

Relearning Our Relationships to the Earth: Rebecca Solnit's Ecofeminism

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Abstract

This thesis argues that Rebecca Solnit's book-length works offer ways of rethinking human relationships to/on the earth in an era of climate crisis. *Savage Dreams* (1994), *Wanderlust* (1999), *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), and *The Faraway Nearby* (2013) contain autobiographical accounts of Solnit's relationship to the earth, as well as documenting Solnit's environmental and feminist activism over the last twenty years. Using an ecofeminist framework that focuses on ethics of care and connection in the face of destructive and dominant forces such as capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, I argue that Solnit's work not only documents environmental activism, but becomes part of that activism itself by suggesting alternative ways of living in an era of climate crisis.

Reading these texts in terms of the wilderness (chapter one), the desert (chapter two), the city (chapter three) and the road (chapter four), I consider the ways place is both central to Solnit's work, and a representational tool within it. I thus discuss both Solnit's content and form on ecofeminist terms, demonstrating that Solnit's work against dominant power structures goes beyond merely recounting her own experiences of activism; the stylistic connections, wanderings, and affective resonances of Solnit's works suggest and promote new ways of relating to the earth.

I therefore offer an extended critical engagement with Solnit's work in order to argue for the increasing importance of her book-length works in the face of planetary uncertainty and unpredictability. I demonstrate the ways Solnit's writing confronts and accepts these uncertainties, thus refusing the denial and despair that so often characterises climate change discourse. Instead, Solnit's radically connective ecofeminist narratives are mobilising and moving in their commitment to reconfiguring human-human and human-nonhuman relationships in the face of climate breakdown.

Contents

Acknowledgements	4
Introduction	
Resistance	5
Chapter One	
The Wilderness	35
Chapter Two	
The Desert	99
Chapter Three	
The City	164
Chapter Four	
The Road	230
Conclusion	
The Unknown	295
Bibliography	307

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Introduction

Resistance

“Take a long walk, know the names of plants, live outside, watch the weather – these are really acts of resistance.”¹

Rebecca Solnit, in conversation with Robert Macfarlane, 2017

As planetary climate crisis looms, it is hard to believe that taking a walk may constitute an act of resistance. While icecaps melt and superstorms hit vulnerable regions, how, and why, might these seemingly small things – walking, noticing – become mobilising forces for climate activists? Rebecca Solnit has been acting against and writing about various environmental and social crises since the 1980s. She has published over twenty-seven books to date, from memoirs and art books to essay collections and a children’s book, covering topics as wide-ranging as the Nevada Test Site, Alzheimer’s disease, communities in crisis, feminism, and walking. This thesis argues that Solnit’s works constitute acts of resistance in themselves. Using four of her book-length texts, I argue that Solnit’s work engages both explicitly and implicitly in acts and discourses of ecofeminism. Framing these readings in terms of place – each chapter is governed by a location that either influences or structures the texts being discussed – I consider the ways Solnit combines environmental activism, feminism, and autobiographical narrative in her work to construct texts that resist the dominant forces of capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal culture. By arguing that Solnit’s work is both narratively and formally ecofeminist – that is, engaged in feminist and environmental action by

¹ Rebecca Solnit, Interview by Robert Macfarlane, Cambridge, 2 November 2017.

noticing and promoting alternative relations to people and place than those proffered by a capitalist, patriarchal, colonial worldview – I gesture towards Solnit’s emerging and ongoing importance as a writer involved in actively pursuing other, connective, futures. Focusing on the ways Solnit engenders community and individual connection on/in/through American land, and on the site of the text itself, I argue that her writing demonstrates ecofeminist ethics of care and connectivity in both content and form. Beyond merely narrating ecofeminist acts of resistance, Solnit’s work becomes such an act itself, formally engaging with these small resistances: naming, noticing, walking, watching. Her work thus gestures towards, even lays the groundwork for, an alternative future to the one offered by an exploitative approach to landscape.

Texts and Contexts

Now famous for prompting the invention of the term “mansplaining” with her essay “Men Explain Things to Me,” Solnit has been growing in popularity over the last ten years.² She is a contributor to *The Guardian*, writes the “Easy Chair” column for *Harper’s Magazine*, and her name is seen frequently in by-lines in print and online.³ Yet, perhaps due in part to the rise in popularity and visibility of her journalism, Solnit’s book-length works have been somewhat critically neglected. Thus, while there is no doubt that her social and cultural critiques as a journalist have contributed to her writerly acts of resistance, I am interested here in the more formally complex texts that comprise her longer works. Due to her wide-ranging subject matter, Solnit

² Charlotte Shane traces Solnit’s career and growing popularity in “How Rebecca Solnit Became Essential Feminist Reading,” *The New Republic*, May 26, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/142369/rebecca-solnit-became-essential-feminist-reading>, accessed 24 September 2019.

³ *Harper’s Magazine*, “Rebecca Solnit,” <https://harpers.org/author/rebeccasolnit/>, accessed 24/09/19; *Guardian*, “Rebecca Solnit,” <https://www.theguardian.com/profile/rebeccasolnit>, accessed 24 September 2019.

can be positioned within several American writing traditions. She can be placed beside nature writers such as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Barry Lopez, Gary Snyder, and Edward Abbey – although she tends to avoid the rapturous depictions of Nature so characteristic of these writers. She sits more comfortably beside women writing place, such as Linda Hogan, Kathleen Dean Moore, and Terry Tempest Williams, all of whom write with an ethical responsibility to American land. The radical but understated politics of her work are reminiscent of Rachel Carson and Mary Austin, and she writes in a ‘creative nonfiction’ style that can see her aligned with Olivia Laing, Maggie Nelson, and Claudia Rankine. In many ways the wandering, *moving* quality of her work speaks most directly to Virginia Woolf’s expansive nonfiction.⁴ While I occasionally invoke these writers, I do not read Solnit’s works alongside them here (though this would make for an interesting future project). There is not yet an in-depth consideration of Solnit’s works, and by focusing solely on Solnit within this thesis, I make a case for the importance of her writing in an era of climate change, suggesting that it represents ways of thinking about climate crisis that only becomes apparent through extended and connected readings of her longer texts.

Though varied in topic, Solnit’s longer works are united by their style; a collaged, accumulative and meandering quality that, far from obscuring the political impetus of her writing, brings to light the intersections and connections of her experiences, communities, and ideas. I discuss, both separately and comparatively,

⁴ As well as being a useful comparison for Solnit’s style, Virginia Woolf’s work appears in several of Solnit’s books. She is quoted, paraphrased, and alluded to in *A Field Guide* (15–17), *Wanderlust* (187–88), and *The Faraway Nearby* (240), and Solnit’s 2004 book *Hope in the Dark* draws its title from one of Woolf’s diary entries, as Solnit notes in the book’s opening chapter (1). Each reference is made in an attempt to access an emotion about or impression of place. As a writer interested in form, place, and female experience, Woolf is an important touchstone for Solnit’s ecofeminist writing. While an extensive exploration of this relationship is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting the affective and lyrical resonances of Woolf in Solnit’s work.

Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American West (1994), *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (1999), *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005), and *The Faraway Nearby* (2013). Rather than providing a comprehensive chronology of Solnit's work, these texts are united by a concern with place. I echo this concern in the structure of this thesis, which reads Solnit's works through the wilderness (chapter one), the desert (chapter two), the city (chapter three), and the road (chapter four). By structuring my own work in terms of place rather than chronology, I draw attention to Solnit's preoccupation with place and our relation to it, and trace a meandering path through the texts and their various subjects that allows for a sometimes comparative, sometimes individual discussion of the texts. As such, I do some meandering of my own to consider the connections within and between the texts without travelling a straightforward route through the twenty years my chosen corpus spans. This approach reflects Edward Soja's claim that "the discipline imprinted in a sequentially unfolding narrative predisposes the reader to think historically, making it difficult to see the text as a map, a geography of simultaneous relations and meanings that are tied together by a spatial rather than a temporal logic."⁵ Space, or place, is the central logic of Solnit's work, and following its lead allows for a more thorough engagement with this centrality.

Savage Dreams discusses the wilderness of Yosemite National Park and the desert space of the Nevada Test Site. It reads these two places alongside each other, giving a historical account of their creation and use, and a narrative of the communities living and working on these sites in the 1980s and 1990s. *Savage Dreams* is perhaps the most grounded of the texts, the most obviously 'located,' and, consequently, it

⁵ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 1.

features most heavily in the first two chapters, in which physical places are the focus. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* is similarly located in desert and wilderness spaces, but wanders too into the urban and – even further – into the abstract. Though it is the shortest text I discuss, *A Field Guide* acts as a comparative text in each chapter, sometimes by introducing the places the chapter will consider, sometimes by complicating them. I utilise its multifarious content to unpack the less obviously ecofeminist narratives/topics in Solnit’s work, and to consider the figurative uses of place. Moving through discussions of the colour blue, music, photographs, walking, mountains, painting, and endangered species, *A Field Guide* is a microcosm of Solnit’s work as a whole, delicately drawing together seemingly oppositional subjects in order to explain a new vision of our relationships to the world. I therefore use it in the conclusion to bring together the various themes I identify in Solnit’s work throughout the chapters. *A Field Guide*’s lyrical quality acts as a bridge between the more ‘typically’ activist, place-based texts – *Savage Dreams*, *Wanderlust* – and the more ‘abstract’ *The Faraway Nearby*. More overtly engaged with ideas of memoir, metaphor, and form, *The Faraway Nearby* moves away from the ‘natural’ world and tells a more introspective narrative. With a dual focus on her mother’s Alzheimer’s and Solnit’s own illness, *The Faraway Nearby* is included here for its preoccupation with care, and its engagement with questions of style and genre, questions I link back to Solnit’s ecofeminist ethics by discussing the importance of metaphor in her work. The stylistic similarities of all three texts can be read through *Wanderlust*. *Wanderlust* is the most ‘academic’ of Solnit’s works. Subtitled “a history of walking,” it is expansive and ambitious in its scope, covering everything from the evolution of human bipedalism to treadmills in suburbia. Though not located in one place, *Wanderlust* engages with *our engagement with* place, via this history of walking, and

I use it in the final chapter to tie together the thematic and stylistic “wanderings” I trace in the other texts.

By beginning with a physically located, spatialised analysis of these texts, I chart a path through Solnit’s work that is less interested in the sequence of her writing than it is in the resonances and reflections these texts create when held up together. Reading these texts as records and tools of ecofeminist climate action is a compelling reason for returning to Solnit’s longer works, some of which are more than twenty years old. The last few years have represented an interesting juncture in Solnit’s writing career – nowadays, she seems more focused on journalism and essay collections than longer works – yet returning to and reading her longer works in light of the current climate crisis can provide us with much needed epistemological and affective tools for coping with the changes it will entail. Organising this thesis by place allows me to trace the productive connections between Solnit’s works that speak beyond each text’s singular purpose to bring to light a cohesive, ecofeminist, understanding of people and place vital to relearning our relationships with an increasingly unpredictable planet.

Key Terms

Place is thus the root of my analysis. I use the terms “space” and “place” throughout this thesis, but rely more heavily on “place” to convey the depth of Solnit’s relationship to land. Understanding place to mean, as Tim Cresswell asserts, “spaces which people have made meaningful,” I read Solnit’s relation to the locations that organise my chapters as affectively valued.⁶ Thus, in line with Yi-Fu Tuan’s assertion that “what begins as an undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it

⁶ Tim Cresswell, *Place: An Introduction* (Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 12.

better and endow it with value,” I consider the “value” Solnit reads in the various places throughout her work as a value that tries to move outside of or beyond the financial worth so often attached to places.⁷ This alternative place-based analysis centres on what I read as the ecofeminist ethical impetus of Solnit’s relationship to the earth. By connecting Solnit’s ecofeminist ethics of care and connectivity to her preoccupation with place, I suggest that her works demonstrate a way of relating to place that resists the forces responsible for the current climate crisis – forces born of exploitative and damaging attitudes to both people and places.

Ecofeminist theory argues that destructive environmental behaviours can be traced back to a perceived link between women and nature that sees both as passive, in need of control, and lacking agency. Maria Mies explains, “women all over the world, since the beginning of patriarchy, were also treated like ‘nature,’ devoid of rationality, their bodies functioning in the same instinctive way as other mammals. Like nature they could be oppressed, exploited and dominated by man.”⁸ Thus, as Val Plumwood argues, “the western mapping of a gender hierarchy onto the nature/culture distinction has been a major culprit in the destruction of the biosphere.”⁹ Greta Gaard, looking back at ecofeminist theory from its inception in the 1980s to its slow decline as a term throughout the 1990s, argues that “the history of ecofeminism merits recuperation, both for the intellectual lineage it provides and for the feminist force it gives to contemporary theory.”¹⁰ That is, the structures of domination ecofeminism

⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977), 6.

⁸ Maria Mies, preface to *Ecofeminism*, Critique Influence Change Edition, ed. by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (London: Zed Books, 2014), xxiii.

⁹ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

¹⁰ Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Re-Placing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism,” *Feminist Formations* 23, no. 2 (August 2011): 42–43, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2011.0017>.

identifies are still in place, and still need resisting.

The term's decline in use is down to charges of essentialism, as many outside – and indeed many within – ecofeminism believed the links critics were drawing between women and nature (claims that women, as nurturing, were best suited to heal the ailing planet) to be just as damaging as the destructive patriarchal link between women and nature responsible for environmental degradation in the first place. Gaard points to the ways critics sought to undermine ecofeminism's focuses on connectivity, activism, diversity, and equality:

Focusing on the celebration of goddess spirituality and the critique of patriarchy advanced in cultural ecofeminism, poststructuralist and other third-wave feminisms portrayed all ecofeminisms as an exclusively essentialist equation of women with nature, discrediting ecofeminism's diversity of arguments and standpoints to such an extent that, by 2010, it was nearly impossible to find a single essay, much less a section, devoted to issues of feminism and ecology (and certainly not ecofeminism), species, or nature in most introductory anthologies used in women's studies, gender studies, or queer studies.¹¹

Gaard encourages revisiting not only the term “ecofeminism,” but its rich and varied applications. That is, while some ecofeminist theory does work in a damagingly essentialist register, much of it does not. Stacy Alaimo suggests that “attempts to valorize women and nature via glorification and mystification may only bind them more securely to narratives of phallic domination.”¹² Thus, a much more useful link between women and nature is to understand that both have been subject to strategic forms of domination, and that these cultural dominances intersect with other systems

¹¹ Ibid., 31.

¹² Stacy Alaimo, “Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994): 144, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178438>.

responsible for the oppression of marginalised groups and the degradation of the planet.

These structures are what Karen J. Warren refers to as “isms of domination.”¹³

She writes:

Ecofeminist philosophy draws on feminism, ecology and environmentalism, and philosophy in its analyses of human systems of unjustified domination (‘isms of domination’). It assumes that such domination is neither justified nor inevitable. As a *feminism* (what I take to be an ‘ism of liberation’), ecofeminist philosophy uses sex/gender analysis as the starting point for critiquing ‘isms of domination.’ As an *ecological* and *environmental* position, ecofeminist philosophy uses ecological and environmental insights about the nonhuman world and human-nature interactions in its theory and practice.¹⁴

Warren’s work, and ecofeminist theory in general, is founded upon the understanding that gender oppression has been reflected in, or given rise to, an exploitative relationship with the land or ‘Nature.’ Rooted in a Christian belief that “God had authorized human dominion over the earth,” the dominant approach to land has become exploitative in cultures based on hierarchies in which a white, male, straight, rich elite sit at the top.¹⁵ Vandana Shiva states, “the source of patriarchal power over women and nature lies in separation and fragmentation. Nature is separated from and subjugated to culture, mind is separated from and elevated above matter; female is separated from male, and identified with nature and matter.”¹⁶ As Warren asserts, patriarchy is only one ‘ism of domination’ against which an ecofeminist

¹³ Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 43.

¹⁴ Ibid. (italics in the original).

¹⁵ Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990), 131.

¹⁶ Vandana Shiva, *Biopiracy* (Totnes: Green Books, 1998), 66.

conceptualisation of the earth works; closely related to a patriarchal attitude towards land is a colonial one, which utilises narratives of conquering, ownership, and exploration to displace indigenous peoples and ‘settle’ new land. Moreover, capitalism – which sees both workers and land as resources, not living entities – similarly reinforces this hierarchy. Discussing the damage wrought by capitalist patriarchy, Shiva states in *Ecofeminism* (1993), “an economics of commodification creates a culture of commodification, where everything has a price and nothing has value.”¹⁷ Reminiscent of the way Tuan sees place as a space endowed with value outside of financial worth, Shiva’s point draws attention to the cumulative effect of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism (not to mention science, religion, and the military) that renders both the physical landscape and conceptions of it nothing more than a resource for production, inert and useless in and of itself, submissive and subordinate as women, people of colour, the working classes, the LGBTQ+ community, and so on.

These ‘isms of domination’ are at the root of the climate crisis. As Gaard puts it, “climate change may be described as *white industrial-capitalist heteromale supremacy on steroids*, boosted by widespread injustices of gender and race, sexuality and species.”¹⁸ Dominant attitudes towards lands and marginalised peoples are culminating in dangerous weather events, species extinction, ocean warming and acidification, and drought, which in turn will increase the exploitation and displacement of people across the globe. Ecofeminist theory and practice can counter, mitigate, and comprehend these interconnected systems. As Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen assert,

¹⁷ Vandana Shiva, preface to *Ecofeminism*, xvii.

¹⁸ Greta Gaard, “Ecofeminism and Climate Change,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 49 (March 2015): 27, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2015.02.004> (italics in the original).

ecofeminist theory provides ethical guidance to challenge inequalities arising along racial, gendered, and species boundaries. At a time when human violence and encroachment as well as climate change threaten to permanently alter the earth, with devastating consequences for all the animals and plants that make this planet home, the insights of ecofeminists are more important now than ever.¹⁹

As the climate crisis intensifies, the effects of this crisis fall disproportionately on communities of colour, women, and the working classes (Hurricane Katrina is now an infamous example of this). An ecofeminist standpoint, as Adams and Gruen assert, refuses to accept this inequality, refuses the so-called ‘inevitability’ of these outcomes and instead questions *why* this happens and what might be done to resist it.

Despite the fact that environmental injustices are spread unevenly across the globe, there is a pervasive sense that all humans are equally responsible for the climate crisis. This is a grossly uneven distribution of blame, which suggests that the leaders of multinational oil corporations share no more of the blame than an indigenous fisherman. The fault of this crisis lies not at the feet of all of humanity but at the feet of the Western world, of capitalist, patriarchal, colonial attitudes towards the land that allowed for such an exploitative era to begin – and to continue. It is because of this uneven distribution of blame and responsibility that I do not use the term “Anthropocene” throughout this thesis. “Anthropocene,” Timothy Clark states, functions “mainly as a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands – cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political – of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale.”²⁰ While it can be a useful term in this regard, it can also be limiting, as Donna Haraway asserts:

¹⁹ Carol J. Adams and Lori Gruen, *Ecofeminism: Feminist Intersections with Other Animals and the Earth* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 5.

²⁰ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 2.

the Anthropocene lend[s] [itself] too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the ‘game over, too late’ discourse I hear all around me these days, in both expert and popular discourses, in which both technothocratic geoengineering fixes and wallowing in despair seem to coinfect any possible common imagination.²¹

For Haraway, the term Anthropocene obstructs rather than engenders possibilities for thinking and acting in an era of climate crisis, being already too marked by popular (over)use within doom and gloom stories of a dying world. Anthropocene hardly seems a hopeful term, then, and relies often on the same technoscientific dominances responsible for the so-called Anthropocene in the first place. Therefore, following Kathleen Dean Moore’s assertion that the term “completely muddles the message. We don’t name new eras after the destructive force that ended the era that came before,” I avoid “Anthropocene” within this thesis because it does not fully express the *destructive and engineered* nature of the shift into a new geological era, and because the term also fails to effectively distribute the blame for that shift.²² In fact, I avoid using any term for the era we are moving into, beyond calling it an era of climate crisis (a more urgent term than climate change, and one which encompasses more readily the epistemological difficulties of climate breakdown than the term climate emergency). Instead, I choose to focus on what that era may entail. Reading Solnit’s ecofeminism as an engagement in a future that seeks alternative relationships to land – and to nonhumans, and to each other – than those proffered by the dominant culture, I read in the stories and communities Solnit creates a hopeful and unified drive to save

²¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 56.

²² Kathleen Dean Moore, *Great Tide Rising: Towards Clarity and Moral Courage in a Time of Planetary Change* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2016), 132.

what can be saved, to notice what must be noticed, and to resist what can, must, be resisted.

I thus avoid using “Anthropocene” to avoid perpetuating the dominances against which ecofeminism works. In a similar way, I use various terms for the earth and Solnit’s/our relationship to it throughout this thesis. I alternate between “land” and “landscape” in order to draw attention to the differing attitudes towards the earth – those rejected by ecofeminism, and those promoted by it. The term “landscape,” as Leslie Marmon Silko (quoted in *Savage Dreams*) reminds us, “is misleading: ‘A portion of territory the eye can comprehend in a single view’ does not correctly describe the relationship between the human being and his or her surroundings.”²³ Silko draws attention to the differences between her own Laguna Pueblo relationship to land, and the understanding of landscape derived from a Western tradition of painting, viewing, and (later) photographing ‘impressive’ topography, a tradition she argues does not do justice to a human embeddedness within the land. By quoting Silko, Solnit too suggests that she sees the term “landscape” as limiting and oppressive. I thus use the term “landscape” only where it reflects or draws attention to an attitude oppositional to the work of ecofeminist philosophy. In contrast, “land” refers to the earth itself, rather than a view of it, and is a term that captures some of the more embodied connections to place Solnit evokes in her work. However, it is worth noting that though Solnit herself understands the problematic history of the term “landscape,” she still uses it throughout her work. Perhaps because it has come to act as such a useful catch-all for Western understandings of land, Solnit often uses “landscape” without question. To counter the dominance of this term, but to allow for, and draw

²³ Leslie Marmon Silko, “Landscape and the Pueblo Imagination,” quoted in Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 264.

attention to, its pervasiveness, I use the term “land(scape)” throughout to denote the ways in which Solnit’s work often sits at the juncture between “land” and “landscape.” That is, I use the bracketed term both to draw attention to the pervasiveness of “landscape” as an attitude and idea born of various ‘isms of domination’ and to avoid, I hope, falling into this trap myself. In this sense, “land(scape)” is often the most useful way to describe Solnit’s position; as a person undoubtedly affected by pervasive attitudes to the earth, she cannot wholly sit outside of them. Nevertheless, her work pushes towards an alternative relationship to land, one that avoids gender essentialisms, ‘isms of domination,’ and exploitation.

