowledging the feminine tie with nature: “We know ourselves to be made from this earth. We know this earth is made from our bodies. For we see ourselves. And we are nature. We are nature seeing nature. We are nature with a concept of nature” (227).

4 For an excellent philosophical discussion of ecofeminism, see the chapter “Feminism and Ecofeminism” in Plumwood’s Feminism and the Mastery of Nature.

5 The poets of place Bonnie Costello names are Robinson Jeffers, William Carlos Williams, Gary Snyder, Ted Hughes, Robert Bly, David Waggoner, W.S. Merwin, Mary Oliver, Wendell Berry, and Donald Hall (cf. 571). The second category of poets, advocating a “latter-day poetics of superfluity” (570), includes poets Wallace Stevens, John Ashbery, Derek Walcott, Jorie Graham, Charles Wright, Amy Clampitt and A.R. Ammons (cf. 572).

6 See endnote 5.

7 “Vacant Lot with Tumbleweed and Pigeons” (Collected Poems 172), “Vacant Lot with Pokeweed” (Collected Poems 329); a detailed discussion of Clampitt’s use of the word “vacant” can be found in Costello.

8 In the chapter “Amy Clampitt’s United States” of his book Modern Poetry after Modernism, James Longenbach describes the influence of European landscapes on Clampitt's descriptions of American natural sites (the coast of Maine, Iowa and the West Coast) by juxtaposing it to Henry James' European experience.
Amy Clampitt is fond of supplying the reader with additional information about some of her poems. Here she defines the subject of the poem "The Outer Bar" and adds a precise description of the setting by quoting from an entry in a newspaper. She writes: "Of the particular island Louise Dickinson Rich wrote in *The Peninsula* (Chatham-Viking, 1958, 1971, p. 152): 'When there's an unusually low run of tide it's possible to get over there by walking across the exposed sand bar to Inner Bar Island and then scrambling ankle-deep along a rocky reef to outer Bar. But you can't stay very long. The minute the tide turns you have to start back. If you wait too long you're going to be stuck out there for twelve hours, or until the next low tide; that is, unless you can attract the attention of a passing lobsterman who will take you off" (*Collected Poems* 435).

**Bibliography**