“Land(scape)” thus denotes Solnit’s connective relationship with place. As an ethic based on restating or renewing our implication and participation within planetary systems outside of current assertions of dominance, I read Solnit’s ecofeminism as primarily engaged in acts of connection. While Warren sees the underlying oppressions against which ecofeminist philosophy works as interconnected, there is a parallel understanding that connection is the quality missing from, eradicated by, these oppressions. As Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva assert, ecofeminism involves “looking for connections where capitalist patriarchy and its warrior science are engaged in disconnecting and dissecting.”²⁴ As part of its resistance, connection must be the thing ecofeminists work towards as well as point out. I therefore read Solnit’s work in terms of a liberatory connection that works both to notice *and to mobilise* the connections between people and place that are obliterated by the work of capitalism, patriarchy, the military, science, and colonialism. More than merely pointing out intersecting systems of oppression, then, Solnit’s connective work suggests other ways of relating to people and place. Thus, by working towards understanding the

²⁴ Mies and Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, 16.

resistances at play in Solnit's texts, I gesture towards a hopeful and enduring use of ecofeminist philosophy that goes beyond pointing towards the problems, and begins to consider how we might think through and attend to those issues in an era of climate crisis.

The idea of "care" is also bound up in an ecofeminist ethical approach to the environment. Carolyn Merchant states that "an earthcare ethic, which is premised on [a] dynamic relationship [between humans and nonhumans], is generated by humans, but is enacted by listening to, hearing, and responding to the voice of nature. A partnership ethic thus emerges as a guide to practice."²⁵ This active call and response implicates humans in reciprocal relationships to place and to nonhuman others, and avoids flattening out blame or responsibility; it is a nuanced, individualised version of accounting for and attending to the environmental impacts of 'isms of domination.' Throughout this thesis, I read Solnit's work as variously engaged in narratives and actions of care, covering everything from antinuclear activism, to caring for her elderly mother, and even acts as simple as walking. Importantly, Merchant's term avoids drawing an essentialist link between women and care, and charging only women with an environmentally caring role. This is fine line to tread; Deane Curtin argues that an "ethic of care provides a very important beginning for an ecofeminist ethic, but it runs the risk of having its own aims turned against it unless it is regarded as part of a distinctly feminist political agenda that consciously attempts to expand the circle of caring for."²⁶ Throughout this thesis, I argue that the care ethic in Solnit's work is a radical, expansive force based on an almost defiant attention to and

²⁵ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xix.

²⁶ Deane Curtin, "Toward an Ecological Ethic of Care," *Hypatia* 6, no. 1 (1991): 71, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1991.tb00209.x>.

connection with people and places in the face of a dominant culture that seeks to separate and fragment.

Emphasising the political potential of ecofeminist thought in an era of climate crisis is imperative, then. Alaimo asserts that only in its politically mobilised incarnation can ecofeminism “take on both caring for and fighting for, ‘healing the wounds’ while ‘reclaiming the earth.’”²⁷ Solnit, too, understands the dangers of falling into an essentialist position. She asserts, “I don’t believe women are more like nature, but I believe we share a political fate, not least as the sites on which a dominant culture exercises its fears and desires.”²⁸ Solnit’s point of intervention in ecofeminist philosophy is not in connecting women *to* nature, but in drawing attention to connecting ‘isms of domination’ and, in turn, creating her own alternatively connective, care-driven activist narratives. At their core, these ecofeminist ethics suggest an inextricable link between the human and the nonhuman. Framing these links particularly in terms of gender politics, Patrick D. Murphy observes:

To be a feminist one must also be an ecologist, because the domination and oppression of women and nature are inextricably intertwined. To be an ecologist, one must also be a feminist, since without addressing gender oppression and the patriarchal ideology that generates the sexual metaphors of masculine domination of nature, one cannot effectively challenge the world views that threaten the stable evolution of the biosphere, in which human beings participate or perish.²⁹

Solnit participates. Through narratives of ecological and/or feminist resistance and formal engagements with walking, caring, and futurity, Solnit refuses to perish,

²⁷ Alaimo, “Cyborg and Feminist Interventions,” 150.

²⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 280.

²⁹ Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 48.

refuses to see the work as finished, refuses to live silently in a dominant culture that relegates her, her friends and family, the human and nonhuman communities through which she moves, and the land on which she walks, to an exploited and subordinate position.

Thinking About Solnit's Writing

Ecofeminism is, therefore, a theory and practice of resistance. Adams and Gruen assert,

theoretical work in ecofeminism identifies the interconnected structures of normative dualisms, highlights the ways that such dualisms facilitate oppression and misrecognition, and draws out both conceptual and practical connections between injustice towards non-dominant individuals and groups. In practice, ecofeminists work in solidarity with those struggling against gender oppression, racism, homophobia and transphobia, environmental injustice, colonialism, speciesism, and environmental destruction. In both theory and practice ecofeminists imagine different social relations are possible.³⁰

By tracing the ecofeminist ethics at work in Solnit's texts, I emphasise the link between theory and practice that renders each text both an activist tool, and a piece of activism in itself that works to reimagine social and environmental relationships on radically connective and care-driven terms. Therefore, while I unpack the ways in which each text and its place(s) – its geography – forms a piece of Solnit's ecofeminism, I develop this reading to argue that when read through and alongside one another, her works are stylistically and formally unified in their activist, ecofeminist potential.

³⁰ Adams and Gruen, *Ecofeminism*, 35.

Despite being about wildly different subjects, then, the texts are more similar that they first appear. Part of why this unity is initially unapparent is the question of the books' genre. Questions of what they 'are,' of categorisation, seem to orbit Solnit's longer works, made concrete by the simple fact that her books seem to be difficult to shelve in bookshops (I actually check).³¹ This difficulty is something Solnit herself encourages; in an interview with Robert Macfarlane in 2017, Solnit smilingly answered a question on the genre of her work by stating, "somebody someday will have to explain the coherence in my work, and it won't be me."³² While I make a case for a connecting thread – ecofeminist ethics – that draws together Solnit's writing, it won't, can't, be me either. That is to say, I have not set out to categorise Solnit's works – my goal is not to separate them, but to unite them. *The Faraway Nearby*, as I have said, is perhaps the most explicit "memoir" out of the four texts discussed here. Indeed, it is most likely to appear in the "Biography" section. But its similarity to *Wanderlust*, for instance, lies in its fascination with meditative walking. It connects to *A Field Guide* in its urbanity, but also in its lyrical style, its fascination with symbols and the abstract. Solnit's works are both *less* and *more* than the genres assigned to them, and while I am interested in this question it is more the limits of this question that spurs my analysis of Solnit's connective, ecofeminist style.

It is difficult, even impossible, to concisely describe Solnit's works. In my brief explanation of the texts above, I barely do justice to even a part of each book. I could just as easily have explained that *The Faraway Nearby* is about apricots. Or

³¹ Solnit's work can most often be found in sections on feminism, which usually stock *Men Explain Things to Me* and *The Mother of All Questions*. Tables on contemporary politics often stock *Hope in the Dark* and *Call Them by Their True Names*. *Wanderlust* occasionally appears in sections on travel writing, and *The Faraway Nearby* sometimes turns up in Biography. *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* is, perhaps, the hardest to shelve; I have only found it once.

³² Solnit, Interview, 2017.

labyrinths. *Savage Dreams* is about water, about bodies, dust, and cattle ranches. *A Field Guide* is about what is lost in both figurative and literal ways to people and to the planet every day. But it is also about music. *Wanderlust* is about, and against, but also a part of, modernity. I could continue for pages. More than anything else, questions of genre, style, and classification preoccupy the small pool of critics already writing on Solnit's work. Wendy Harding asserts that Solnit belongs to a group of writers producing "a type of writing that is ... difficult to classify:"

They are not autobiographers, though their writing is centered on their own experiences in particular places. They are not nature writers, though their investigations take them into the domain of the natural sciences. They are neither geographers nor historians, though they deal with space and time. They are not travel writers, for they have no interest in stimulating readers' interest in faraway places. In creating hybrids of all these genres, their texts express the complexity of place.³³

Harding's summary is a useful one; it explains the renewed and alternative relationships with place at play in Solnit's work. Yet it does not capture the other things so characteristic of Solnit's writing; the introspective narratives that are more reflections than autobiography, the interest in urban space, the lyrical style of Solnit's descriptions, her fascination with metaphor. Solnit is more than a writer of place, then. She writes with, through, and beyond it. Monica Manolescu considers Solnit to be a writer who "combines the work of the cultural historian and art critic with autobiography and highly personal observation to produce works that discuss landscape in its evolution and representation, also addressing the personal experience of place and migration as well as the role of communities in facing disaster and

³³ Wendy Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xiv.

renewal.”³⁴ This is a neat digest of over fifteen books, and serves Solnit’s sprawling subject matter well. But it does not quite access the stylistic quality of Solnit’s work; it doesn’t wander. It is therefore difficult to explain the coherence in Solnit’s work not because there is none, but because there are *so many* coherences, so many ways of thinking about her writing.

And Solnit’s style sprawls, coheres, and convergences as much as her subjects. Marcus O’Donnell calls Solnit’s work “polyphonic open journalism,” suggesting that her training in journalistic writing is the basis of the “hybridity” he identifies in *Savage Dreams*.³⁵ He considers “Solnit’s gift as a writer [to be] her ability to move from the proclamatory mode of the prophetic voice to the evocative lyricism of the poet or nature writer and then into the exegetical questioning of the critic.”³⁶ Similarly, Michelle Dicinoski describes the “associative quality” of Solnit’s writing that “works to construct an essaying ‘I’ who is attempting to fashion not just a view of the world, but a *way* to view the world – a method that is shaped by wild associations.”³⁷ Writing about *The Faraway Nearby*, Dicinoski reads the link between form and content in the politics of Solnit’s work. For O’Donnell, too, the politics of Solnit’s writing are latent in its style: “Solnit’s writing is documentation, search and celebration. She refuses to divide her politics from her writing. She makes the point that her commitment to hybridity is a political act of resistance in itself.”³⁸ Identifying the hybrid genre(s) and

³⁴ Monica Manolescu, “Cartography and Renewal in Rebecca Solnit’s Infinite City: A San Francisco Atlas,” *Canadian Review of American Studies* 44, no. 2 (2014): 243, <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras.2014.S04>.

³⁵ Marcus O’Donnell, “Walking, Writing and Dreaming: Rebecca Solnit’s Polyphonic Voices,” *Journalism* 16, no. 7 (October 2015): 937, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914553078>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 945.

³⁷ Michelle Dicinoski, “Wild Associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the Lyric Essay,” *TEXT* 39 (2017): 2, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue39/Dicinoski.pdf>.

³⁸ O’Donnell, “Walking, Writing and Dreaming,” 947.

various stylistic modes of Solnit's work, both O'Donnell and Dicinoski consider Solnit's craft as much as her content; form interrupts, preoccupies, any discussion of Solnit's writing. Thus, as I argue throughout this thesis, Solnit's work constitutes acts of resistance not only in the sense that it documents environmental activism, but in that the writing itself resists the same oppressive, hierarchical, or categorical forces that allow for the exploitation of land and marginalised people. The politics, the ecofeminist ethics, are latent in, part of, the style.

Writing about *Savage Dreams*, Harding notes that "Solnit assembles fragments in what may initially seem to be a random, crazy-quilt style. Rather than following the strict logic of historical processes and turning this tangle into a straight line, her approach consists in weaving a web of correspondences around events and people in order to express intersections, recurring patterns, and convergences."³⁹ Identifying and drawing together the intersections, recurring patterns, and convergences in Solnit's work is as close as I will get to 'explaining' its coherence. Getting 'to the bottom of' Solnit's writing is an impossible task, and would involve separating out each text, thus diminishing their connective, collective, power. That is, it would miss what is at stake when we consider the texts together, how they talk to/between one another. Thus, by reading the texts collectively, as unified by their ecofeminist, ethical concern with place, I look more to what joins and upholds the message of Solnit's work than what distinguishes each text. By refusing to classify these books, I sit instead in the boundaries between the genres (or bookshelves) critics have tried to assign Solnit's writing. Dividing out her work – this bit is nature writing, that chapter is autobiography – would miss the joyful clashing and comingling of genres and/or topics that forms the ethical-aesthetic root and purpose of Solnit's ecofeminist writing.

³⁹ Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, xix.

Solnit's works join and extend into different genres, then, and as part of understanding Solnit's connected and connective participation in ecofeminism – which works against separating, delineating forces – I consider how her work participates in genre(s), but does not belong to any one in particular. I thus read Solnit's work in terms of Jacques Derrida's argument:

A text cannot belong to no genre, it cannot be without or less a genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark.⁴⁰

Just as Solnit's work is more than an account of place, her work is more than nature writing, autobiography, art history, essay, but it still – unavoidably – shows traits of each. Despite, or maybe because of, this, it is important to consider the texts beyond the theoretical frameworks afforded to these genres. Take, for example, how we might consider Solnit's work 'autobiography': it stems from and relates personal narratives and experiences, but it is rare to hear of her work called, simply, autobiography. Leigh Gilmore's term "autobiographics" is thus useful in describing Solnit's own autobiographical endeavour, as well as highlighting the ways Solnit avoids or rejects rigid genre categorisations: "autobiographics avoids the terminal questions of genre and close delimitation and offers a way, instead, to ask: where is the autobiographical? What constitutes its representation?"⁴¹ Emphasising the "autobiographicality" of Solnit's works without having to label the texts solely "Autobiography" allows for a

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. by and Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343176>.

⁴¹ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 42.

more fluid approach to the self/life-writing aspects of the texts, placing more of a focus on the place-self connections made within Solnit's work.⁴² It also allows for a focus on personhood and individuality free from conventional autobiographical approaches such as a linear narrative tracing the adult writer's development from childhood to the present. Much in the same way as I reject a chronological approach to Solnit's texts in order to privilege the importance of place, using autobiographics allows for a spatial, non-linear interpretation of personal narrative within Solnit's works. My consideration of Solnit's autobiographics, rather than autobiography, is similarly reflected in my consideration of her work in relation to nature writing and the lyric essay, too; her work draws elements from each genre, but refuses to be pigeonholed by these categories, and I reflect this by occasionally invoking critical discussions of these categories but not allowing them to overshadow the importance of place, ecofeminist ethics, and climate crisis.

My approach to Solnit's work also necessitates a broader critical approach than that offered by ecocriticism, despite the central importance of ecofeminist theory. Timothy Morton asserts that climate crisis requires rethinking not only a social or physical human-planet relationship, but a critical one. In unpacking and disproving the usefulness of terms such as 'Nature,' Morton's work stretches beyond ecocritical discourses, asking instead for a more radical, more textured approach to writing about land. He asserts, "one of the targets of genuine critique would be the very (eco)critical languages – the constant elegy for a lost unalienated state, the resort to the aesthetic dimension (experiential/perceptual) rather than ethical-political praxis, the appeal to 'solutions,' often anti-intellectual."⁴³ Morton is critical of the vocabulary and

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 23.

strategies offered by ecocriticism, and sees its elegiac quality as limiting at best when it comes to dealing with environmental crisis. Following this, I read Solnit's work from within and beyond an ecocritical framework, and gesture towards the necessarily all-encompassing nature of living in and thinking about an era of climate crisis. This serves both to expand my critical engagement, and to consider the ways accounts that might seem tangential or digressive are actually implicated in the physical and epistemological crisis of climate breakdown. Beyond discussing Solnit's depiction of place, then, I identify the ways Solnit's focus on the experiential, the affective, the introspective – qualities that Morton argues limits environmental writing – is *part of* an ethical-political strategy for rethinking our relationships with the earth in each text.⁴⁴ I therefore argue throughout this thesis that Solnit's texts are actions *in themselves* which are involved in helping us rethink, relearn, our relationship to the planet. I derive this argument from Elizabeth Ammons' *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (2010), in which she asserts, "the value of the humanities ... resides in the power of words to inspire us, to transform us, to give us strength and courage for the difficult task of *re-creating* the world."⁴⁵ Solnit's work not only tells us about new relations to the planet, then, it enacts them. In this way, I argue that Solnit's activist texts do not only write place; they *rewrite* it on activist terms.

Thinking With Solnit's Writing

Solnit's work represents a way of writing and thinking our relationship to place and the planet that takes into account the urgency of the crisis *and* the affective resonances

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 14 (italics in the original).

of the beauty and pain that come with this urgency. In this way, her work is a compelling example of what Haraway calls “staying with the trouble,” a way of being “truly present ... as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”⁴⁶ Staying with the trouble is a way of confronting, thinking, learning from and acting against the practical and epistemological crises engendered by climate breakdown. Clark is skeptical about the power of literature and other modes of cultural production to change the way humans currently act. He asks, “how far does a change in knowledge and imagination entail a change in environmentally destructive modes of life?”⁴⁷ Whether you believe literature has the power to change things or not (and I hope it is clear by now that in many ways I do believe this), the current modes of climate discourse are clearly not working. As Morton argues, “information dump mode,” the relentless accumulation of new facts about global warming, “is a way for us to try to install ourselves at a fictional point in time *before global warming happened*. We are trying to anticipate something inside which we already find ourselves.”⁴⁸ This is a bleak prospect, one that often finds us asking, “what is the point?” Indeed, if we are already in a time of dangerous climate events, if we are already facing a global climate crisis, why sit around reading, thinking, and writing about climate? It seems futile at best.

Yet this is precisely why trying to shift thinking is so important. Greta Thunberg, the sixteen-year-old Swedish climate activist, puts it most simply: “we already have all the facts and the solutions. All we have to do is wake up and change.”⁴⁹ Waking up requires a new mode of thinking, a shift that can in part come from cultural

⁴⁶ Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 1.

⁴⁷ Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, 18.

⁴⁸ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (London: Pelican, 2018), 14. Italics in the original.

⁴⁹ Greta Thunberg, *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* (London: Penguin, 2019), 11.

outputs that resist conventional, dominant modes of thinking about the environment. As Ammons asserts, and as Solnit too believes, there is something *added* when we think, read, and write about these issues. Like Thunberg, Morton asserts that “it seems to be not enough just to know stuff” about climate change.⁵⁰ We know the facts, but piling them up in a stark reflection of the physical waste dumps that are themselves part of the problem is doing very little to actually change anything. Instead, a call to emotions, to an ethical or moral relationship with the earth, seems to be the way forward. Rather than the disconnecting, panic-inducing effects of climate facts, an affective, ethical strategy seems better placed to both kick-start the changes we still have time to make, and to persuade, even allow, people to feel connected to and appreciative of the world in which they live. After all, Morton argues that it is not the fact that humans are to blame for global warming but “*how* we think this blame” that is important.⁵¹ We now understand that humans undeniably are to blame (though, as I have argued, to varying degrees). Moving beyond this knowledge, Solnit’s work begins to consider how we might think about it by exploring her own (sometimes vexed) relationships to places. Solnit’s work, and my analysis of it, represents an alternative to burying our heads in the sand, exalting only the ‘beautiful’ parts of our world, and retreating into despair as we watch it all disappear. Solnit’s work is often – through noticing, naming, watching, and walking – joyfully, hopefully mobilising and future-oriented, even when that future is, by its very nature *as* future, uncertain.

Each chapter in this thesis unpacks Solnit’s ecofeminist approach to this uncertain future, identifying the ecofeminist, activist potential within even the most unlikely narratives across four seemingly disparate texts. Solnit’s works are, for the

⁵⁰ Morton, *Being Ecological*, 11.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 205 (italics in the original).

most part, concerned with American places, and often encounter and counter American *ideas* about those places. Indeed, chapter one, “The Wilderness,” uses *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, to consider how Solnit engages with, redefines, and refutes American attitudes towards its wilderness spaces – attitudes born of various ‘isms of domination.’ Beginning with an analysis of the second half of *Savage Dreams*, in which Solnit describes her visits to Yosemite National Park and the history of its creation, I read Solnit’s depictions of the park in terms of “wildness,” a term that, unlike “wilderness,” does not come with the baggage of a capitalist, patriarchal, colonial history. Reading Solnit’s depictions of “wildness” through the recurring image of water, I unpack the importance of embodiment in Solnit’s ecofeminist endeavor to argue that *Savage Dreams* calls for a reconsideration of the terms used to describe so-called wilderness places. I then turn my attention to the recurrence of the colour blue in *A Field Guide*, looking to Solnit’s immersive descriptions of distance, space, and land(scape) that speak to a similar embodiment to that found in Yosemite’s water, but perhaps one that marks a more expansive connective impulse. Solnit utilises these images in order to call for an embodied and connective engagement with wild spaces. Considering the ways America’s wildernesses were created, bounded, and emptied out by ‘isms of domination,’ I discuss the ways Solnit works to recognise the life of the land and incite, or reincorporate, a more expansive human engagement with it.

In chapter two, “The Desert,” I consider how this embodied and revitalised relationship to the land works when the land itself has been rendered dangerous and/or destructive. Opening with a discussion of Solnit’s representation of the desert in *A Field Guide*, I unpack the ways she moves beyond Euroamerican understandings of the desert as a wasteland, instead promoting a human-desert relationship predicated

on a similar kind of engagement to the one found in “wildness” – in both, Solnit reintroduces a relationship to place closed off by various ‘isms of domination.’ I then discuss Solnit’s narratives of the Nevada desert in *Savage Dreams*, unpacking the ways Solnit relates to and draws connections across a desert wracked by nuclear destruction. Complicating the joyful, embodied relation to place I identify in chapter one, chapter two takes a place not ‘traditionally’ seen as ‘beautiful’ and asks how we may relate to an increasingly toxic land(scape). This chapter focuses on the narratives told about these places by the dominant culture, and argues that Solnit’s mistrust and subversion of such narratives contributes to the ecofeminist ethics at play across her work. “The Wilderness” and “The Desert” thus lay the groundwork for understanding the ways ecofeminist discourses are illuminated by the relationships Solnit narrates and the places she describes within these two texts.

The subsequent two chapters move beyond this thematic engagement to consider Solnit’s stylistic ecofeminism. Chapter three, “The City,” takes Solnit’s urban descriptions as its starting point, discussing the ways the city acts as both a physical setting and as a useful metaphor in Solnit’s more introspective writing. Beginning with an analysis of the city in *A Field Guide*, I look at how the urbanity of Solnit’s writing, far from negating her environmentalism, reveals an alternative engagement with place nevertheless based on similar affective relationships to those located in the wilderness and the desert. *A Field Guide* thus offers a bridge between the more overt ecofeminist narratives in Solnit’s work, and the stylistic or conceptual ecofeminist writing I identify as the most useful tool for rethinking place in an era of climate crisis. The city in *A Field Guide* provides a springboard for my analysis of *The Faraway Nearby*, in which I expand upon the metaphor of the city as labyrinth to consider the ways metaphor itself is an example of ecofeminist care in Solnit’s work.

I focus on the ways the mutability of metaphor is not only a useful tool for Solnit's narratives, but is indicative of the ethics of care and connectivity that give rise to Solnit's attitudes not only to the land(scape), but to everyone and everything, to her experience of the world as a whole. Thus, while I consider these ecofeminist ethics in literal terms in chapters one and two, in chapter three they become a tool for engaging with narratives of illness that reflect upon, or are refracted through, Solnit's activist life.

Chapter four, "The Road," expands this analysis out to consider all four texts. Extending the use of metaphor identified in chapter three, I use the road as my own central image or metaphor to discuss the ways walking and driving are both stylistic and activist tools in Solnit's texts. Considering *Wanderlust*, *Savage Dreams*, *The Faraway Nearby*, and *A Field Guide* in relation to one another, I suggest that reading Solnit's wide-ranging works in strange and surprising relation to one another increases their activist potential. I argue, in the end, that Solnit's works are stylistically matched by their wandering, and that this wandering facilitates the activist and ethical unity of her writing. I structure this chapter as its own journey through the various instances of walking in Solnit's work in order to further understand the connections between texts, between narratives, and between Solnit's style and content, that all seem to rest on a few key tenets of ecofeminism. In the end, Solnit's ecofeminism – and my analysis of it – involves taking a long walk, and I conclude by gesturing towards the futures this walk may lead us towards.

Each chapter discusses, engages, and even calls for, tiny acts of care-driven resistance. Reflecting back Solnit's call to rethink and relearn relationships to place via small acts of naming, noticing, watching, and walking, this thesis engages in an ecofeminist praxis of sorts in drawing connections within and between Solnit's texts,

and using these texts to rethink the ways we relate to place in an era of climate crisis. Journeying through Solnit's works, I argue that her stylistic innovations and disparate subjects are rooted in an ecofeminist ethic that makes her work vital not only in terms of critical engagement – of which there is not yet a lot – but in terms of understanding and standing behind the importance of artistic engagement with climate crisis: Solnit's work is engaged in working through *how* we think it, not just what we think. Her work makes a case not only for a renewed interest in and engagement with the world through which we move, but for an engagement with environmentalism that goes beyond aesthetic engagements with 'Nature.' I gesture also towards the importance of an emotional, affective resonance in thinking through climate, and place more generally, that is too often ignored. Solnit's work is moving, and more than being merely part of its appeal, this is part of its power. Through its style, content, and images, through narratives of nuclear destruction, discussions of time, autobiography, and illness, Solnit's work engenders more than an appreciation for this multifarious world. It becomes an activist tool, an affective call to arms that asks, even compels, us to confront the epistemological difficulties of climate crisis via a connective, radical ecofeminist ethic.

Chapter One

The Wilderness

“The future of the planet ... depends on relearning our relationship to the earth.”¹

Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words* (2010)

Introduction: Into the Wild

In order to effectively approach the climate crisis, we need to change the way we think about our relationship to the planet on which we live. As a writer engaged in coming to terms with and acting against environmental degradation, Rebecca Solnit actively reforms this relationship in her work. In this chapter, I argue that Solnit takes areas traditionally described as “wilderness” and redefines them in terms of a more inclusive, expansive, and multifaceted “wildness” as a way of beginning to rethink and relearn ways of relating to a changing planet. Considering the various land(scape)s Solnit depicts in *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, I discuss the ways this reframing is an ecofeminist, activist move that works against what Karen J. Warren calls “‘isms of domination’” in order to allow these lands a future outside of the neatly packaged tourist attractions so often denoted by the term “wilderness.”² Elizabeth Ammons’ above claim outlines in no uncertain terms the epistemological requirements that affect the ways we may deal, or are currently dealing, with the climate crisis. It is as much a crisis of understanding as it is of scientific fact. As Naomi Klein asserts, “living with this kind of cognitive dissonance is simply a part of being

¹ Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 165.

² Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What It Is and Why It Matters* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 43.

alive in this jarring moment in history, when a crisis we have been studiously ignoring is hitting us in the face.”³ This chapter reads Solnit’s work on wilderness as an example of a reconfigured approach to place that, in turn, offers an alternative approach to this crisis.

Roderick Frazier Nash calls wilderness a “basic ingredient of American culture;” it holds a central place in the USA’s self-imaginary.⁴ From the terror-filled primeval forests that greeted the Puritans, to the ‘wild’ in Wild West, wilderness is an integral part of America’s self-made mythology. As such, the wilderness – what it means, how it was formed, and how it is treated – can tell us a lot about America’s attitude towards its land. The wilderness has been through many iterations, by turns avoided, tamed, and preserved. Now, ‘wilderness’ signifies tracts of ‘empty’ landscape, cordoned and protected. As outlined by the 1964 Wilderness Act, this protection follows strict rules. Nash explains:

According to the legislators, ‘a wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.’ The act went on to require that a wilderness retain ‘its primeval character and influence’ and that it be protected and managed in such a way that ‘it appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature.’⁵

A wilderness, by law, is a place devoid of human presence, one that appears untouched, and untrammelled. As a concept, the wilderness thus draws upon an attitude to land that sees it as dead, inert, static, and at the mercy of human will. This

³ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 3.

⁴ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xi.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

attitude (as outlined in the introduction) comes from the collective, exploitative forces of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy that subjugate the landscape in order to extract, undermine, and tame the earth's resources.

Crucially, the Wilderness Act only requires wildernesses to “appear” untouched by human presence. Ironically, the inclusion of the term “appear” causes the protective qualities of the act fall apart, as it does not require these places to be truly left alone, but to only *look as though* no one is there. Wilderness is an illusion in two senses, then. It relies on appearances and arbitrary boundaries – wilderness is created and contained by these dominant cultural attitudes. Yet it is also impossible to maintain a landscape on the terms of the Wilderness Act: places such as Yosemite National Park have never been wildernesses, if a wilderness needs to be untrammelled by humans, untouched and uninfluenced by anything other than ‘nature.’ Relying on a dualistic separation of nature and culture, the Wilderness Act suggests that humans are separate from, and elevated above, nature, but they are still *required* not to influence it – their status does not eradicate the effects of humans on nature. The terms of the act thus reflect, rather than counter, a worldview that sees landscapes as inert, mechanical resources. That is, Richard Grusin explains, wildernesses are born of a capitalist, patriarchal, colonial attitude, the logic of which “relies upon the assumption that nature provides the resources or raw material for economic and technological development, and that the protection or preservation of the environment is clearly subordinate to, and can only be understood within, a calculus of economic growth and prosperity.”⁶ The Wilderness Act is as prescriptive as the logic it purportedly counteracts, protecting only certain places, and imposing rigid rules concerning the

⁶ Richard Grusin, *Culture, Technology, and the Creation of America's National Parks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xiv.

ways those places should be understood.

For Timothy Morton, “wilderness embodies freedom from determination, the bedrock of capitalist ideology. It is always ‘over there’, behind the shop window of distanced, aesthetic experience; even when you are ‘in’ it.”⁷ I argue that Solnit works in *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* to create ecofeminist relations to wildness by exposing the roots of such separatist, dualistic thinking. Based, as Morton points out, on dualism, wilderness is born of the same capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal systems responsible for gendered oppression. If wilderness places are heralded as pristine examples of the American landscape, they are exemplars only to those whose access to them remains unencumbered. That is, women and people of colour – particularly Native peoples whose homelands are within the ‘boundaries’ of America’s wildernesses – find their interaction with wilderness restricted by their social position.

In this chapter, I argue that Solnit swaps narratives of fragmentation for narratives of connection, engaging in an ecofeminist reimagining, a rethinking, of America’s wild land(scape)s. Val Plumwood points out that for ecofeminists, “there is the problem of how to reintegrate nature and culture across the great western division between them and of how to give a positive value to what has been traditionally devalued and excluded as nature *without* simply reversing values and rejecting the sphere of culture.”⁸ It is not enough to merely reverse the terms and value ‘nature’ over ‘culture,’ then. Instead we must seek new relationships, new ways of seeing and being with the earth. Solnit’s wildness avoids this switch, focusing instead on drawing connections between people and place, and calling for reciprocal,

⁷ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 113.

⁸ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 10–11.

respectful, and celebratory relationships between them. I thus read Solnit's work as answering Carolyn Merchant's call for a "dynamic relationship" with the earth that is "generated by humans, but is enacted by listening to, hearing, and responding to the voice of nature."⁹ Connecting the human and nonhuman in a mutual, reciprocal relationship is, Merchant argues, vital to countering the divisive forces of the dominant culture, and by moving from wilderness to wildness, Solnit takes part in and enacts this dynamic bond.

Timothy Gilmore develops "a concept of wildness that conveys more adequately the unruly complexity of ecological systems, reveals our epistemological limitations as corporeal beings within such systems, and aids us in understanding the need for nurturing ecological consciousness in this time of ecological crisis."¹⁰ As a nurturing, reciprocal and multiple term, "wildness" as Gilmore imagines it works directly against capitalist, patriarchal and colonial dissections that formed/form American wilderness spaces. Emphasising plurality, diversity, difference, and dynamism, Gilmore's wildness aligns with Merchant and Plumwood's calls for connectivity, reciprocity, and vitality. In its acknowledgement of epistemological limitations and its emphasis on "nurturing ecological consciousness," it relates to Ammons' call for relearning relationships to the earth. Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o use the term "wildness" in relation to queer ecocriticism. They assert that "wildness is where the environment speaks back, where communication bows to intensity, where worlds collide, cultures clash, and things fall apart;" wildness is a partial, open, unruly term that can be used to push back against various forms of

⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xix.

¹⁰ Timothy Gilmore, "After the Apocalypse: Wildness as Preservative in a Time of Ecological Crisis," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, no. 3 (2017): 390, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isx033>.

domination in favour of a more expansive and inclusive relation to the environment.¹¹ In these terms, then, I read Solnit's work as locating, even creating, such spaces of "wildness" that refuse the dualistic, mechanistic destruction inherent in exploitative, reductive relations to place. Instead, she favours a symbiotic, reciprocal understanding of place-self connection that is explicitly engaged in imagining a future for both. By making the distinction between "wilderness" and "wildness" Solnit's work illustrates a shift or turn in thinking that will open up ways of contending with land(scape)s and their inhabitants – human and nonhuman – that need not rely on understandings of place proffered by various 'isms of domination,' but instead rest on ecofeminist ethics of vitality and connectivity in order to attend to an unknown but approaching future for people and place alike.

Tracking Solnit's engagement with wildness, I turn first to *Savage Dreams*. Solnit spends half of this text describing her various trips to Yosemite National Park. As a place that epitomises the American wilderness, Yosemite provides the perfect grounds on which Solnit is able to counter the dominant narratives responsible for its creation. I discuss the ways Solnit describes the national park system, considering the underside of its affiliation with wilderness, before turning to Solnit's many depictions of the park's water. Tracing an increasingly immersive, embodied relation to place throughout the text, I locate qualities of wildness in Solnit's depiction of water that render it oppositional to the inertia associated with wilderness landscapes. I then turn to *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* to further consider the importance of representing and reading the land(scape) in order to change human relations to place. Focusing on what Solnit calls "the blue of distance," I unpack the multiple metaphorical uses of

¹¹ Jack Halberstam and Tavia Nyong'o, "Introduction: Theory in the Wild," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (2018): 454, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942081>.

this colour in her work, and connect them to the complexities of wildness that counter the rigid understandings of wilderness. Gesturing to the ways Solnit describes, creates, and calls for connective, affective relationships with the earth, I argue that wildness is a tool for Solnit's broader ecofeminist ethic, one that directly relates to the epistemological crisis wrought by climate change.

National Parks

As a tourist destination, and a place 'protected' by the 1964 Wilderness Act, Yosemite National Park is complicit in upholding the dominant culture's definition of wilderness as a place to be seen and visited but not lived in. John Brinckerhoff Jackson describes the ways national parks, like the wilderness itself, are framed as relics, places in which visitors are "tactfully told that [they] are not at home but in a museum;" this land is not intended as a dwelling place, but is instead rendered static and 'unliveable,' relegated to the past by its equivalence to a museum piece.¹² Bolstered first by its designation as a national park and then by the terms of the Wilderness Act, Yosemite National Park has capitalised on the notion of an empty, untouched natural world since the advent of landscape tourism, providing a packaged, safe, and static 'wilderness' that erases the histories and presence of Native peoples in particular, and of decades, even centuries, of human intervention in the land in general. In order to continue this, Yosemite's tourists are encouraged to engage in acts of simultaneous image-building and erasure themselves. Sally Ann Ness asserts, "the signs of the Yosemite landscape perform so as to realise a particular purpose; that of persuading visitors to bond with the park and to feel and act and think and *live* as

¹² John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 101.

though the park belongs individually and personally to them.”¹³ Ignoring the hundreds of other people in their line of sight, they gaze up at the rocks and waterfalls of the landscape and imagine their experience is unique.

And the park’s wilderness is known to them, even when it remains invisible. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit recounts the moment she saw a “tourist taking snapshots of Yosemite Falls ... when there was no water in the waterfall, only a dark stain on the rock face.”¹⁴ Because they are complicit in upholding the “appearance” of the park’s wilderness, the tourist is still able to take a meaningful photograph of the waterfall even when it runs dry. The tourist is able to fill in the gap in the image with their own ‘knowledge’ of what Yosemite ‘looks’ like: they ‘see’ the waterfall even in its absence. This is a deliberate move on the part of the park’s authorities. As Ness puts it, “the invisibility of Yosemite’s material constructed-ness – the foregrounding of the park’s pristine natural character – is, perhaps, its most effective, argument-performing feature.”¹⁵ The hidden constructed-ness of the park upholds the very definitions of wilderness upon which its continual importance as a tourist destination depends. It is because of this that Solnit observes, “in a lot of ways, [Yosemite] wasn’t a great place to go see Nature, whatever that is, but it was the best place to go see people going to see Nature, the Park Service presenting them with the official version of Nature, and the accretion of Nature’s artefacts and souvenirs” (228–29). Like Jackson, Solnit sees “Nature” in Yosemite as merely a collection of images and objects curated for human consumption. And like Ness, Solnit understands the artificiality of Yosemite’s

¹³ Sally Ann Ness, *Choreographies of Landscape: Signs of Performance in Yosemite National Park* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 13 (italics in the original).

¹⁴ Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 223. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁵ Ness, *Choreographies of Landscape*, 85.

supposed ‘relationships’ with its visitors. In observing not the natural world itself, but the people observing it, Solnit points to the meaninglessness of the ‘natural’ in this ‘wilderness.’

Understanding the way Yosemite manipulates both the view for and the views of its visitors, Solnit describes how “most of [her] friends ... saw the valley as a Disneyland” (228). Solnit’s friends’ arch description of the national park as a place of endlessly repeated vacuous façades is reminiscent of what Jean Baudrillard calls the “hyperreal;” the park is so far removed from its actuality – its bloody history, its heavily controlled, even artificial, landscapes – as to become generated by “models of a real without origin or reality.”¹⁶ The disneyfication of the wilderness experience is particularly pertinent, as Baudrillard remarks, “Disneyland is a perfect model of all the entangled orders of simulacra This imaginary world is supposed to ensure the success of the operation.”¹⁷ Disneyland constitutes its attraction as a safe, predictable, “phantasmagori[cal]” place, and Yosemite works in the same way.¹⁸ A constructed, neatly packaged tourist attraction, Yosemite also reflects Umberto Eco’s claim that “Disneyland tells us that faked nature corresponds much more to our daydream demands” – these tourist attractions fake their own naturalness and, in doing so, offer an experience of ‘nature’ that becomes more ‘real’ to the visitors than the land’s actual state.¹⁹ As hyperreal, Yosemite generates itself according to an original, untrammelled, pristine, peopleless model that does not exist. Upholding the terms of the Wilderness Act to such an extent, it becomes a place in which visitors are allowed

¹⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. by Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. by William Weaver (London: Harcourt, 1987), 44.

to ignore the complex history of the land in favour of a sanitised and picturesque vacation experience. Yosemite exemplifies the definition of wilderness as “untrammelled” and “primeval” by reinforcing these characteristics through a continued, erroneous, reiteration of their ‘reality’ within the park.

Contrary to Solnit’s own interpretations of the park, which include the histories of the land missing from the park’s monuments and information boards, the ‘Nature’ she witnesses the tourists ‘experiencing’ shows nothing of the implications of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchy in Yosemite. The visitors see a pristine wilderness because that is what the museum-park tells them to see. Their photos mean the same thing to them whether the water flows or not. Solnit finds her time there marred by this static, sanitised version of the Yosemite landscape. She writes, “I came back to Yosemite again and again, but nothing ever happened to me there. It was a place where nothing was supposed to happen” (228). Yosemite, its history erased, its changes halted, allows no space for the unpredictable, no room for a truly ‘wild’ experience, because to do so would allow its violent and vexed history to leak through. Yosemite is frozen in a hyperreal timelessness, and its stasis extends to the people within its boundaries, too.

In search of a wild ‘something’ to counter the wilderness’ ‘nothing,’ Solnit starts to wander the less frequented paths of the Yosemite area. Doing so, she begins a quest to uncover the histories of the park hidden by its very designation *as* a park. This quest centres on the name of a lake within the park’s boundaries, Lake Tenaya, a place named for an Ahwaneechee chief whose people were forcibly removed by white men in the mid-nineteenth century (219). Solnit writes, “Yosemite National Park is the very crucible and touchstone for American Landscape, and I thought if I could understand what happened at this lake within it, I could begin to see into the

peculiarities, blindnesses, raptures, and problems that constitute the Euro-American experience of landscape” (221). Solnit pinpoints in this lake, in its name, the same attitudes that underpin the dominant cultural understating of ‘wilderness,’ an attitude of conquest and exploitation that hides beneath the landscape’s surface. With a focus on Tenaya’s story, Solnit recounts the narrative of the Mariposa Battalion’s entry into the Yosemite area in 1851, and Lafayette Bunnell’s subsequent renaming of the lake in the middle of it after the chief whose people he set out to annihilate. Solnit also recounts the involvement of James D. Savage, whose suggestion of “starving the Indians out of their valley” led to the battle over Yosemite and, ultimately, to the creation of Yosemite National Park (232). Detailing part of a colonial project to ‘empty out’ this land, Solnit’s narrative gestures towards the creation of terra incognita spaces in the American West that furthered both the removal and erasure of indigenous peoples, and the understanding of ‘Nature’ as an untrammelled, empty wilderness.

Recounting the story of Yosemite’s creation, Solnit is working to understand the “blindnesses” of the national park’s history, unpacking the ways the dominant cultural narrative of Yosemite – one that ‘forgets’ the deliberate erasure of its Native peoples – has worked to render it a people-less, ‘natural’ landscape. Yosemite is thus, as Wendy Harding describes it, “placed under the sign of empty.”²⁰ Yosemite’s history is hidden by the ersatz emptiness of its hyperreal cultural image. Harding asserts, “empty is a double-faced sign: it links a mutating decoy – the illusion of emptiness – to an underlying project, an act of appropriation.”²¹ Working against such acts of appropriation, Solnit digs deep into the park’s histories to counter the supposed emptiness of the park. In doing so, she locates another layer, another complexity, in

²⁰ Wendy Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xiv.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xv.

this land(scape)’s character. Solnit describes how the lake’s name was “given from outside, neither about the lake nor about the man, but an unpleasant incident almost entirely forgotten by Yosemite’s visitors” (220). She goes on, “Bunnell claims to Tenaya that the new name will give the man a kind of immortality, but what he is really doing is obliterating Tenaya’s culture from the place and beginning its history over again” (220). Simultaneously “annihilating” and “romanticizing,” the lake’s name both reveals *and* conceals the history of this land(scape) (220). Reassigning Tenaya’s name to a place that supposedly exists outside of time is anachronistic, but the paradox is deliberate; it both locks Tenaya and his people in the time before the lake was renamed, and shifts the focus from man to water, ‘naturalising’ the history of the park and erasing its violent human history. The lake performs its own lack of history, all the while holding the key to the vexed and bloody past this landscape so ardently tries to conceal.

The lake introduces Solnit to another Yosemite, a place outside of its dominant characterisation as wilderness. It thus becomes the first place in which Solnit enacts her newly connective wildness. Engaging in a bodily, connective practice, Solnit takes a swim in the lake; she immerses herself within a land(scape) that so often keeps its visitors at arm’s length. She writes, “the water was so shallow and the lake inclined so gradually I walked far from the shore before it became deep enough to swim in. It was an uncanny place. It was hard to trust that this cold, clear substance would bear me up if I submerged myself in it, or that I would emerge the same as I went in” (279). In an act of surrender, Solnit gives herself over to the possibility of change – she does not know if she will emerge the same. The water, in its revelatory, shifting character, presents a new or different version of the land to the Wilderness Act’s definition of it. The water takes a long time to engulf Solnit fully; it takes a lot of work to reach the

park's hidden histories. That she is far from the shore when the lake finally bears her up is testament to the need to move off the track, away from the monuments and information boards. The revelation of the lake's history, her immersion in a recovered narrative and in the water itself, profoundly alters Solnit's experience of the park; she is no longer able to view the landscape as an empty, peopleless wilderness, so must alter her perspective.

Solnit's walk into Lake Tenaya reflects Stacy Alaimo's claim that "thinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions."²² Using her own body, Solnit renders Yosemite a "fleshy" place, reliant upon symbiotic and multifaceted relationships between it and its inhabitants. Gesturing towards the multiplicity of place through the image of the water and her own submersion within it, Solnit begins to consider further those stories that reside below the surface of the Yosemite's supposed emptiness. Water thus becomes the medium through which Solnit locates Yosemite's wildness; delving both literally and figuratively below the surface of this seemingly timeless, inert landscape, Solnit locates beneath the museum descriptors, monuments, and picture postcards, a place that is vital in every sense.

Solnit's representation of water's wildness therefore becomes an activist endeavour, one that refuses the dominant cultural narrative's erasure of the park's people, history, and vitality: the water makes for an embodied, reciprocal experience of land. As a metaphor, then, water acts as a medium of, even shorthand for, Solnit's newly dynamic relationship with place. It is a mobilising symbol. Avril Horner and

²² Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 2.

Sue Zlosnik unpack the feminist uses of ecological metaphors:

Landscape[s] [are] used not just to give a sense of place but to suggest, sometimes with ambivalence, the possibilities for self that lie beyond society, outside patriarchy, and within the future. These possibilities, many of which are to do with rejecting the cultural construction of gender, must inevitably be connected with forces of wildness, fluidity and the unknown. This is not because woman herself is wild and unknowable, a conclusion which would drive us dangerously towards the essentialist position which sees woman as the embodiment of nature, instinct, and intuition. It is because articulating the desire for woman's sexual, social and artistic freedom depends on suggesting what is not known, what is not acceptable, what lies beyond the civil boundaries of culture.²³

Horner and Zlosnik's interest in the social possibilities latent in alternative relationships to place can be read in the ways Solnit reconfigures land(scape) in/through metaphor. While the sense of the unknown is not necessarily bound to the female in Solnit's work, there is nevertheless a sense that Solnit's very act of immersion, as a woman, in the national park, marks her utilising the implicit connection between water and femininity to speak more broadly to the importance of altering her, our, relationship to place. That is, water represents new possibilities for relations to place not because Solnit herself is wild (which would suggest an essentialist connection between women and nature), but because the very mutability of the metaphor resists the dominant culture's urge to control. Immersion thus presents a possibility for a new relation to place, an embodied and enlivened relationship that rejects a detached view of the landscape in favour of a tactile connection to land(scape).

Literally moving beyond the "civil boundaries," the trails, tracks, roads, and

²³ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 7.

campsites of the park, Solnit locates wildness in the waters of Lake Tenaya. Suggesting that wildness is an entrenched quality that undercuts or supersedes the more provisional idea of wilderness, Graham Huggan argues that many writers in particular “tend to mistake *wilderness* for *wildness*, assuming that the geographical qualities of one can be mapped onto the moral qualities of the other.”²⁴ Reflecting on Thoreau’s famous claim that “in wildness is the preservation of the world,” Huggan gestures towards the ways wildness, and not wilderness, may be a moral or ethical antithesis to the culturally dependent, and thus often destructive, understandings of wilderness spaces.²⁵ It is the wild that Solnit locates in Yosemite’s water, a fluid, introspective and subjective experience of place that connects rather than separates the various forms of life and land to be found there. As such, Solnit’s immersion actively reshapes the way she views Yosemite land, reflecting Morton’s argument that “if we could not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we were embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it.”²⁶ The swim in Lake Tenaya marks a moment, a spatial and temporal suspension, in which understanding is embedded in experience, in a physically embodied *move* to connect with the land(scape). Solnit has to trust the water to “bear [her] up,” she must give it time before it becomes “deep enough to swim in.” Entering into the water therefore becomes not merely a transformative moment for her understanding of the park, but for her understanding of herself *in relation to* the park; she is relearning her relationship to this earth by redressing the power imbalances and rendering the lake itself an active participant in her visit to Yosemite. Submerged in the waters, Solnit is no longer

²⁴ Graham Huggan, “Back to the Future: The ‘New Nature Writing,’ Ecological Boredom, and the Recall of the Wild,” *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism* 38, no. 2 (2016): 157, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440357.2016.1195902>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁶ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 64 (italics in the original).

separate from the land, but part of it, upheld by it; it is no longer an inert landscape to be acted upon, but an empowering, mobile force in its own right.

Bodies of Water

Drawing these connections in/to a place whose authorities discourage, even prohibit, such attachments, Solnit locates within her own body a site of activist dissent. This bodily action recurs throughout the text, as she begins to connect the presence of her gendered body with the histories of erasure and oppression latent in Yosemite's landscapes, in ways that recall the connections between various 'isms of domination.' It is important to note, though, that Solnit is not describing a universal 'human' experience while she immerses herself in the park's various waters. As Plumwood asserts, "a universalised concept of 'humanity' can be used also to deflect political critique and to obscure the fact that the forces directing the destruction of nature and the wealth produced from it are owned and controlled overwhelmingly by an unaccountable, mainly white, mainly male elite."²⁷ Solnit does not collapse differences, she draws connections based on an understanding of the power relations responsible for the park's status as wilderness.

In this sense, Tenaya's concealed history shares similar roots in 'isms of domination' to the present-day iterations of patriarchy Solnit and her friends experience when they visit the park. Narrating both gestures to the ways certain human groups are aligned with nature and controlled in similar ways, rather than reaping the benefits enjoyed by the controlling culture. Recounting the hike she and her friends took up to Glacier Point, Solnit writes, "about halfway up, we bathed in a cold pool in one of the streams, and small trout – too wild to know they're supposed to be wary,

²⁷ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 12.

said Catherine – swam through our legs” (355–56). Taking a break from one of the park’s most frequented hikes, the women submerge themselves in a trout-filled pool; they reject the dominant, anthropocentric experience of the park in favour of sharing an alternative with the park’s wildlife. The literal connections with the park’s “wild” trout, that they swim through the women’s legs, represents a bodily connection to the park characterised by physically situating the “wild” in relation to each woman’s body. The women, enabled by the fish, by the literal movement of the park’s ‘nature,’ relinquish the enforced separation between the human and nonhuman upon which the park’s identity depends. Astrida Neimanis argues, “in acknowledging [a] corporeally connected aqueous community, distinctions between human and nonhuman start to blur.”²⁸ Solnit and her friends place themselves in watery community, and invoke ecofeminist connections by eschewing the individualist narratives the national park relies upon. The women and the trout move through the pool together, no one tries to catch the fish, and the fish do not try to escape. The fish, wild but not part of the wilderness, reveal a living part of the earth that is not hidden by the park. They represent a channel for Solnit and her friends to experience the wild; the fish approach them. Relating to each other as unafraid equals, both the women and the fish are immersed in a moment of inclusive, connective wildness. Importantly, as in the discussion of wild metaphors above, this moment does not signal an essentialist link between the women and the trout; the wildness in this passage does not suggest that the women are closer to nature than to the ‘culture’ of the park. Rather, the wild trout allow for, even encourage, an alternative relation to Yosemite land/water based on the more radical, inclusive, shifting characteristics of wildness.

²⁸ Astrida Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water,” in *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. by Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 92.

In stark contrast to this peaceful, wild immersion, Solnit recalls the night she and her friends spent camping next to five men “loudly recounting their dubious sexual exploits,” which included “trying to seduce a twelve-year-old” and “cornering a woman in an elevator” (355). Aside from drawing attention to the uncomfortable – frightening – evening she and her friends spent having to listen these men, Solnit reveals here an attitude in which these men are comfortable enough to loudly and obnoxiously discuss the exploitation of women without fear of repercussions: they are at the top of Yosemite’s patriarchal hierarchy, protected by the same ‘isms of domination’ that render the park a top tourist spot and eliminate the presence of Native peoples. Reflecting on this, Solnit writes, “Yosemite, even in the valley, is bear country, and a bear was supposed to have ripped a car door off at this campground the night before. Unfortunately, the U.S., even in the national parks, is man country, which has hindered my freedom of movement far more” (355). For Solnit, the threat of the park comes not from wild animals, not from the trout or the bears, but from male visitors. In turn, the male visitors’ behaviour is facilitated by the patriarchal origins of the park itself; wilderness is made safe by and for these men, and these men alone. The aggressive sexuality of the men and the fluid sensuality of the fish swimming “between [the women’s] legs” thus echo the oppositional narratives that form them; the persistent, sexualised dominance of the land by male conquest, and the connective, reciprocal movement inherent in Solnit’s own understanding of, and movement within, the land.

By pausing midway through their hike, the three women are therefore able to at least partially escape the patriarchal threats of the park in favour of an immersive, transformative experience of wildness. Away from the trail of Yosemite’s complicity in various ‘isms of domination,’ Solnit and her friends participate in acts of wildness

that connect them not with the destructive power of Yosemite's threatening male visitors, but in kinship with the nonhuman nature of the park; they forge a dynamic relationship, connecting to without exploiting the land(scape) by immersing themselves in it. Neimanis argues, "the fluid body is not specific to woman, but watery embodiment is still a feminist question; thinking as a watery body has the potential to bathe new feminist concepts and practices into existence."²⁹ Water, in this moment in particular, as an almost amniotic force, allows Solnit to 'birth' an ecofeminist practice of connectivity in the face of the most overtly violent and divisive encounter she herself faces in the park. Once again, it must be noted, the wildness of this moment does not come from the fact that Solnit is a woman, but from the fact that, as Neimanis articulates above, this sense of "watery embodiment" is a feminist question to which Solnit finds a feminist answer. In this act of defiance, Solnit's embodiment is her defense, and in the watery submersion in Yosemite's wild, she locates a new, alternative relationship to land not controlled by the dominant forces of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism.

Water thus becomes an empowering connective force within the park, and Solnit begins to explore her physical relationship to it. Explicitly connecting Yosemite to her individual body, Solnit writes,

if the human body is seventy percent water, mine after a decade in San Francisco contains a high proportion of Hetch Hetchy. I'd wanted to see this drowned valley at the end of my faucets for years. For a while I kept a U.S. Geological Survey topographical map of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir tacked up above my kitchen faucet, so that every time I did the dishes or filled the kettle, I would remember the system that links my plumbing to this alpine landscape (225).

²⁹ Ibid., 89.

Solnit's awareness of exactly where her water comes from displays both an environmental concern and a preoccupation with her personal connection to this place; Hetch Hetchy water is part of Solnit's autobiography. As such, her trip to see it represents a kind of pilgrimage to the source of her self. The map tacked up in her kitchen acts as a connecting point between Solnit and the land(scape); its primary use is not to locate the reservoir but to act as a reminder of the importance of this water in Solnit's daily life. Reminiscent of David Rothenberg's assertion, "water does not divide; it connects. With simplicity it links all aspects of our existence," Solnit's fascination with where her water comes from, and how it resides in her own body, represents a wider interest in the human connection to the earth.³⁰ Water, as autobiography, is a bodily element in a landscape that seeks to erase any evidence, physical or narrative, of human presence. Barbara Kingsolver reminds us, "water is life. It's the briny broth of our origins, the pounding circulatory system of the world, a precarious molecular edge on which we survive. It makes up two-thirds of our bodies, just like the map of the world."³¹ That we and the planet are both more than two thirds water, not to mention that there is a finite and unchanging amount of water cycling around the planet, reveals how destructive a position the wilderness constructs for its visitors by asking them to assume they are separate from, and thus immune to, the changes of something as important as water.

As such, Solnit's bodily relation to Hetch Hetchy works to counter the disconnecting characteristics of wilderness. Displaying the map is also an example of what Sara O'Shaughnessy and Emily Huddart Kennedy describe as the "(often)

³⁰ David Rothenberg, introduction to *Writing on Water*, ed. by David Rothenberg and Marta Ulvaeus (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2001), xiii.

³¹ Barbara Kingsolver, "Fresh Water," *National Geographic*, April 2010, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2010/04/water-is-life/>, accessed 24 September 2019.

private-sphere actions undertaken with the intent of demonstrating, encouraging, or communicating to others the tractability and importance of a behavioural commitment to the environment.”³² Though it takes place within Solnit’s own home, and seems therefore to relate only to her individual daily life, the Hetch Hetchy map is an example of Solnit’s environmental ethics that connects to the rest of the text; it is an autobiographical moment that sends ripples out as Solnit connects the map to the water, to herself, to the land(scape), to the new wildness she locates within it.

Hetch Hetchy, as part of Solnit’s autobiography, reveals not only a physical connection between person and place, but also an affective one. This affective connection works to combine the embodied and the cognitive, producing a state whereby, as Heather Houser explains, “feeling grounds one in the present, but ... is also coded by past experience and impinges on the future.”³³ Unlike the park’s version of this connection, in which tourists feel themselves a part of the park and thus move themselves, for a time, outside of time, Solnit’s version involves aligning the park with an individual human timeline. Hetch Hetchy’s water system is literally part of her body, a fact that resists the park’s supposed timelessness through the literal movement of water. P. J. Zwart writes, “a world without time would be completely dead and frozen, without any movement or change.”³⁴ Solnit reinstates the movement of the land, of the planet, via the wildness of Yosemite’s water, directly countering the stasis imposed by the idea of wilderness. In an account that reflects Neimanis’

³² Sara O’Shaughnessy and Emily Huddart Kennedy, “Relational Activism: Reimagining Women’s Environmental Work as Cultural Change,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 35, no. 4 (2010): 552–3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/canajsocicahican.35.4.551>.

³³ Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3.

³⁴ P. J. Zwart, *About Time: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin and Nature of Time* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Co., 1976), 4.

claim that “water is always sometime, someplace, somewhere,” Solnit situates her bodily connection within the moving waterfall at Hetch Hetchy in the present, facilitating an embodied presence.³⁵ She writes:

The spray was so thick around the wooden footbridge across the waterfall that it seemed to pass through the gentler periphery of the waterfall. The temperature dropped. Water streamed across the vibrating bridge, and the roiling water below was clearly dangerous. As I walked across, the spray soaked my clothes and obscured my vision: All I could see was the full circle rainbow the cascade made in front of me, like a halo around a secret (227).

Here, Solnit records the immediacy of her experience; everything she recounts is happening at once. The water engulfs her, and she is absorbed both by the water and by her impressions of it. The repetitions of “water” and “waterfall” in single sentences both surround and infiltrate Solnit’s experience of her own movement. The wildness of the water takes centre stage. As a marker of her own and the park’s wildness, the water also overturns the inertness of Yosemite’s wilderness. The spray obscures the footbridge; the movement of the water overwrites the trail system put in place for tourists’ safe passage through the park. Similarly, the spray holds a “secret,” perhaps the secret or silenced history of the park that is encased in the rainbow, shielded, but not entirely erased. Though the colours are what draw the eye, we can see through rainbows; Solnit is seeing past the wilderness on the surface to the wild complexities and connections underneath. Huggan asserts that “the wild means different things to different people: a quality of self, a relation to the world, an atavistic memory.”³⁶ In this passage it is all three: the water prompts reflections on the self, as the spray soaks both Solnit’s body and her vision of the land. It gestures outwards to the world as a

³⁵ Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism,” 90.

³⁶ Huggan, “Back to the Future,” 165.

whole, not only because of its active part in the water cycle but because of the sheer size and power of the waterfall that is acting outside of Solnit's, humanity's, influence. And as a feature of the park that long predates Solnit's presence in it, the waterfall gestures to a far-reaching, atavistic place-memory that tells of another time, a time-before. Saturated by the water's spray, Solnit feels – experiences – another, living Yosemite emerging from within the established image of the inert landscape. Somewhere between water, land, and air, the waterfall thus acts as a mediator for Solnit's connection to the land, an in-between place that provides enough of a gap in the tightly woven dominant narrative for Solnit to locate an alternative, wild, land(scape).

The waterfall works against the view the wilderness presents its visitors. Literally: it obscures Solnit's vision. Solnit has stated earlier in the text that she is looking to locate the "blindnesses" wrought by Yosemite's capitalist, patriarchal, colonial history. The waterfall plays on this blindness. Crucially, though, the obscuring force of the water itself is not the same as the evasive history of the landscape; while the latter is imposed upon the land, the former comes from within it. The water, as wild, as something beyond the human, folds Solnit into its mist and carries her to new understandings that are partial, unruly, felt rather than witnessed. The waterfall thus speaks to Gilmore's claim that "wildness is everywhere and always around and within us – in fact, it breaks down the very notions of 'around' and 'within.'"³⁷ Wildness is autobiographic, an experience that connects Solnit to a land whose dominant narrative wishes to keep her at arm's length. And wildness is leaky. It gets through the gaps, it makes contact where wilderness keeps its distance. Solnit gestures across the text as a whole to the powers and importance of watery

³⁷ Gilmore, "After the Apocalypse," 404.

embodiment, of connecting to and being present in these places. Relying on the fluidity of both self and land(scape), Solnit begins to posit new connections to place that sit outside of the dominant narrative.

Below the Surface

Water thus allows Solnit to explore the “unruly complexity beneath the surface” of Yosemite’s wilderness.³⁸ Dammed in the early twentieth century, Hetch Hetchy is home to a huge reservoir that floods the valley. It is impossible *not* to see human intervention here, and Solnit explains that many tourists avoid the area due to its lack of ‘natural’ beauty (225). It is an area that flouts the terms of the Wilderness Act, having been affected by much more than the “forces of nature.” Of the dammed and flooded land(scape), Solnit writes, “I have heard that sometimes when the water is very clear, the trees on what once was the valley floor become visible” (225). The very notion of a long forgotten – or long erased – land(scape) that resides below the surface contradicts the supposedly “primeval” and “untrammelled” character of this wilderness.

Even walking in Hetch Hetchy is an act of resistance, then, a bearing witness in which Solnit engages in order to counter the pristine wilderness other tourists are there to see. And it is unruly, complex, and unsettling. Solnit connects the drowned valley to an experience, earlier in the trip, of being startled by a woman moving out of what appeared to be a diorama in the American Indian Cultural museum. In an account that connects this land(scape) to the erasure and dispossession of Yosemite’s Native peoples, Solnit explains, “there was something as terrifying about the idea of a whole landscape drowned beneath the still, opaque blue waters of that lake as there

³⁸ Ibid., 391.

had been in seeing a living woman on a display in a museum: Both of them were evidence of something grievously dislocated” (225–26). In the dominant understanding of the park, dead trees and living indigenous women are considered wholly out of place. Like the drowned effects of capitalist, patriarchal exploitation on the valley floor, the park’s silenced indigenous residents have been “dislocated” by the emptiness and timelessness ascribed to the park by its colonial history. Solnit’s account thus calls to mind the histories of living exhibitions of Native peoples (the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair, for example, exhibited indigenous cultures from around the world using living people) and connects this history with the drowned land at Hetch Hetchy Valley, both of which exemplify the effects of colonial, capitalist patriarchy on the people and life of the park.³⁹ The unexpectedness of both a living woman and dead trees in these places renders Solnit at least partially complicit in upholding Yosemite’s timeless wilderness, as she expects the valley and the diorama to remain unchanged, static, frozen in the past. Both the trees and the woman disrupt the picture-perfect park; they are out of place in the park’s ‘Nature,’ a term or idea which, Morton suggests, “smooths over uneven history, making its struggles and sufferings illegible.”⁴⁰

Yet it is the very smoothness of the image – the still woman, the opaque waters – that makes Solnit suspicious, that causes her to take a closer look, to see the woman move. Describing her encounter in the museum, Solnit writes, “suddenly, one of the figures by the diorama moved and shocked me as though she were a ghost or one of the objects had come to life ... she had been so still when I came in that I had taken her for a display, not a demonstrator” (224–25). If Yosemite is the display, static and

³⁹ See Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (London and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

⁴⁰ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 21.

timeless, the fact that the woman stands, and moves out of it, is a subversive act. Declaring herself a “demonstrator” in a place where the ‘official’ narrative speaks of Native peoples in the past tense, this woman does indeed present herself as something “dislocated.” Switching from passive to active, the woman in the museum draws attention to her own bodily presence. Moving out of the picture – which relegates her to the wilderness’ past – the woman moves herself into the present, disrupting the purported emptiness of the wilderness landscape. Therefore, much as Tenaya’s story rises to the surface of the lake, a lived story of the park here overwrites the dominant image of it, as an indigenous woman demonstrates her own presence in a place whose wilderness label attempts to freeze and empty the land(scape).

And this story is not finished in the scene in the museum. In search of stories of Yosemite land from beyond the Parks Service’s records, Solnit seeks out Tenaya’s descendants in the hopes that they may speak to the indigenous experience of Yosemite and thus provide an alternative narrative to the time-locked blindnesses of the national park. Her research proves fruitful:

I was told there were still at least two Ahwaneechee descendants living in Yosemite Valley itself. Ralph Parker and Jay Johnson had been born there, grew up in the village, and had taken jobs in the Park Service ... Ralph Parker was the husband of the woman I had seen demonstrating in the Indian Cultural Museum, Julia Parker. She is herself a Pomo, from the Sonoma County coast region, but she has lived in Yosemite since 1947 ... It was Parker’s grandmother, Lucy Tom Parker Telles, who taught her much of what she knows about basketry and acorn preparation, and it is she who has kept alive many of the old ways, not just as a cultural demonstrator in the museum, but as a speaker and teacher around the state (290).

Julia Parker’s presence and importance rises slowly to the surface of Solnit’s own narrative. By delaying the revelation of who she is and how she is, in fact, integral to

the park's present, living state, Solnit mimics for her reader the slow revelations of the land, the water, in which she is immersed. Parker demonstrates her own active involvement in presence, relating the present to the past and retaining and passing on indigenous knowledge to future generations. Parker, though part of the "museum" of the park, in fact refuses to uphold the distanced, displayed character of the wilderness that draws Yosemite's visitors. As a teacher, she involves visitors in the land's histories, and by moving, literally, she refuses to be complicit in the park's supposed inertness. Harding argues that this moment "could be compared to the effect Solnit achieves in *Savage Dreams*, for she restores spatiotemporal vitality to places that had been immobilized in the public consciousness thanks to the attribution of emptiness."⁴¹ Indeed, including Julia Parker in her narrative of Yosemite, Solnit engages in a connective, ecofeminist act that privileges the voices and experiences of women, rather than complying with the silencing effects of the dominant narrative. It is the connective act of re-peopling that comes to light when Solnit discovers Julia Parker's identity. In a moment engendered by and told via the delayed revelatory effects of the park's water, Solnit and Julia Parker are connected through metaphor as well as in actuality, and in the metaphorical connection, Solnit posits a deeper, affective connection to the park's people that moves beyond merely countering the park's 'official' narrative and into the multifaceted wild.

Solnit's acts of connection consistently bring untold histories to the surface of the water, of the park's narrative. Near Hensley Lake reservoir – another human-made body of water in this supposedly untrammelled area – Solnit recalls that "where we were walking had once been far under water. ... Boats had once floated above our heads, and catfish had nibbled the land that cracked under our feet, but before that it

⁴¹ Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, 149.

had been grassland” (362). In an unsettling disjunct whereby this land both is and is not (has been, is no longer, but perhaps might yet be) drowned, Solnit sees this place as uncanny, otherworldly, distinct from but connected by its watery, wild state to the Hetch Hetchy reservoir, Julia Parker, and the violence of the park’s capitalist, patriarchal, colonial history. Solnit writes,

it’s not unusual to see fallen trees in water, where they are clearly already dead, or trees that have died where they stood and stand dry and austere, but these trees drowned in place were uncanny, terrifying. Their branches lifted up like imploring hands, their immobility was a curse where land and water themselves so often changed place. They had died of fidelity in an unfaithful landscape and then been buried and unburied, like something in a horror movie (362–63).

The unfaithful landscape – the picture-perfect façade Yosemite uses to hide its most underhanded histories – has led to the death of its trees, a literal eradication of life. That the trees are then “unburied” attests to Yosemite’s disturbing past reawakening via the park’s water – whether the water is there or not. The gothic, anthropomorphised trees, their part in the “horror movie” of the park’s hidden violence, recalls Ken Gelder’s observations that horror provides “ways of defining ... what should be seen (and what should remain hidden).”⁴² Horror, itself part of the unruly complexities of the wild, becomes a way to effectively reveal the violence of the park’s histories. Bringing them to the surface in such a way calls to mind Morton’s “dark ecology,” which “has a dark side embodied not in a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic-sentimental Bambification of sentient beings, but in a ‘goth’ assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world.”⁴³ Dark ecology draws connections at all levels, understanding the destructive powers of ‘isms

⁴² Ken Gelder, *The Horror Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.

⁴³ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, 184–85.

of domination,' and forming a relationship to even the most destroyed/destructive land(scape)s.

Echoing this sentiment, Solnit represents, rather than ignores, the uncanny trees, she sees their “imploring hands” and describes the fate they share with much of this land and its people (that is, to be simultaneously rendered living and dead by museum displays and place names). The drowned and unburied land(scape) – the monstrous places – requires a recalibrated relation to place, because the trees are a presence that will not go away. As David Mogen, Scott Patrick Sanders, and Joanne B. Karpinski assert, “the gothic reality, in its otherness, is irreconcilable with the received reality of the conventional world, but it is nevertheless immanent and present, and it impinges significantly upon the conventional world.”⁴⁴ Awakening the joy of the land(scape) awakens its sadnesses too, and the unburied trees seem to impinge upon Solnit’s experiences of place. Just as she characterises Julia Parker and the drowned Hetch Hetchy land(cape) as “grievously dislocated,” the monstrosity of this description seems to implicate Solnit in a value judgement aligned not with the unruly complexities of wildness, but with the urge to order and control inherent in the wilderness. Yet if, as Donna Haraway asserts, “boundary creatures are, literally, *monsters*, a word that shares more than its root with the word, to *demonstrate*,” Solnit’s gothic account of this place is really another iteration of the revelatory, flowing, and shifting wild character the park wants to erase and Solnit wants to inhabit, celebrate, and re-centre.⁴⁵ Solnit’s narrative, like Julia Parker’s presence, like the unburied trees, actively demonstrates against the dominant culture by drawing dark

⁴⁴ David Mogen, Scott Patrick Sanders and Joanne B. Karpinski, introduction to *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1993), 26.

⁴⁵ Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2 (italics in the original).

ecological connections and appreciating, voicing, those areas of the park deemed too ‘monstrous’ – too living, too changeable, too *present* – for tourists to see.

Wildness Puts Us in Our Place

Wildness, in its shifting, revelatory, character, draws Solnit to new relationships with the Yosemite land(scape). It forces her to rethink her own position in relation to it. Immersing herself within and giving herself over to its waters, Solnit engages in acts of wildness that privilege reciprocal interactions and resist hierarchies imposed by ‘isms of domination.’ Kingsolver explains that “wildness puts us in our place. It reminds us that our plans are small and somewhat absurd. ... Looking out on a clean plank of earth, we can get shaken right down to the bone by the bronze-eyed possibility of lives that are not our own.”⁴⁶ Wildness asks humans to relinquish an elevated position. It asks us to engage with the nonhuman presence of land(scape). As wild, Yosemite’s water is, at once, intimately connected to Solnit’s sense of self, to her sense of place, and elusively, playfully out of the reach of understanding; it is a life not her own, a quality and a place that does not, will not, accommodate her “plans.”

As a place beyond the human, Gilmore asserts, wildness “can facilitate the work of curing the obsessive drive to order, separate, and control.”⁴⁷ Engaging with the unknown elements of the wild is thus another part of Solnit’s ecofeminist ethic activated by Yosemite’s water. Working against the controlling, bordering, mechanising terms of the Wilderness Act, Solnit’s accounts of Yosemite’s water reframe the human-land relationship by acknowledging, even celebrating, its elusive qualities. Solnit’s walk along the Merced River attests to this:

⁴⁶ Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder* (London: Faber, 2002), 40.

⁴⁷ Gilmore, “After the Apocalypse,” 407.

As I followed the river west through the valley, toward sunset, something surprised me every few minutes. The river bent, the valley turned a little more due west and a last ray of sun stretched toward me, a stand of trees gave way to a meadow, a space between the trees opened up a view of a sheer wall or the deep V of the west end turning rosy. The river is a gentle, neglected, beautiful thing, widening into broad mirror, spilling over shallow falls and singing to itself, breaking into halves to encircle an island, writhing, turning, harbouring beautiful groves of broadleaved trees, ripping the soil from under them to expose the great knots of roots like hundred-fingered hands all bare and knobbly knuckled as they clutch the earth, throwing up sand bars and long reaches of polished boulders, gentle backwaters, stands of marsh grass, ducks, a school of large fish hovering motionless in a pool in perfect formation like a fleet of submarines, developing shadowy depths, swimming holes, washing up whitened tree trunks in places it's hard to believe the spring rush must reach, turning in winter into a long skein of icy lace and open pools. No one walks the river but a few fly fishermen (248).

That “something surprise[s] [Solnit] every few minutes” taps into the notion of an unknown, continually evolving land, in which its very life is the thing that renders it impossible to pin down or pigeonhole. This river, like the Hetch Hetchy waterfall, is always moving: the “widening,” “spilling,” “breaking,” “writhing,” “turning,” and “ripping” of the river reveals a continual motion in which the water is always changing, always conjuring a new unknown. As with much of the water Solnit encounters throughout *Savage Dreams*, this river symbolises a peopled history of Yosemite, in which the “hundred-fingered hands” still “clutch the earth.” Akin to the “imploring hands” of the unburied land(scape), this anthropomorphic moment connects people and place in a kind of dark ecological symbiosis. Moreover, Solnit’s anthropomorphic metaphors engage with what Alaimo calls “transcorporeality.” Connecting “across bodies” of people and place, these metaphors speak to the ways human influence is unavoidable even in the furthest ‘wildernesses.’ Alaimo argues, “transcorporeality ... insists that the human is always the very stuff of the messy,

contingent, emergent mix of the material world.”⁴⁸ Framing the uncanny earth in terms of human influence, Solnit fuses not only her self and this place, but humans with *place itself*. Thinking transcorporeally, Solnit uses the Merced River here to gesture towards the as yet unknown connections between people and place, at the same time calling for a celebration of those connections. Thus, water, in its transformative, shifting, cycling state becomes the mode, medium, and metaphor for Solnit’s engagement with what Haraway calls “ongoingness,” a kind of looking-forward to unknown futures without the anxiety and anthropocentrism that usually underpins our understanding of ‘The Future.’⁴⁹ For Haraway, ongoingness is part of “staying with the trouble,” an acknowledgement of the vexed and uncertain impacts of the climate crisis that “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, and meanings.”⁵⁰ Solnit’s wild description of the Merced, its surprising, moving, elusive quality, is emblematic of change, uncertainty, and movement. Situating herself in wild presence alongside the water, Solnit walks towards an ethic of ongoingness drawn from a relearned, connective, wildness.

Multiplicity is a key part of this unknown wild. Solnit’s description contains an awareness of seasonal cycles, of the winter ice and the spring melt, the sunshine and the verdant “groves of broadleaved trees” that signify the perpetual changing of the natural world. Again, these cycles are represented by the water itself, and Solnit is aware of the literal and figurative fluidity of the image she is using. Pamela J.

⁴⁸ Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*, 11

⁴⁹ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Mittlefehldt writes,

water is so mutable that to use it as a metaphor is at best an ephemeral undertaking. Water is illusion: steam, fog, mist. Water is force: storm, torrent, tsunami. Water is solid: jagged ice and silken surface. Water is light: refractions of a million suns, glittering sparks of a distant fire. Water is depth beyond comprehension, cold beyond flame.⁵¹

Every image the water touches – the “polished boulders,” the “swimming holes,” “marsh grass” and “gentle backwaters” – serves to illustrate this diversity, this infinite variety within the (image of the) river. The endless possibilities situated within the natural world, the always changing, always moving land allows Solnit partial access – she walks alongside it – but retains its metaphorical variety within its physical fluidity. The river represents too much at once for Solnit to fully understand; it is not just unknown, it is *unknowable*. As such, the river works in opposition to the aims of Enlightenment science, which purports to ‘know’ the world, as Patrick D. Murphy puts it, through “rationalism, categorization, and classification.”⁵² Enlightenment science is thus built of and upholds various ‘isms of domination.’ As Naomi Klein asserts, “post-Enlightenment Western culture is founded [on] myths about humanity’s duty to dominate a natural world that is believed to be at once limitless and entirely controllable.”⁵³ Reflective of Solnit’s ecofeminist engagement with wildness, then, her depiction of the river’s unknowability proffers an alternative relationship to place

⁵¹ Pamela J. Mittlefehldt, “Writing the Waves, Sounding the Depths: Water as Metaphor and Muse,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/10.1.137>.

⁵² Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 31. See also Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990) and Patricia Fara, *Sex, Botany and Empire: The Story of Carl Linnaeus and Joseph Banks* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2003) for accounts of the ways Enlightenment science is both born of and upholds colonial and patriarchal dominance.

⁵³ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (London: Penguin, 2015), 159.

based not on the dominance and control that characterises Enlightenment knowledge, but on a celebration of the unknown. Falling into step with the river, Solnit engages in what Neimanis refers to “aqueous transcorporeality,” an extension of Alaimo’s term that incites an “ethics of *unknowability*” born of water’s mutability.⁵⁴ It denotes a relation to the other – a person, nonhuman life, the future – that accepts, even utilises, the inability to fully comprehend, predict, or understand. Connecting to, without attempting to ‘know,’ the water, Solnit embeds in this description a notion of reciprocity that rejects the park’s dominant narratives of control, conquest, and detachment, and emulates Kingsolver’s call to look at, relate to, respect, and yet relinquish an understanding of, “lives that are not our own.”

In this description of the Merced River, Solnit situates a new, ecofeminist relationship to place, emphasising wildness over wilderness, change over stasis, and action over inertia. Placing her faith in equal parts in the introspective self and in the powers and life of the land, Solnit arrives in *Savage Dreams* at an attitude to land actively engaged in ongoingness. As part of the land’s ongoingness, this unknown wild allows Solnit to connect the park’s past, present, and future *without* having to ‘know’ what is coming. Asserting that “the inability to remember the past becomes an inability to imagine the future,” Solnit gestures throughout her account of Yosemite to the ways the park’s refusal to acknowledge its debauched past disallows it a future (324). Using water as a vessel for the recovery of the park’s past is therefore part of Solnit’s engagement with ongoingness, and in acknowledging the multi-layered, revealing water-narratives of this land(scape), Solnit imagines futures through her own, ongoing and relational presence in the park. Water in *Savage Dreams* thus comes to stand for the unknown, for connection, and for time, qualities of wildness missing

⁵⁴ Neimanis, “Hydrofeminism,” 95 (*italics in the original*).

from accepted definitions of “wilderness.” Working against these narratives, and moving towards an acceptance of the park’s, the land’s, the future’s unknowability, Solnit displays an ecofeminist effort to uncover those stories that the dominant culture has hidden, attend to the destructive behaviours of that culture, and work to draw connections where that culture is invested in separations.

The Blue of Distance

A Field Guide to Getting Lost further engages with this sense of unknowability. The text covers topics as disparate as species extinction, Solnit’s childhood, the Great Salt Lake, and fifteenth century art history, all of which are pulled together by the idea of “getting lost,” a kind of joyful abandoning-to the unknown which, once again, invokes wildness in Solnit’s accounts of American land(scape)s. Every second chapter of the book is entitled “the blue of distance,” the image of a blue horizon which comes to act as a metaphor that is similar to Yosemite’s water in its mutability, but is further reaching in its qualities of complexity and unknowability; it is somehow wilder than water, and far more elusive. Getting lost in this blue, Solnit claims throughout *A Field Guide*, offers new ways of being in, new ways of thinking in, the environment. As such, I argue that the blue of distance is an image through which Solnit not only describes wildness but *creates* it, by reaching beyond the physical landscape to consider affective or emotional land(scape)s that are as much a part of her ecofeminism as the lands on which she walks. I thus read *A Field Guide*’s wildness in terms of what Josh A. Weinstein calls “ecological humility.” He explains:

Ecological humility is a humility that *recognizes the simultaneous smallness of any one being in relation to the whole, and the impossibility of the whole without its constituent parts*. It is, thus, a form of cosmic humility engendered by, and concerned with, the

interconnection of people and place, living and non-living things, in our lived experience of the world. What is most important here is the recognition of multiple perspectives, which exist without the need for a grand hierarchy.⁵⁵

Understanding our own smallness, but also our own culpability and relationality, is vital to facing a future made uncertain, precarious, by climate crisis. As an extension of the surrendering quality of Solnit's watery interactions in *Savage Dreams*, the blue of distance in *A Field Guide* becomes an ecologically humble symbol that reiterates at once the smallness of Solnit's human presence in wild lands, and the power to change and be changed that sits within her individual body/experience/account of the land(scape). Radically altering her own perspective, Solnit utilises the blue of distance as a wild metaphor throughout *A Field Guide* in order to extend the scope and power of the relearned relationships she locates in the water in *Savage Dreams*.

Solnit walks in *A Field Guide* through the land(scape)s of the American West, most notably the Utah desert and the Great Salt Lake. Understood as wildernesses since European settlement, these places are 'known' to be empty, unliveable, or else have been built up to accommodate a human presence that works against, rather than with, the desert climate (draining groundwater, running air conditioning units, driving gas-guzzling cars for hours across the desert, and so on). This sets up a relation to place engendered by the dominant culture, one that elevates humans above the land rather than asking them to live with(in) it. Consequently, in order to locate this land's wildness, Solnit needs to first lose her 'knowledge' of this land that has been framed by the dominant culture. She writes, "getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing,

⁵⁵ Josh A. Weinstein, "Humility, From the Ground Up: A Radical Approach to Literature and Ecology," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 22, no. 4 (2015): 771, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isv048> (italics in the original).

... the world has become larger than your knowledge of it.”⁵⁶ The answers lie beyond the familiar narrative set out by dominant cultural understandings of landscape. Solnit’s search for wildness thus moves her towards what Haraway calls “situated knowledges,” which refuse dominant – patriarchal, capitalist, colonial, scientific – knowledge structures that posit a singular, disembodied, ‘Objective’ worldview, and instead privilege an embodied, contingent, relational, and often paradoxical knowing-of-the-world. In contrast to dominant cultural uses of “objectivity,” Haraway argues that feminist objectivity “turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility.”⁵⁷ Working against such promises of transcendence, *A Field Guide* proposes getting lost, moving away from or outside these promises. Consequently, Solnit’s vision of the blue of distance is not the same vision of wilderness encouraged by the national park authorities, and it is not the same view of the land that renders it passive, static, and feminine. Instead, Solnit envisions the blue of distance, as an unknown entity, from an embodied, relational perspective that furthers her engagement with wildness in its very epistemological complexity. Working against the various ‘isms of domination’ that render land static and subordinate, Solnit gets lost in the very idea of the blue of distance, proving that “getting lost like that seems like the beginning of finding your way or finding another way” (13). Wildness, as connective, as relearned, as humble, is another way.

Solnit uses a description of fifteenth century painting to explain what she means by “the blue of distance.” She describes the ways “painters become more

⁵⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 22. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

⁵⁷ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 582–3, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

concerned with verisimilitude, with a rendition of the world as it appeared to the human eye, and in those days when the art of perspective was just arriving, they seized upon the blue of distance as another means of giving depth and dimension to their work” (31). Painting a far away, blue-tinted pastoral scene in the backgrounds of their work, these artists used the colour blue to add depth and distance to their pictured worlds by attempting to mimic the blue haze that colours objects on the horizon. The blue of distance thus relates to the elusive, evasive qualities Solnit lends to water in *Savage Dreams*; it is a wild image. In its “verisimilitude” it speaks to the complexities of wildness, making it a mutable image in which/on which to plant various impressions of place. Solnit uses the blue of distance to introduce her account of walking in Utah. She arrives to walk at the Great Salt Lake in a drought year, explaining that the water level had fallen so low upon her arrival that “much of what was ordinarily sea became land, and I went out walking on it towards Antelope Island, which floated above its reflection, a symmetrical solid object like a precious stone, floating in that blue” (35). No longer merely a descriptor for landscape, the blue of distance exists here as a physical feature of the land. Antelope Island is far away, it is part of the blue of distance, and Solnit walks towards it, chasing an embodied experience of an image-made-place. Moving her body into this image, Solnit alters her understanding of the place; it is no longer a distant, viewed wilderness, but a calling, glimmering wild. Describing Antelope Island as a “precious stone,” Solnit implies her desire to get close, to look at its glittering surface. In its twinkling state, the land moves. It is also moved; the drought has altered the terrain. The change in water level directly counters the static understanding of wilderness, and the unpredictability of the waterline attests to this place’s wildness. Solnit’s ability to walk towards the island in the middle of this lake represents another kind of ‘gap’ in the

dominant cultural narrative of this place as a body of water unfit (due to salt levels) for human consumption.

The description of Antelope Island and its newly emerged land connects its spatial and temporal distance on the site of Solnit's body. She explains "I could more or less walk directly toward the island for the miles and hours I was out" (35). The miles and the hours fuse in her description of walking in/on the lake, and she locates this land(scape) in a space-time directly related to her individual experience of the blue of distance. Once again, Solnit's immersive and experiential engagement with the wildness of this land(scape) offers a direct contrast to the notions of distanced objectivity integral to a scientific 'knowledge' of place. Not wishing merely to categorise the island by naming it, Solnit surrenders to its intrigue, and the island draws her towards it. Something of its blue quality pulls her in, echoing Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's idea that "as we readily follow an agreeable object that flies from us, so we love to contemplate blue, not because it advances to us, but because it draws us after it."⁵⁸ Fusing her steps with minutes, Solnit looks towards this place's short and long future, creating, as she does with the water in *Savage Dreams*, a temporal and spatial wild place that has space for the visibility and implications of human interaction with it. This, in turn, allows Solnit to look back: she explains that the basin marks the site of Lake Boneville, a much larger lake whose water line is etched into the mountains and high rocks surrounding the Great Salt Lake (36). Reflecting upon this history, Solnit writes, "ten thousand years or more have passed since that lake ceased to exist, but its ring all around the landscape insisted that where I walked was once deep underwater, just as the flotsam and soft sand reminded me

⁵⁸ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. by Charles Lock Eastlake (London: Cass, 1967), 311.

that not so long ago I could have rowed or swum where I was walking” (36). The land here is both below and above water, and Solnit’s account of the recent and the ancient shifts of this place describes both a geological newness and an ephemerality that counters the idea of static, unchanging wildernesses. In turn, Solnit’s walk towards Antelope Island represents an active, bodily *doing* of this countering; literally resituating her body in a land(scape) that is usually inaccessible, Solnit enters the fantastical realm of the blue of distance, and her whole perspective of and relationship to this land(scape) shifts as a result.

As in Yosemite’s water, here Solnit’s body engenders this shift. Walking towards the blue of distance, towards Antelope Island’s shimmering image, Solnit uses her body to bring the background into the fore, to move the blue of distance closer to her embodied, situated knowledge of this place. Plumwood argues, “one of the most common forms of denial of women and nature is what I will term backgrounding, their treatment as providing the background to a dominant, foreground sphere of recognised achievement or causation.”⁵⁹ Walking towards the island, and reconceiving of places as wild, as inhabited, as ‘timed,’ Solnit works against backgrounding in order to celebrate and uphold the connective power of her new land(scape) experience. The land(scape) she describes here connects across time, it gestures at once towards its geological history and its peopled present, implying – via Solnit’s foregrounded self, the shifting nature of the water-land, and its relation to the metaphorical, representational possibilities of the blue of distance – an active investment in this land’s ongoingness. Solnit thus becomes what Arnold Berleant calls an “engaged participant,” the opposite of the distanced, ‘objective’ scientific observer. Berleant explains, “entering and participating in the landscape requires full sensory

⁵⁹ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 21.

involvement. As an engaged participant, we approach the painterly landscape influenced by our meanings and our perceptual involvement.”⁶⁰ Solnit’s bodily presence changes the painterly landscape; she moves to situate herself within the blue of distance, to become a part of the wild land(scape) in order to eschew the distancing requirements of wilderness.

Yet the island remains physically out of reach: “Antelope Island, golden in the harsh light, would get larger and clearer as I walked but always remain ahead like a dream or a hope. The water that remained was pale blue and on that scorching October afternoon a pale sky met it far away, the distinction between water and air hard to make out” (36–37). Suspended just beyond a fully embodied experience, some of the blue of distance remains outside of Solnit’s knowledge, unreachable and unforegroundable, and Solnit is caught between wanting to reach the island and wanting to hold onto its shimmering, distant image. Her description of the island is thus marked by what Haraway calls “the split and contradictory self,” “the one who can interrogate positionings and be accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic imaginings that change history.”⁶¹ Antelope Island is both rational – it exists on maps, it is a part of the cultural definition of the Great Salt Lake – and it is fantastical – it is a precious stone, a blue tint on the horizon, an impression of a place Solnit both does and does not want to approach. The island mirrored in Solnit’s contradictory self reflects the same collapse between “within” and “around” that characterises the wildness of Yosemite’s water. Thus, as both land and water, as both a place and an impression of place, the island represents a duality in which Solnit is able to anchor the epistemological crises and contradictions evoked by

⁶⁰ Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992), 6.

⁶¹ Haraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 586.

the blue of distance. The gap opened up by the island allows Solnit to simultaneously draw attention to and dismantle the imaged, viewed understanding of landscape. In a static, ‘untrammelled’ view of this place, the land that allows Solnit to walk towards Antelope Island would not exist. In a commitment to ongoingness exemplified by the dream and hope of this place, then, Solnit’s bodily immersion invokes, even enacts, wildness which, in turn, calls for an ecologically humble relationship with this place that accepts its unknowability rather than ‘knowing’ it in the ways the dominant culture – exemplified by colonial maps, scientific explanations, museum plaques – claims.

The land around Antelope Island lacks the temporal stasis needed to render it a wilderness as defined by the Wilderness Act. It is “temporary land” that will be “drowned in winter” (36). In contrast to the picture-perfect wildernesses, this land lives, it shifts and changes with the weather. Drought is the reason for this land, and Solnit’s inclusion of this fact gestures towards the fragility of these land(scape)s, influenced as they are by the exploitation and degradation wrought by the dominant culture. Yet, by framing the island in terms of the shimmering blue of distance, Solnit points not only to the devastating effects of human intervention, but to ways the land’s fragility may also signal its ability to recuperate a sense of itself beyond an anthropocentric understanding of the planet. Explaining how ongoingness relates to the climate crisis, Haraway writes, “I am not interested in reconciliation or restoration, but I am deeply committed to the more modest possibilities of partial recuperation and getting on together.”⁶² Antelope Island’s shoreline will shift, and Solnit never makes it clear whether this is to do with destructive human intervention or the natural movement of water levels. What she does make clear is her “getting on” with this

⁶² Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 10.

place both physically, as she moves through it, and emotionally, as she notices and appreciates its “golden” qualities, as she accepts and contemplates the unknowable shifts between “water” and “air” that draw her across this temporary land. Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell, and Robert Hudson argue that

affective relations with landscape are always political, for they scale humanity to the world, draw us intimately to place and time and change so that we might sense our own vulnerability as susceptible parts of the greater whole, and ultimately perhaps to comprehend that ‘to care for the world is to keep something of it close.’⁶³

Solnit sees Antelope Island as an extension of the blue of distance, an unknown, unreachable land. Yet, as an “engaged participant,” she keeps it *affectively* close, she cares for it by writing it, by witnessing it, and by staying with its contingent, changeable character. She locates these kinds of fragile knowledges within the elusive blue of distance that draws her to the island in the first place. She thus scales her self to this experience, revelling in the land’s temporary nature and giving herself over to the captivating images towards which she walks. Immersing herself in this shifting land(scape), Solnit gestures towards a reciprocal and shifting emotional connection that may be the answer to human relations to place going forward in this uncertain era.

Feeling Blue

After all, “blue” is a feeling. It calls to and reflects our emotions, and in this affective pull Solnit locates an alternative relationship to place than that offered by dominant cultural appreciations of wilderness. Götz Hoeppe suggests that “contemplating the

⁶³ Christine Berberich, Neil Campbell and Robert Hudson, introduction to *Affective Landscapes in Literature, Art, and Everyday Life: Memory, Place and the Senses* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 16.

blue sky may be a first step toward understanding the atmosphere as a fragile and malleable realm that we must quickly learn to care for if we want to have a future on Earth,” gesturing towards the importance of affective bonds to place, of re-establishing relationships to the planet beyond both exploitation and distanced wilderness preservation.⁶⁴ The blue of distance, then, draws out these affective bonds simply by being a thing to be contemplated. Solnit explains,

the color of that distance is the color of an emotion, the color of solitude and of desire, of there seen from here, the color of where you are not. And the color of where you can never go. For the blue is not in the place those miles away at the horizon, but in the atmospheric distance between you and the mountains (29–30).

The blue of distance is an internally, affectively rendered wildness, an acknowledgement of the earth’s complexities, unruliness, and ongoingness that is *felt* as well as witnessed. Reflecting upon the desire to know, to reach, the blue, Solnit calls for a “slight adjustment of perspective,” an adjustment that furthers the relearning exemplified by her switch from wilderness to wildness:

We treat desire as a problem to be solved, address what desire is for and focus on that something and how to acquire it rather than on the nature and the sensation of desire, though often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing. I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation in its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed? For something of this longing will, like the blue of distance, only be relocated, not assuaged, by acquisition and arrival, just as the mountains cease to be blue when you arrive among them and the blue instead tints the next beyond (30–31).

⁶⁴ Götz Hoeppe, *Why the Sky is Blue: Discovering the Color of Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 290.

Celebrating the “nature and sensation of desire,” Solnit places emphasis not on reaching the blue, but on inhabiting the affective resonance of the colour itself. Like the blue that tints the next beyond, Solnit sees desire as a state, an emotion, that is an achievement in its own right. “If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up,” Solnit suggests, new relationships to place emerge. Suddenly, it is not about physically situating the body in the land(scape), but about affectively immersing oneself in the experience of seeing/feeling/noticing the place. The “blue of longing” thus becomes a kind of place in itself, not one bounded and known, but joyfully *unknown*, malleable and personal. As such, Solnit pinpoints in desire an opportunity to relinquish the dominant urge to know, control, and contain, and instead develop a situated knowledge of this place based on *not* possessing the landscape. “Looking across the distance” but accepting your inability to cross it becomes an act of ecological humility, re-scaling the land(scape) on ecofeminist terms. Solnit emphasises her own smallness – both physical and epistemological – in order to contemplate the blue of distance’s wildness as an entity outside of, beyond, her own experiences of this land(scape). In its wildness, it exists in the perpetual “next beyond.”

These affective relationships to wild places are full of contradictions. Far from the picture-framed wilderness, whose emptiness should inspire awe and wonder, but never sorrow, the blue of distance conjures an indescribable combination of affective resonances. Solnit explains, “the emotion stirred by the landscape is piercing, a joy close to pain when the blue is deepest on the horizon or the clouds are doing those spectacular fleeting things so much easier to recall than to describe” (119–120). Peace, awe, wonder, and surprise converge in the deep blue, yet Solnit is unable to accurately

describe her experience; she is speechless. This speechlessness relates to the shifting relationship Solnit engenders with her representation of the blue of distance. Gilmore argues, “the moment of loss of speech is a dramatization of the more general limits of language in grasping the unruly complexity I am calling wildness.”⁶⁵ Once again, the image’s mutability taps into something the ‘known’ wilderness deliberately erases; an introspective, irreducible experience that relies on tangled emotions and incomplete visual descriptions; the blue of distance furthers the ethics of unknowability in Solnit’s work by emphasising the necessarily contradictory, confusing, unrepresentable relations to place needed to contend with uncertain, messy futures.

This messiness is surprisingly beautiful. Yi-Fu Tuan explains that “the most intense aesthetic experiences of nature are likely to catch one by surprise. Beauty is felt as the sudden contact with an aspect of reality that one has not known before; it is the antithesis of the acquired taste for certain landscapes or the warm feeling for places that one knows well.”⁶⁶ The blue of distance is a necessarily affective-aesthetic experience, one that functions in opposition to the “acquired taste” for landscape. This pits it directly against the wilderness which, as Greg Garrard reminds us, represents “a universe reducible to an assemblage of parts functioning according to regular laws that men could, in principle, know in their entirety.”⁶⁷ Existing firmly outside of this kind of ‘knowing,’ the blue of distance acts as an affective and representational tool for the recognition and creation of wild experiences beyond those prescribed by the dominant narrative. In line with Haraway’s claim that “efforts to come to linguistic terms with the non-representability, historical contingency, artefactuality, and yet

⁶⁵ Gilmore, “After the Apocalypse,” 403.

⁶⁶ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 94.

⁶⁷ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2012), 69.

spontaneity, necessity, fragility, and stunning profusions of ‘nature’ can help us refigure the kind of persons we might be,” Solnit’s accounts of her internal, affectively rendered relationships to place via the blue of distance speak to the contingent and necessarily autobiographical qualities of wildness.⁶⁸ That is, Solnit’s relationship to the blue of distance is personal, it is rendered internally, but it stands also for an expansive, inclusive relation to place based on accepting and celebrating failures, contradictions, and worries, all the while joyfully contemplating the earth’s beauty. If, as Terry Tempest Williams asserts, “beauty is not optional, but essential to our survival,” Solnit’s descriptions of the blue of distance privilege an affective relation to place that takes into account the unruly complexities of its wild character.⁶⁹ Thus wildness, as affective, counters the emotionally distancing effects of wilderness.

As wild, the blue is felt before it is (even partially) understood. It reflects Rachel Carson’s claim that “it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*. If facts are the seeds that later produce knowledge and wisdom, then the emotions and the impressions of the senses are the fertile soil in which the seeds must grow.”⁷⁰ The feelings incited by the blue are what prompt Solnit both to walk towards it, *and* to accept its unreachability. In this sense, just as Yosemite’s water creates a gap into which Solnit and her newly located wildness can slip, the blue exists in a kind of loop indicative of wildness’ more elusive, ephemeral qualities. William Gass describes a collapse in “blue” itself, whereby “*blue*, the word and the condition, the color and the act, contrive to contain one another, as if the bottle of the genii were its belly.”⁷¹ The

⁶⁸ Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 3.

⁶⁹ Terry Tempest Williams, *The Open Space of Democracy* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2009), 8.

⁷⁰ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder: A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 49 (*italics in the original*).

⁷¹ William H. Gass, *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2014), 11.

blue doubles back, it expands and contracts in one breath. It is, as in wildness, somehow both within and around, and somewhere between both. Solnit describes this collapse by framing it in terms of getting lost: “this blue is the light ... that does not touch us, does not travel the whole distance, the light that gets lost, gives us the beauty of the world, so much of which is in the color blue” (29). Blue loops back on itself, as Solnit first describes the beauty of the blue, and then reads blue as a generator *of* beauty – as though it is both the cause and effect of an affective bond to distant places. In this sense, the blue is an example of what Morton calls “ecognosis,” “a knowing that knows itself. Knowing in a loop – a *weird* knowing.”⁷² He continues, “in the term *weird* there flickers a dark pathway between causality and the aesthetic dimension, between doing and appearing, a pathway that dominant Western philosophy has blocked and suppressed.”⁷³ The blue represents a kind of ecological knowing that is based on feeling, on an affective-aesthetic draw that goes beyond the detached, untrammelled view of the wilderness to an introspective, deep appreciation of the wild. In this blue, then, Solnit situates an extension of the wildness she locates in Yosemite’s water; more than merely documenting the wild in wilderness places, Solnit lands on a symbol that, through its unruly, multifaceted weirdness, is involved in the very creation of this wildness.

Part of the blue’s wildness thus lies in what is just beyond the reach of ‘knowledge’; it is light that does *not* arrive, that we cannot *know*, but that we know in our unknowingness. This weirdness, this loop, relates to Nicola King’s observation that “paradoxical ‘knowing’ and ‘not knowing’ is the position of any autobiographical narrator, who, in the present moment of the narration, possesses the knowledge that

⁷² Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 5 (italics in the original).

⁷³ Ibid.

she did not have ‘then,’ in the moment of experience.”⁷⁴ As necessarily part of her autobiographical narrative, the wildnesses Solnit describes in both texts – the embodied experience of the water and the affective relations to the colour blue – hinge on this fragile balance, this simultaneity, this messiness. In this jumble of emotions and effects, Solnit creates a place that allows for, even encourages multifarious responses to it, a kind of stacked up involvement in a place’s topography and beauty, its physicality and its symbolic resonance, that culminate repeatedly in emotional or affective responses to land(scape).

David Crouch describes “feeling” in similar terms to the ways I am using wildness, identifying a “whirl or a complexity, the multiplicity of our feelings-memories-affects-emotions.”⁷⁵ Combining affect and memory, Crouch renders feeling temporal; its complexity – akin to wildness’ complexity – relies on layers of meaning, memory, and experience. Framed in such a way, every time Solnit sees the blue – and, consequently, every time we read a new blue – she brings with it all of the blues written and seen – and read – before, creating complex and shifting layers of feeling-response. And, she asserts, places themselves work the same way:

Place, which is always spoken of as though it only counts when you’re present, possesses you in its absence, takes on another life as a sense of place, a summoning in the imagination with all the atmospheric effect and association of a powerful emotion. The places inside matter as much as the ones outside ... there is a place where sadness and joy are not distinct, where all emotion lies together, a sort of ocean into which the tributary streams of distinct emotions go, a faraway deep inside (118–19).

Lawrence Buell argues, “place-sense is a kind of palimpsest of serial place-

⁷⁴ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 2.

⁷⁵ David Crouch, afterword to *Affective Landscapes*, 240.

experiences.”⁷⁶ Sense of place relies on emotional memory; it is a presence beyond the physical place. This place is “inside,” it is a feeling-response of an individual, introspective, subjective experience of place. Framed in terms of wildness, this feeling-response exists precisely because of the complexities of place, complexities that are different for everyone. Once again, as Plumwood argues, a universalised category of “humanity” is one reserved for the dominant culture’s evasive, white-washed characterisation of wilderness.⁷⁷ In contrast, Solnit’s wild sense of place here is deeply individual, introspective, and affectively bound.

Nevertheless, the expansive emotional range of the blue also indicates an inclusivity that cultivates a collective experience of wildness; blue is, as Michel Pastoureau asserts, “less symbolically ‘marked’ than other colors,” and thus open to a collective comingling of feeling.⁷⁸ Blue’s mutability, like water’s in *Savage Dreams*, is what allows Solnit to represent the multifaceted quality of wildness. And this mutability means Solnit is able to count on her readers’ understandings of complexity. As a symbol that relies on an expansive imaginary, the blue of distance calls upon both the individual and the collective response to the image and, in turn, the places Solnit uses it to describe. Writing the blue of distance in such expansive terms, Solnit reaches out to her readers’ feelings. *A Field Guide* thus reflects Ammons’ claim that

unless evacuated of all connection to our lives, humanities study stirs up powerful feelings. It raises profound and often upsetting questions about the meaning of life, the social systems invented by human beings, our treatment of ourselves and each other, and our relationship to all other living beings and the earth.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Malden: Wiley, 2005), 73.

⁷⁷ Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 21.

⁷⁸ Michel Pastoureau, *Blue: The History of a Colour* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 180.

⁷⁹ Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 33.

Unwilling to wholly universalise the affective resonance of blue, Solnit instead layers multiple figurative representations of the colour and the emotion(s) it incites. She draws upon the very quality of emotion, of feeling, in order to forge relationships, connections, between people and place. Far from the distancing character of the untrammelled, inert wilderness, the blue of distance's wildness resonates because of its affective proximity, its resonance beyond itself, its power as metaphor. The blue incites ecological humility. It pulls you/us/Solnit into a reciprocal relationship whereby its very representation relies on an active engagement with place-sense that comes not from exterior human definitions, such as the Wilderness Act, but from introspective, affect impressions of the very unknowability of place that draw upon highly personal yet surprisingly broad impressions of the land(scape). Redefining the very representations of these places, Solnit's blue of distance thus works towards reframing or relearning her/our relationships to place from the site of the text itself.

Terra Incognita

In this sense, Solnit's blue of distance asks us to 'read' the land(scape). This takes the form of layers of metaphor, returning to affective meditations and accounts of autobiographical interactions with place. These are variously framed by the blue of distance. Furthering the implications this blue has for reading or interpreting the land(scape), Solnit figures the Utah land in which she walks in terms of "terra incognita." Terra incognita, the blank space on the map, signifies an unknown surrounded by the dominant cultural sense of the 'known,' bounded, controlled wilderness. By relating her discussion of terra incognita to the blue of distance, Solnit connects the ephemerality of the blue to the "empty" spaces on maps in order to

highlight the wild qualities and situated knowledges latent in both. She writes, “the phrase was common on old maps ... and is seldom found now. Between words is silence, around ink whiteness, behind every map’s information is what’s left out” (161). Solnit is writing in a ‘known’ world, a world where categories, labels, and boundaries order the universe. Directly related to Enlightenment science’s focus on categorisation is the colonial project of cartographic delineation. Once the land was ‘emptied’ of its indigenous inhabitants (as Solnit recounts in *Savage Dreams*), white settlers embarked on a project of mapping, ‘knowing,’ the wilderness landscape.⁸⁰ Once again countering these dominant narratives, Solnit seeks out the “between,” “behind,” and “around” places that exist outside of this known, mapped, landscape. Between, behind, and around are themselves wild qualities, based in the complex, messy, living land(scape) that resists fixity either on the map or in the cultural imagination. Thus, by choosing a cartographic metaphor, Solnit engages in similar acts of resistance to those that saw her submerge her body in Yosemite’s waters; it is an engagement with what is behind or beyond the immediately visible/‘known’ that allows her to move towards an experience of wildness. Cartography in *A Field Guide* therefore works in terms of John Pickles’ assertion that “like the map, the landscape is a particularly good example of a ‘text’ which has been presumed to require a straightforward literal reading, but which actually poses great problems of interpretation and understanding.”⁸¹ ‘Reading’ the land, the wild, in terms of this unknown, Solnit locates within the places she walks and the lands she represents an alternative to the bounded, categorised landscapes the dominant culture creates; she

⁸⁰ See Geoff King, *Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1996), 137–166.

⁸¹ John Pickles, *A History of Spaces: Cartographic Reason, Mapping, and the Geo-Coded World* (London: Routledge, 2004), 54.

creates new maps, charts new paths for relearning her relationship to these places.

Solnit returns to her description of Antelope Island in her account of terra incognita, once again utilising an image that suggests an ecofeminist ethic that runs throughout her work. She writes, “the terra incognita spaces on maps say that knowledge too is an island surrounded by oceans of the unknown, but whether we are on land or water is another story” (168). If water represents an unknown, or a blank space, Solnit’s walking on land where water once was – and water will soon be again – means she walks on a precarious and temporary knowledge as well as temporary land. Mirroring in many ways the water-made-land in *Savage Dreams*, Solnit’s account of Antelope Island’s temporary, drought-wrought formation once again points to the ways she uses the emergence of new lands – lands that subsequently exist outside of the timeless or temporally static dominant narrative – to describe a living wildness in which the shifting and changing topography is something to be celebrated.

In between the usual edge of the Great Salt Lake and the shores of Antelope Island, terra incognita emerges as a physically rendered blue of distance, and Solnit seeks to situate herself affectively within it. She writes, “miles and miles of what had not long ago been lake had become a puzzle-patchwork of shallow pools and damp and dry sand, shallow lagoons of clear water, long fingers of sand that stretched toward the island and its reflection in the deeper blue water beyond” (35). Solnit depicts a land that shifts and reforms. Sometimes sand, sometimes water, this temporary place represents a literal gap in which Solnit locates a new, mutable, wildness. As “temporary,” this in-between place exists on no maps of the area, it moves beyond the static, untrammelled understanding of wilderness that maps the shores of the lake and the island at its centre. Instead of being merely an unimportant edge-image, terra incognita here is a key part of Solnit’s relation to place, of reading or “mapping” her

own situated knowledge. Denis Cosgrove writes, “‘blank’ spaces within the frame ... generate and reflect aesthetic and epistemological anxiety; they are thus the favoured space of cartouches, scales, keys, and other technical, textual, or decorative devices which thereby become active elements within the mapping process.”⁸² Dominant cultural understandings of place would have terra incognita filled in with more “useful” information in order to disguise the epistemological failures they indicate. Yet, for Solnit, epistemological uncertainty signals a wildness to be celebrated. As an extension of the blue of distance’s contradictory, fluid, affective and metaphorical uses, Solnit recuperates the unknowability of terra incognita spaces in her ecofeminist reframing of senses of place.

As such, her journey towards Antelope Island is an exercise in presence, in experience. Far from achieving a ‘goal,’ it results in a joyfully wrought epistemological and representational failure: “Antelope Island grew closer and closer, larger and clearer, but finally there was a point at which there was no going on ... I do not know what I would have done upon arrival. And I’m not sure the island was meant to be arrived at, for up close its glowing gold would have dissolved into scrub and soil” (40). The island is unreachable; Solnit situates herself instead in the desire she relies upon to achieve a slight adjustment in perspective, the same adjustment that renders her switch from wilderness to wildness. To reach the island, to map the temporary land, would reduce this land(scape) to another version of landscape formulated by the dominant, divisive forces of capitalist patriarchy; up close, the land loses its shimmering draw and becomes a scrubby, ‘known’ place without the affective resonance of the blue wild. Explaining the ways light bouncing off an object’s molecules creates colour, Victoria Finlay advises, “think not so much of something

⁸² Denis Cosgrove, introduction to *Mappings* (London: Reaktion, 1999), 10.

‘being’ a colour but of it ‘doing’ a colour.”⁸³ The land that appears in the drought-ridden Great Salt Lake is “doing” the blue of distance. *A Field Guide* is not merely recording but enacting a new wildness by noticing and reflecting upon the sticky emotional relations to place Solnit finds when stepping outside, beyond, the usual understanding of wilderness. No longer viewing but feeling, no longer describing but envisioning, Solnit, as a writer, *creates* this blue of distance, and situates within it a (literally) female-centred, connection-orientated narrative of the land that accepts its unknowability and gives the place itself an agency it has been denied by the dominant narrative: the blue of distance is active in this text.

Solnit finds herself affectively and representationally situated in the blue of distance, within its weirdness, within its complexities and contradictions, all of which are manifested in an unsettling change in the land(scape)’s scale. She writes,

I looked down and the scalloped edges of land and water lost scale and looked like the world seen from an airplane ... From miles up in the sky, the land looks like a map of itself, but without any of the points of reference that make maps make sense. The oxbows and mesas out the window are anonymous, unfathomable, a map without words (40).

Calling to mind Baudrillard’s claim that “the territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – that engenders the territory,” the map here is visible before the land itself is comprehensible; it is another rendition of the weird knowing, the ecognosis engendered in the text by felt resonances of the blue of distance.⁸⁴ In the uneasy shift in scale that renders the land a map, that situates her in bodily relation to weird terra incognita, Solnit loses the ability to ground herself in the land(scape). The description

⁸³ Victoria Finlay, *Colour: Travels Through the Paintbox* (London: Sceptre, 2002), 6.

⁸⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1 (italics in the original).

of flight lifts her feet off the ground, and the intangibility of the image leaves her nothing to hold onto. Like the blue of distance, the land darts out of reach, both physically – the land looks far away – and representationally – the land is a map without words, without its informational anchors. Yet the fact that this image is devoid of the “points of reference” usually expected from a map pushes it into an abstraction whereby the land, and the metaphor used to describe it, are stripped of their cultural connotations; the land is no longer a wilderness, and the map, which no longer conforms to the rules of the dominant culture, subsequently no longer signifies that wilderness. By situating herself at once within and above the land she describes, Solnit incites a multitude of visions that literalise the “slight adjustment in perspective” that underlies the shift from wilderness to wildness. Subverting the accepted ‘factuality’ of the map – much in the same way as she emphasises the positive fragility in this land’s newness – Solnit emphasises the importance of envisioning land(scape)s outside of the dominant frameworks of conquest, ownership, or knowledge. Her very perspective on this place is wild: complex, shifting, connective, and adjusted. Solnit thus embraces unknowability, she engages in an act of ecological humility by stopping short of the need to know, and letting the land act upon her. Refusing to dominate this place with names and human scales, Solnit instead surrenders to its scale-less wildness.

Engaging in this unknowability involves turning back, acknowledging the importance not just of not knowing, but of not needing to *attempt* to know:

I walked back. ... Near where I’d started there was one more surprise in that landscape: a series of shallow indentations where water had dried into salt crystals. One was a carpet of roses, one a heap of straws, one a field of snowflakes, all made of muddy salt, though when I tried to cut away a small cluster of the pale brown roses to take with me, they immediately became less beautiful. Some things we have only as

long as they remain lost, some things are not lost only so long as they are distant (41).

Like the cracked mud-map viewed from a great height, the salt crystals are mediated through images that rely on a shift in scale and perspective. The wonder of this moment exemplifies Solnit's creative investment in wildness, in what might be possible when lands are relinquished from their typical – untrammelled, pristine, static – description and allowed, in contrast to the 'isms of domination' that work to define and categorise, to remain elusive. In Solnit's desire to carry home a piece of the land, there are echoes of the desire inherent in the blue of distance, in her senses of place, a simultaneous yearning for and acceptance of the unreachable. The very nature of these things is to disappear up close, and their importance lies not in their capital value, but in their existence outside of or beyond human experiences of them. When Solnit removes one cluster of crystals from the rest, they dissolve. She has engaged in a similar act of separation and dissection that characterises the wilderness, and the land(scape) refuses to comply; the land itself resists the dominant forces that claim to 'know' it.

Here, Solnit arrives at an unknowability that may actually hark back to earlier understandings of wilderness in America. Speaking to the history of conquest and dominance in the American landscape, Cosgrove writes, "the experience of those who actually confronted American nature was more frequently of its enormous scale and energy: the endlessness of its forests, the height and force of its waterfalls, the dimensions and fury of its storms."⁸⁵ The sheer scale of this landscape was a threat to be tamed, and 'civilising' the landscape was, in many ways, an exercise in reducing

⁸⁵ Denis Cosgrove, *Geography and Vision: Seeing, Imagining, and Representing the World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 93.

its scale. In upending the scale of the land – in rendering the crystals roses or collections of snowflakes – Solnit resists the controlling efforts the dominant culture took to alter this wilderness and thus alter the very definition of the term. It is important, then, that this land be left intact. Acknowledging that the “brown roses” “immediately became less beautiful” when separated from the land and crystals around them, Solnit creates a tangible image of the importance of cultivating and protecting connections within the land that sit outside of both a purified aesthetic experience – a trip to the wilderness – and an exploitative, monetary relationship – land as resource. In a moment that calls to mind that catch-phrase of backpackers, “take only memories, leave only footprints,” Solnit realises that for this place to thrive and continue, she must simply leave it alone.

This is not the same action as that proposed by the Wilderness Act, though. Solnit is not leaving this place “untrammelled,” it is not pristine and static, and she has already proven its fluid changeability. Instead, Solnit’s depiction of this land is wild. It is deliberately multidimensional: the intimacy of the distance is contradictory, the intricately woven metaphors of the crystals, the roses, and the overarching blue of distance represents an imaginative mapping, and the openness of the space she represents suggests a resistance to the boundary-forming nature of cartography and wilderness designation. Humbly giving herself over to the complexities of this land, Solnit does not attempt to know, to pigeonhole the salt crystals. She piles images up in layers, stacking metaphors in order to expose the fallacy of a singular interpretation of an inert or static landscape. This land is, at once, the roses and the salt crystals, a map, and a destination or location for Solnit’s walking. Solnit engages in ongoingness here, by showing the land(scape) forming and reforming itself through creative figurative combinations. Solnit’s repeated representations of/through the blue of

distance utilise the land's features as new images to promote and protect its life beyond her own, or humanity's own, use for it.

In this sense, Solnit creates with/in the blue of distance what Williams calls the "open space of democracy," a land "not interested in hierarchies but in networks and systems where power is circular, not linear; a power reserved not for an entitled few, but shared and maintained by many."⁸⁶ Opening out the land into this democratic vision, Solnit enacts a dynamic, reciprocal relationship to place that takes into account the flux and flow of its wildness, and is interested in its ongoingness as a place that both does and does not need/relate to her. Wildness, via terra incognita and the blue of distance, is created in a connective representational cycle in which the land forms Solnit's impression of it, which forms the wild land, and so on. In this looped, affective relation to place, Solnit locates the unruly complexities of even *her response to* wildness, and renders this representational giving-over part of her relearned relationship to place.

Conclusion: Wild Possibilities

At the end of *A Field Guide*, Solnit turns to the nonhuman inhabitants of newly wild land(scape)s, explicitly contemplating lives that are not her own and finding her place in/through the wild. Solnit walks in the county in which she grew up, yet sees it through new eyes, contemplates a new wildness, when looking out for its animal inhabitants. Making what Haraway calls "oddkin" – connective relationships with nonhuman others – Solnit reads her childhood home through the endurance and resurgence of its nonhuman population. Haraway asserts, "staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations

⁸⁶ Williams, *The Open Space of Democracy*, 59

and combinations.”⁸⁷ Turning in the final pages of her text to the animal inhabitants of the wildernesses surrounding her, Solnit collaborates across species boundaries to solidify the situated knowledges that have led, finally, to a celebratory, connective relationship with wild places. She explains, “I began to see a picture I had not before, of all the animals who had hovered in the doorway of disappearance and then returned to this place” (203–4). Solnit is telling not a story of destruction – though, she reminds us, destruction and extinction have happened here – but one of renewal, of the future. The animals are part of ongoingness, engaging in recuperative and defiant acts of *living* in a place that has been ‘preserved’ by the dominant culture’s acts of emptying, erasing, and eradicating human and nonhuman inhabitants alike. That animals have returned to this place renders it not an empty wilderness, but an inhabited wild place, a place through which and from which to imagine a future of embodied and vital relationships between and across people, nonhumans, and place.

Engaging in the same temporally connective acts that characterise her accounts of Yosemite’s wildness, Solnit relates this land’s futurity to her own past – she looks back to look forward. Amongst her descriptions of the returning animals, Solnit recounts her own father’s involvement in protecting and rejuvenating this land. Finding his name in the index of a book on local geography, Solnit recalls a childhood marred by difficult relationships with her parents (discussed further in chapter three). Yet while she alludes to an unhappy upbringing, Solnit situates this brief personal narrative within one that relates more broadly to the land’s hopeful future. She writes, “terrible things were happening in that house, but they were tied to the redemption happening on the larger scale of the county, which was in part reaction to the violent erasures going on across the country and the world” (206). Drawing connections

⁸⁷ Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 4.

between her angry father and the wild land(scape) in which she now walks, Solnit uses her own past to gesture towards the land's ongoingness.

Identifying a chain of events that have led, among other things, to the planned return of an elk herd, Solnit does not forgive the damaging or destructive behaviours that meant the elk had to be returned in the first place, but she does emphasise the importance now of looking forward. Thus, on the final page of *A Field Guide*, Solnit looks out into the blue of distance one last time:

Most of [the elk] live out on the remotest peninsula of this remote place, a spit of land like a north-pointing finger, segregated from the rest of the world by a ten-foot-tall ring of cyclone fencing across its knuckle, a peninsula at whose tip I had realized that the end of the world could be a place as well as a time. ... Their antlers looked like a forest rising up. The end of the world was wind-scoured but peaceful, black cormorants and red starfish on wave-washed dark rocks below a sandy bluff, and beyond them all the sea spreading far and then farther (206).

As with so many iterations of the blue of distance, this final image refuses Solnit embodied access to it; she is separated from it by a fence. What remains, then, is an affective connection. She pauses in contemplation at the edge of the text, of the land(scape). And if this image at the end of the text is the end of the world, Solnit renders this recovered, spatiotemporally situated image of the/a future *hopeful*. The elk are living harmoniously, the place is “peaceful.” Likening their antlers to a “forest rising up” gestures at once to the longevity of their presence – forests, when left alone, have the potential to regenerate, and will outlive any human – and to the defiance of their vitality. The elk, and the figurative forest, are acting against the forced passivity of their confinement to the wilderness. Beyond this defiant, temporally bound and forward-looking image, is the sea. On the peninsula – itself something that stretches

forward – Solnit looks across the ocean to the furthest reaching blue horizon yet. In the final lines of *A Field Guide*, we are wrapped in the bluest of blue images, standing at the edge of the most unknowable future, yet far from being frightening, threatening, or disheartening, this is an image of peace and hope drawn from the connective powers of wildness. If “the future of the planet ... depends on relearning our relationship to the earth,” Solnit teaches us here to look beyond the known and proximal wilderness, and out to the unruly, contingent, and troublesome wild to something beyond the human.⁸⁸

Rewriting the wilderness, figuring such places instead in terms of wildness, Solnit enacts in *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide* a commitment to land(scape) that goes beyond the dominant cultural understanding of it. The encroaching climate crisis lurks below the surface of both texts, as Solnit gestures towards the need to re-relate to place in times of change – both physical and epistemological. In *Hope in the Dark*, Solnit asserts that “hope is the story of uncertainty, of coming to terms with the risk involved in not knowing what comes next.”⁸⁹ Uncertainty is part of the wild, part of this new relation to place; it is necessarily unknowable, and in reaching towards the land(scape)’s future, Solnit enacts a hopeful relationship to place that goes beyond her knowledge of it. Resisting the terms of the Wilderness Act, refusing the dominant culture’s urge to control, to know, to freeze these places in timeless, static emptiness, Solnit locates her new relationship to the planet in her giving-over-to the uncertainties that greet her at the edge of the peninsula. As Solnit looks out onto/into the future at the end of *A Field Guide*, she gestures towards a celebration of land(scape)s and their communities that need not rely on wholly positive, intact, and protected landscapes,

⁸⁸ Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 165.

⁸⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 7.

but that allow for a celebratory, hopeful experience that understands the necessity of staying with the trouble, of acknowledging environmental damage but working to shift the perspectives on those places, and reforming reciprocal, humble connections to places that understand them beyond the rigidly prescribed terms of the dominant culture.

Her work, in its repositioned, ecofeminist relationship to the planet, echoes Patrick D. Murphy's questions, "what if instead of alienation we posited *relation* as the primary mode of human-human and human-nature interaction without conflating difference, particularity, and other specificities? What if we worked from a concept of relational difference and *anotherness* rather than Otherness?"⁹⁰ Through the water in *Savage Dreams* and the blue of distance in *A Field Guide*, Solnit situates herself in dynamic anotherness to these newly wild places. She writes herself in relation to, rather than in control of, the Yosemite land(scape) and the temporary addition to the Great Salt Lake. She works to uncover the joyful possibilities of wildness, and frames these possibilities in terms of humble, ecologically connective attitudes that reflect upon the environmental injustices wrought by the dominant culture. Writing this new wildness, Solnit engages "the power of words to inspire us, to transform us, to give us strength and courage for the difficult task of *re-creating* the world."⁹¹ Transforming the wilderness by eschewing the terms of the Wilderness Act, Solnit thus posits new relations to place based on an overarching ecofeminist ethic. Resituating the temporality of place in both texts, Solnit becomes able to prepare for uncertain futures, to engage in acts of ongoingness and dynamic relation that come to terms with unknowability, rather than ignoring it. Refusing to silence these places, engaging in

⁹⁰ Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other*, 35 (italics in the original).

⁹¹ Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 14 (italics in the original).

re-peopling, re-animating, revitalising these land(scape)s, Solnit uses a situated, embodied, and affective depiction of place to actively destabilise the terms on which we are told to approach these places, and the planet as a whole. In the complex, messy, whirl of the wild, Solnit tells us another – more joyful, less prescriptive, actively connective – way is possible.

Chapter Two

The Desert

“They need this to be a dead place so they can kill it.”¹

Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015)

Introduction: A Dead Place

Understood as “hellish” sites of punishment for sin, and “deep[ly] distrust[ed]” by early Anglo-American settlers, the American deserts represented, and still represent, a hostile, “purgatorial,” empty wasteland.² Similar to the 1964 Wilderness Act’s understanding of American wildernesses discussed in chapter one, this dominant understanding rests on the idea that the land is dead, unmoving and untouched, and thus open to manipulation and appropriation. In this chapter, I argue that Solnit’s depictions of the American desert in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and *Savage Dreams* counter such narratives of emptiness, hostility, and domination. Beginning with the way she reads life on/in the desert in *A Field Guide*, I show how her ecofeminist ethics undercut the dominant cultural forces responsible for such categorisations. I then move on to discuss the ways this desert life is complicated by the presence of nuclear testing in the Nevada desert. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit details her involvement with antinuclear protests in the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, her experience of the desert is influenced by the death and destruction inextricable from nuclear technology.

¹ Claire Vaye Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus* (London: Riverrun, 2017), 208.

² David Teague, *The Southwest in American Literature and Art: The Rise of a Desert Aesthetic* (Tucson: Arizona State University Press, 1997), 14.

Nevertheless, I argue, Solnit's ecofeminist narratives of partnership and connectivity render the desert a defiantly living, surviving, and thriving activist land(scape).

Mary Austin's *Land of Little Rain* (1904) offers an early, subversive account of the Southwest desert. Far from a barren landscape, Austin states, "void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil."³ Countering the dominant cultural understanding of the desert's emptiness and hostility, she considers it a "land of lost rivers, with little in it to love; yet a land that once visited must be come back to inevitably."⁴ Austin's text thus opens up the possibilities of alternative relationships to desert land(scape)s. Published over a century later, Claire Vaye Watkins' near-future apocalypse novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015) centres on the "Amargosa," a sand dune sweeping across the parched American landscape. The leader of the community living on the edge of that dune decries the government and the media's claim that the dune has eradicated all life in the American desert, explaining to the community's newcomers, "they need this to be a dead place so they can kill it."⁵ Gesturing towards the ways American landscapes were deemed inert by European settlers, Watkins' novel draws upon the histories of conquest, violence, and exploitation that characterise the dominant cultural attitude to American lands, the same histories Austin undercuts in her desert narrative. This resistance to the desert's imposed emptiness provides a useful starting point for interrogating the dominant cultural understanding of desert land(scape)s. Austin and Watkins' narratives both resist and subvert the notion of the desert as an inert, empty, useless landscape, and Watkins' claim in particular is a useful springboard for considering the ways Solnit works against such characterisations.

³ Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2007), 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Watkins, *Gold Fame Citrus*, 208.

In the dominant cultural imagination, the desert is dead space. It encompasses the same inert, timeless characteristics as those outlined by the 1964 Wilderness Act. Understood as a desolate, barren landscape for centuries, to white settlers the desert West was, and is, hostile; the lack of visible water, the heat, and the expanse formed an almost mythical understanding of the desert as a wasteland unfit to accommodate human life. As such, it has provided the perfect ground in the Euroamerican imagination for narratives of dominance, conquest, and progress that have ignored the existing features and inhabitants of the land; by imagining the land as dead, white settlers absolved themselves of the responsibility to pay attention to its life. The desert has always been in some way storied. Patricia Limerick explains, “take the habits of life in a humid climate and a preoccupation with agrarian values; apply those habits and values to the dry grasslands in the middle of the continent; and the myth of the Great American Desert was born.”⁶ The desert’s inertness is a narrative strategy; the creation of the myth of the Great American Desert assured the dominant culture’s access to land that has variously been subject to mining, farming techniques ill-suited to arid land, and, most recently, nuclear testing. Solnit takes this myth to task in *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide*.

Roslynn D. Haynes writes, “‘Desert’ is not an innocent term. Geographically it is defined in terms of rainfall, but unlike other landforms there is, inbuilt in its very name, a sense of foreboding.”⁷ In the emptiness of the land(scape)’s name, Haynes draws attention to the fear and hostility with which we are meant to approach such places. This chapter contends that Solnit counters these negative responses. Borrowing a metaphor from nuclear physics, I argue that Solnit engages in writerly acts of

⁶ Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Desert Passages: Encounters with the American Deserts* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 3.

⁷ Roslynn D. Haynes, *Desert: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2013), 7.

“fusion,” working against the fragmenting powers of capitalist, patriarchal, colonial, military, and technoscientific narratives that govern the desert’s character in order to show Solnit’s investment in an alternative, connective desert land(scape) that focuses on the life, both human and nonhuman, very much still residing on/in it. Using scientific language may seem to run counter to the subversive aims of my argument, particularly as chapter one gestured towards the damaging effects of Enlightenment science on understandings of land. Yet this language itself becomes subversive when coupled with the way Solnit relates in both texts to an unavoidably toxic and sometimes life-threatening land(scape). That is, borrowing the language of nuclear fusion (and, later, Stephen Hawking’s theory of “imaginary time”) actually aligns with Solnit’s ecofeminist ethics of connection when this scientific language is reframed in terms of the same “situated knowledges” that make up the wildness discussed in chapter one. These knowledges, which Donna Haraway asserts are part of a “feminist objectivity [that] makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production,” emphasise the partiality of such knowledge systems and run counter to claims of detached, objective knowing upon which the dominant, destructive forces of technoscience work in the American desert.⁸ “Fusion” thus becomes a tool with which to disrupt the silencing, fragmenting, and destructive forces of nuclear fission in the American desert.

Tracing narratives of fusion throughout Solnit’s desert writing, I begin with an analysis of the desert in *A Field Guide* to draw attention to the ways she reads the desert’s life as a positive, connective force. I then spend the rest of the chapter considering the ways she writes against the dominant forces of nuclear technology in

⁸ Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 594; 581, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

the desert in *Savage Dreams*. I discuss the ways Solnit's subversion of military and technoscientific language, her inclusion of women's testimony, her use of gothic conventions, and her disruption of linear narratives of progress variously work against the dominant narratives of nuclear testing in the desert – narratives that come from both the scientists and government officials invested in nuclear testing and, more surprisingly, from the activist organisations opposing them. Engaged in the ecofeminist act of “looking for connections where capitalist patriarchy and its warrior science are engaged in disconnecting and dissecting,” Solnit undercuts the fragmenting forces of nuclear technology in her work.⁹ This chapter thus argues that Solnit's ecofeminist ethics of connectivity lead her instead to desert communities acting against various ‘isms of domination’ responsible for altering and exploiting their lands and lives. Unpacking the ways these narratives promote alternative, connective relationships within and on desert land, I argue that *Savage Dreams* becomes an activist text, re-telling the nuclear desert on ecofeminist terms, and calling for narratives of hope and connection that further Solnit's investment in re-learning our relationship to the earth. In line with Elizabeth Ammons' claim that writing has “the power ... to inspire us, to transform us, to give us strength and courage for the difficult task of *re-creating the world*,” I read Solnit's desert writing as an extension of the antinuclear protests and community actions she documents in *Savage Dreams*.¹⁰ Writing against the ‘isms of domination’ that are both responsible for and reliant on the land(scape)'s supposed death, Solnit's work is more than an activist call to arms; it is part of that action itself.

⁹ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, Critique Influence Change Edition (London: Zed Books, 2014), 16.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 14 (*italics in the original*).

Desert Life

In *A Field Guide*, Solnit posits an understanding of the desert West that sits outside of the dominant cultural understanding of it as a dead place. Much like the wilderness, which as discussed in chapter one derives its character from its human-less, static image, the desert has been characterised as an empty space, barren and useless, for much of Euroamerican history. Once again, then, Solnit – echoing Austin’s assertion that the desert is never devoid of life – is engaged in exposing “the myth of empty space.”¹¹ Wendy Harding writes of the ways writers and artists reinstate human presence in/on “sites that were once represented as devoid of human presence, as either wilderness or wastelands.”¹² Solnit’s depiction of the Mojave Desert in *A Field Guide* works in opposition to the myth of emptiness, as she fills her entire description of it with animal and human life. Similarly, the land that makes up the Nevada Test Site and the surrounding areas has a long and varied history, and Solnit details in *Savage Dreams* the ways the mining industry swept in and out of the desert and surrounding mountains, touches upon Mormon settlement, and writes at length about the Western Shoshone population that has been in the area for centuries.¹³ Harding writes, “places designated as empty contain remnants of past and present activities that have been left unattended, open for inspection. They contain the archives of foregone, partly effaced tragedies that have affected the land.”¹⁴ Thus, as Harding asserts, and as Solnit’s work demonstrates, lands that sit under the “sign of empty” are rarely that; their purported emptiness is a tool used to further capitalist and colonial

¹¹ Wendy Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), xv.

¹² *Ibid.*, xi.

¹³ Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 56; 52; 159–80. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁴ Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, xviii.

agendas by deliberately ignoring the lives and histories present in such places, much like the creation and definition of wilderness discussed in chapter one.

Solnit opens her account of time spent in the Mojave Desert in *A Field Guide* by stating “once I loved a man who was a lot like the desert, and before that I loved the desert.”¹⁵ In this comparison, Solnit draws a connection between people and lands that centres on her self; she has loved both, and loves the desert still. Using an autobiographical narrative as the connecting point between people and place, Solnit continues the emphasis on connection discussed in chapter one by overtly positioning herself, and her experiential writing, at its affective centre. By equating the desert landscape with a man she once loved, Solnit characterises the desert as an embodied, active participant in her relationship to/with it; it is decidedly not dead. In debunking the myth of emptiness on affective terms – this is not a detached description devoid of sentiment – Solnit renders the desert instead an active partner in her own life. That is, by affectively connecting the desert and the man (but, importantly, not characterising the desert *as* masculine) Solnit enacts what Carolyn Merchant calls the “partnership ethic,” part of the “dynamic relationship” between the human and nonhuman based on humans “listening to, hearing, and responding to” the nonhuman rather than exerting dominance.¹⁶ Solnit writes the life of the desert by invoking the story of a man she once loved, representationally and physically refusing the desert’s sign of empty and engaging in affective partnership with the land(scape) itself.

Equating her relationship to the desert to a romantic relationship of the past, Solnit invokes, at once, the irresistible affective appeal of the land(scape), and

¹⁵ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 129. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York; London: Routledge, 1996), xix.

concedes that its “harsh conditions ... keep you in mind of your mortality” (129). While the desert may be threatening, it is nonetheless – or perhaps consequently, in the sense that romantic relationships remind us in various senses of our vulnerability – appealing. Catherine Savage Brosman writes of the desert, “there is the pull of space, to which ... our gaze cannot help being attracted.”¹⁷ Like *A Field Guide*’s blue of distance (see chapter one), the desert in Solnit’s work is a contradictory, multifaceted place that conjures an often undefinable, messy, affective resonance. Thus, rather than separating out the dangers and delights of the desert, Solnit emphasises these paradoxical qualities in order to resist the inert emptiness on which the dominant cultural understanding of the desert rests; her very description of the desert is changeable, lively.

Thus, despite what perhaps may be read as an anthropocentric relation to the desert – in that it is represented via a human-human relationship – Solnit writes the desert here on decidedly ecofeminist terms. Countering the land(scape)’s perceived inertness, Solnit locates in the draw of the desert a defiant aliveness. The “skeletal elegance” of the desert’s geology is enlivened, as the desert is described as “alive with the primal forces of rock” (129). Solnit switches the depiction from a passive landscape to an active land(scape), reading agency in the desert’s forceful alive-ness. The skeletal nature of its bareness suggests a body. Moreover, the way the light plays over the land “like emotion on a face” does not necessarily suggest a humanoid landscape, but does evoke a living one; the desert is in motion, the light makes it so (129). Both by situating an autobiographical self within the desert and by imagining the desert in terms of embodied life, Solnit amplifies the desert’s vitality by

¹⁷ Catharine Savage Brosman, “Desert,” *The American Scholar* 70, no. 2 (2001): 114, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41213155>.

understanding the role she plays in the partnership she writes.

The emptiness one would expect to find in depictions of the desert is therefore subsumed by repeated references to life. In particular, Solnit emphasises the presence of animals. Throughout her account of the Mojave, Solnit mentions “a kangaroo mouse,” “bats,” “coyotes,” “cottontails and jackrabbits,” “desert quail,” “a bobcat,” “a mountain lion,” “roadrunners,” “a rattlesnake,” “a raven,” a “desert tortoise,” “cats,” “a mourning dove,” “insects called walking sticks,” “a spider,” “paper wasps,” “Mexican grass-hoppers,” “bumblebees,” “a velvet ant,” and “lizards” (130–38). Over twenty animal references affirm the fullness of the desert; there is no absence of life, movement, or inhabitability in this description of a thriving desert ecosystem. Solnit’s inclusion of the desert animals thus serves to remind us that, while the desert may not be “useful” from a (Western) human perspective, the non-human life it sustains is infinitely vast, and endlessly connected. In particular, Solnit mentions the “fearless” kangaroo mouse spotted in the evening darkness, and notes the ways this species has adapted to desert life (130). The kangaroo mouse rarely drinks water, deriving its hydration from food sources; it is a creature perfectly adapted to, and sustained by, life in the desert. In line with Patrick D. Murphy’s idea of “otherness” with which I ended chapter one, this instance looks to the ways difference can be a part of the ecofeminist connectivity on which Solnit predicates her narratives of place.¹⁸ That is, desert life does not always mean human presence, and the animal life here is as worthy of note as human communities. As Val Plumwood asserts, “we need to acknowledge difference as well as continuity to ... establish non-instrumentalising relationships with nature, where both connection and otherness are the basis of interaction.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Patrick D. Murphy, *Literature, Nature, and Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 35.

¹⁹ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 174.

Privileging connection, understanding, and difference over human use and control, Solnit's depiction of the desert in *A Field Guide* upends the narratives of dominance so integral to typical perceptions of American land(scape)s.

In recognising the patterns of connection across even the tiny part of the desert she describes in *A Field Guide*, Solnit confirms that the desert is, in fact, brimming with life. Debunking the myth of emptiness that relates to this characterisation, a myth that relies on the desert being understood as a kind of terra nullius or 'nobody's land,' Solnit asserts the lived, living, and liveable character of the land(scape) in an act of partnership that directly counters the dominant impression of the desert as a dangerous, dead landscape. Invoking this partnership, Solnit engages in a bringing together of the various inhabitants, characteristics, and resonances of the desert. The desert is at once skeletal and alive, and by not shying away from this paradox Solnit indicates a kind of connectivity at the level of her *telling of* the desert. Invoking such paradoxes, Solnit attests that the desert is, for her, both an affirming and threatening land(scape), a tangled, contradictory identity Solnit chooses to embrace throughout her work. In line with a key tenet of ecofeminism, she looks for connections where the 'isms of domination' responsible for the fragmented character of the desert seek to separate. In *A Field Guide*, this connectivity is a figurative move that emphasises Solnit's emotional connections to and within the desert and which serves to privilege the desert's vitality. In *Savage Dreams*, this takes on a literal quality. Nuclear fission, which occurs in the detonation of atomic bombs, blasts atoms apart. In nuclear fusion, there is a joining of atoms. Thus, if fission is the task of the (nuclear) desert, fusion is the task of Solnit's writing. It is therefore to the fused, all at once, quality of Solnit's time at the Nevada Test Site that I will turn to in order to further unpack the connective ecofeminist narratives Solnit uses to explore and narrate an alternative nuclear desert.

So They Can Kill It

Valerie Kuletz writes, “in the case of nuclear colonialism, what is seen as usable, sparsely populated, arid geographic space is used as a dumping ground or a testing field to allow more powerful regions to continue their present form of energy production or to continue to exert military power globally.”²⁰ The desert on which the Nevada Test Site is situated is a military, scientific space, funded by the federal government, and predicated on narratives of dominance, control, and order that emerge from similar colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal rhetoric responsible for the narrow cultural understanding of the wilderness (see chapter one). Both the desert and the wilderness are characterised as dead, empty space by various ‘isms of domination,’ and the indigenous populations of both have, consequently, been subject to violent removals and erasure for centuries. Nuclear technology is thus a further iteration of such exploitative endeavours. Joseph Masco explicitly deems these endeavours “masculine,” pointing to an overtly gendered conceptualisation of the desert space that relies on patriarchal hierarchies to exert power.²¹ In order to see the desert as something other than a military or scientific project, Solnit must therefore resist the ideological forces that contribute to this characterisation. In *Savage Dreams*, the effects of nuclear violence and environmental degradation on and around the Nevada Test Site are framed in the testimony and stories of women. In opposition to the ‘official’ narratives of the site espoused by government officials, scientists, and the military, Solnit spends her time engaging with activists and residents at the test site

²⁰ Valerie Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert: Environmental Ruin in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 8.

²¹ Joseph Masco, “A Notebook on Desert Modernism: From the Nevada Test Site to Liberace’s Two-Hundred-Pound Suit,” in *Histories of the Future*, ed. by Daniel Rosenberg and Susan Friend Harding (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 24.

and collecting the stories of those affected by nuclear testing. She thus undercuts the negative, fracturing effects of nuclear testing by drawing connections between the desert peoples' stories and emphasising how human-human, and human-nonhuman connections are made and sustained in/on a site of conflict, violence, and disease.

Considering the interplay between Yosemite National Park and the Nevada Test Site – the two subjects of *Savage Dreams* – Solnit writes, “the national parks counterbalance and perhaps legitimize the national sacrifice areas, which in the nineteenth century meant mostly mining and timbercutting and has now grown to include waste disposal and military-use areas and places drowned by dams” (246–47). While the national park has served to foster Solnit’s physical and affective connection to place on ecofeminist terms (see chapter one), the Nevada Test Site, as a sacrifice zone, asks Solnit to consider the effects of nuclear violence on a wider community and communal narrative of place. Steve Lerner writes, “the label *Sacrifice Zones* comes from ‘National Sacrifice Zones,’ an Orwellian term coined by government officials to designate areas dangerously contaminated as a result of the mining and processing of uranium into nuclear weapons.”²² Lerner goes on to explain that “government officials concede that the production of nuclear weapons regrettably caused a small number of citizens to make health and economic sacrifices on the altar of national security.”²³ Heavily ironising the government’s claims, Lerner reflects on the ways the results of nuclear detonations and fallout both characterise and are characterised by the test site’s designation as a sacrifice zone. Interrogating the government’s terminology, Lerner gestures towards the erasing and evasive power of calling the desert a site of ‘sacrifice.’ Implying that both the land and its inhabitants are maimed and exploited

²² Steve Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

for the ‘higher purpose’ of national security, the term “sacrifice zone” reframes the underhanded and devastating effects of nuclear technology as a noble cause. In a twisted recapitulation of religious sacrifices – which, in turn, calls back to the origins of many of exploitative actions taken against the American land(scape) as a result of a Christian belief in dominion – the Nevada Test Site’s violence is immediately buried in contradictory and obfuscating language.

This land(scape)’s very designation as a sacrifice zone relies upon the perception of it as dead and empty. Under the sign of empty, the desert is set aside for weapons testing in the ‘national interest,’ due to its perceived ‘uselessness’ (as an arid landscape, it was ill-equipped for the agrarian ideals of the New World).²⁴ Established on military ‘owned’ land in 1950, the Nevada Test Site has been officially characterised as a sacrifice zone ever since – though the violent effects of ‘isms of domination’ on this land and its inhabitants stretch back centuries. While above-ground testing ended in 1963, the detritus of these tests remains, and the craters subsequently created by underground tests are also visible. Vast holes in the desert ground, the empty shells of houses, even a railway bridge built for and warped by a nuclear test litter the site, and waste storage facilities, laboratories and government buildings also gesture towards the federal ownership – and exploitation – of this land. Masco writes, “the modern American desert is a place where curious things seem possible. It exists as (post)modernist frontier and as sacrifice zone, simultaneously a fantasy playground ... and a technoscientific wasteland where many of the most dangerous projects of an industrial, militarized society are located.”²⁵ At once, Masco draws attention to the ways the desert, as a wasteland, is considered a dead sacrifice

²⁴ See Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 4.

²⁵ Masco, “A Notebook on Desert Modernism,” 23.

zone, and simultaneously may be hailed as a site of progress and reinvention. The desert, constructed as a wasteland that, in turn, allows for its designation as a sacrifice zone, now exists in a kind of loop, in which it is at once a sacrificed and sacrificing place. The land, sacrificed to nuclear detonation, enacts sacrifice, fracturing families, communities, and individuals that come into contact with its various toxicities.

Fittingly, then, Solnit begins her time at the test site with an impression of the desert land(scape) as a place of violence and fear (echoing the experiences of nineteenth century settlers attempting to cross deserts such as Death Valley – narratives she includes in both *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide*).²⁶ Reflecting the typical image of the deserts of the American West, Solnit describes “thorny grasses,” “scrubby bushes,” a “hard pale ground” and the “roads kicked into dust” (3). This is a wasteland; the plant life lacks beauty, the roads lack function, and the implied layer of dust settled over the image implies a lack of use that reduces this place to ‘waste.’ Similarly, the “hundreds of dry miles” in which Solnit camps evoke an initial sense of spaciousness, of vastness that threatens to swallow desert visitors (3). Yi-Fu Tuan writes of “landscapes of fear” as products and generators of anxiety, of “a diffuse sense of dread [that] presupposes an ability to anticipate.”²⁷ He goes on, “anxiety is a presentiment of danger when nothing in the immediate surroundings can be pinpointed as dangerous. The need for decisive action is checked by the lack of any specific, circumventable threat.”²⁸ The Nevada Test Site provokes just this sense of anxiety; the threat is invisible, the effects unclear, and the danger continuously present but only obliquely felt; Solnit’s descriptions provoke anxiety in the echoes of mortality embedded within the dry, hard, dusty character of the land itself.

²⁶ See Solnit, *Savage Dreams*, 65 and Solnit, *A Field Guide*, 194.

²⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 5.

²⁸ Ibid.

The fear evoked by the hostility of this desert landscape is further embedded in the names of the places surrounding Solnit. “Funeral Mountains,” “Death Valley,” “Skull Mountain,” and “Specter Range” are all part of the Great Basin (3). This land’s character as a “dead place” is both built into and upheld by the names given to it. Importantly, it is the *English* names of these landmarks that gesture towards this deathliness; the legacy of colonialism here is doubled, first in the very fact that the English names are dominant despite this being Native land, and second in the way each name comes from an understanding of the desert as hostile, threatening, deadly and dead. The violence of names such as “Death Valley” thus both reinforces and conceals the more immediate violence taking place at the Nevada Test Site. By hiding the destructive power of nuclear bombs in a land(scape) already peppered with names relating to death, government officials have found a ready-made excuse for the violence they enact in/on this land. Claiming the land’s hostility and emptiness becomes a reason to further its hostility and emptiness by carrying out nuclear tests there. It also becomes a mechanism with which to bolster the violence enacted upon the land, by reading the land itself as inherently violent. As John Beck asserts, nuclear testing – “the open secret of the American West” – is hidden in plain sight, “screen[ed] off ... by a long-standing discourse of Western ‘waste land.’”²⁹ As such, the position of the site within a desert already deemed both dead and deadly plays into the production of wastelands and sacrifice zones so important to continued nuclear testing, and to the fracturing of communities in and around the land. By including the sinister names of the landscape around her, Solnit thus emphasises the embedded, threatening dominant cultural narratives of this land(scape) that are already used as tools of/for

²⁹ John Beck, *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power, and Waste in Western American Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 21.

the fragmenting power of nuclear fission.

The result of this nuclear fission is dust. “I remembered to be afraid of the dust,” Solnit writes, “the dust that might be radioactive ... the dust of the hundreds of nuclear tests conducted somewhere across the highway I’d just driven in on” (4). Switching from the expanse of the desert to her own personal, proximal situation within it, Solnit reframes this desert, much like the Mojave in *A Field Guide*, in terms of a bodily, autobiographical account. At the mention of nuclear testing, rather than simply restating the visible and expansive destruction of/in/on the site, Solnit shifts the characteristic of the desert dust from one indicative of wasted expanse to one of proximal threat: the dust, when lodged in the human body, enacts violence. The dust thus represents her own direct contact with the fear-filled desert space. In an act that counters the assumed hostility of the desert wasteland, Solnit reminds us that she must consciously remember to fear the dust that might – and only might – be a threat to her. Like the Mojave Desert in *A Field Guide*, everything is familiar to her here, and her many visits to this place have removed, or at least dulled, its hostility: after her opening description involving the dead names, Solnit writes “in the morning light everything looked familiar again” (3). Echoing the way in which the desert’s dead names eclipse the exploitative actions of the dominant culture, Solnit subverts the accepted understanding of the desert as hostile and deadly by hiding her own fears behind the familiarity of this place. This allows her to re-enter the desert land(scape) not as a passive visitor, nor as a victim, but as an activist, even while knowing that the violence of nuclear testing has rendered it dangerous. She is there to protest, to prevent further dangers and damage in/on/to this land. The ways she balances the fear and familiarity of this land(scape) attests to Solnit’s simultaneous attraction and aversion to this desert; she is both drawn to the familiar land(scape), and shrinks away from the dust’s

(potential) toxicity. Most importantly, she understands the significance of recognising both-at-once. Fused in her fear-tinged familiarity, the desert is paradoxically appealing and toxic, and it is definitely not empty.

Refusing the obfuscating powers of the dominant narrative, which would have her either fully embrace the tranquillity of this dusty land(scape), or avoid it for fear of its dangers and toxicity, Solnit makes a distinction between what she *sees* in the landscape – the pale dust that is as much a natural part of the land as the sagebrush – and what she *knows* about the land – that the dust is mixed with fallout from over 900 nuclear detonations that have taken place in this desert. Similar to the discrepancies between what we are told about wildernesses – that they are empty, timeless, peopleless – and what we know about them – they are full of life, are indigenous homelands, were never beyond human influence – the desert dust represents an epistemological rupture in Solnit’s experience of the land(scape). This is dust that “[doesn’t] look like anything special to the naked eye,” and yet contains “fallout mixed into the fine, pale, silky powder that posed the most threat” (4). Solnit’s description of the dust here seems devoid of any immediate, sinister threat: it is silky, fine, and pale, more luxurious than deadly, yet its presence and the known fact of its potential toxicity marks out the test site and the surrounding areas as a sacrifice zone. The dust thus becomes another example of the “twisted, looping form” of “ecognosis,” the weird, affective, ecological knowledge that emerges in places like this (see chapter one for further discussion of ecognosis in relation to the blue of distance).³⁰

Solnit both knows and does not know this land(scape), as the dust renders it both familiar and potentially toxic. Solnit is thus initiated into the narrative of the

³⁰ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 6.

sacrifice zone by the potential danger of the desert's dust, though whether it is herself or the land that is/will be/might be sacrificed is as yet unknown. In this sense, the dust is indicative of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence," "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."³¹ As something known to be toxic but without that toxicity being immediately visible – cancers and genetic mutations can take decades to materialise – the insidious violence of this nuclear desert is implicit, invisible, and difficult to accept. As Solnit writes, "to see mortality in the dust by imagining in it the unstable isotopes of radioactive decay took an act of educated faith" (4). The desert's toxicity is screened by the existing narratives of waste and emptiness that characterise this place, but the weird, looped knowledge of the toxic dust's very presence indicates a slow, invisible violence taking place on this land. By narrating the desert in such a way – as beautiful, inhabited, proximate, threatening – Solnit complicates the terms of the sacrifice narrative by representing a place at once familiar and dangerous, violent and safe, sacrificing, sacrificial, and surviving.

Protest and Testimony

The desert is both the vast expanse Solnit depicts as a landscape of fear, and the proximal, bodily threat of the desert dust that hides within it the toxic threat of nuclear fallout. The realisation of both factors begins her journey of resistance and connection at the activist Peace Camp across from the test site to which she returns again and again throughout the text. Solnit describes the Nevada Test Site as the "hot secret heart

³¹ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

of the Arms Race,” pinpointing the test site as the volcanic centre of military violence in the Cold War US. Subverting military-industrial discourses surrounding the site, Solnit begins to utilise militarised language, exposing the narratives of national security used both to justify and obscure the violence occurring at the test site. She writes, “there were times when the conflict between government and activists became deadly serious, dangerous, even fatal for the activists, but there were more times when it was a neatly staged conflict in which both sides played by the rules” (8–9). Action, conflict, rules, and danger permeate Solnit’s description of the protests as well as the site itself, a conflation that calls to attention the fact that this place is, in reality, a war zone. The militarised sacrifice zone thus attests not only to the already potent dangers and sacrifices those people face when walking within it – in terms of the dust and the heat – but also the potential sacrifice of human life that is intrinsic to the use for which nuclear weapons are intended.

Once again, the ‘official’ stance on this is masked. Karen J. Warren describes “incredible distortions of nuclear parlance [that] are reinforced by such misnomers as ... the Pentagon position that human deaths are only ‘collateral damage’ (since bombs are targeted at buildings and not people).”³² In the name of national security, and in direct opposition to the ecofeminist concerns Warren herself outlines (see introduction), life in the desert – human, animal, plant, planet – is a low priority (ironically, seeing as narratives of national security purport to protect civilian life). Solnit recognises this attitude during the protest at the test site: “as I watched the burly men picking up blockaders by arms and legs stiff with resistance, I saw their frail forms as *bodies*, as potential corpses and as pathetically vulnerable objects put between the landscape and the military, and my eyes filled with tears” (12). Coupled

³² Karen J. Warren, *Ecological Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1994), 191–92.

with the description of the potentially deadly dust that opens *Savage Dreams*, this instance reveals Solnit's awareness of the more immediate dangers of this land(scape). Moreover, Solnit's tears mark a similar emotional connection to place as the love she feels for the desert in *A Field Guide*; her connection to this land is such that she *feels*, as well as witnesses, the violence enacted upon it. Furthering the affective resonance of Solnit's description, the bodies lifted off the dusty ground are indicative of the lives already sacrificed at the Nevada Test Site, from the downwind residents experiencing long illnesses, to the soldiers involved in exposure experiments, and the pigs subjected to direct nuclear blasts (151; 19). Not to mention the life of the land itself, which is continually pulled apart, altered, and exploited in the name of technoscientific progress.

Narratives of sacrifice thus permeate Solnit's depiction of antinuclear protests, as she begins to unravel the tightly controlled discourses of security, emptiness, and hostility responsible for nuclear testing and its effects. At the Peace Camp, Solnit hears a woman named Janet Gordon speak of her own experiences as a victim of the sacrifice zone. Solnit later visits Gordon, and records her tale, which is included in full in *Savage Dreams*. Gordon tells Solnit that she "grew up in the downwind area, about 150 miles east of the Nevada Test Site," and that she was "twelve years old when the testing started, in 1951" (148). Gordon's story details her family history, from Mormon settlement in the Utah desert, to the shift from farming sheep to farming cattle her father made in the 1950s. Gordon's tale gives a palpable sense of emplacement as she tells Solnit, "I came to the era of testing with some family history, with a great deal of love for the land" (149). Yet what begins as a story of a family's sense of place soon morphs into a nuclear horror story. Gordon speaks of her brother's experience of nuclear fallout in the downwind area, telling Solnit that "Kent came

back into camp one evening and he was very sick, he had burns on his skin like a really severe sunburn, he was throwing up, he had a bad headache, and he wondered if it had anything to do with the test they'd set off over in Nevada" (150). The visible effects of the test are then mirrored in the visual confirmations of a bomb going off in the distance: "They saw the flash, they heard the boom. They knew there was a test, it had been on the radio, and Kent said it was like a ground fog" (150). The unquestioned acceptance of nuclear testing here seems astounding, yet testing was normalised to such an extent that tests were announced on the radio and in the papers – Terry Tempest Williams even writes in *Refuge* (1990) of her family pulling over to watch a mushroom cloud bloom out of the distant desert.³³ In keeping with the test site's culture of hidden-in-plain-sight, normalising testing worked, and works, as another obscuring narrative espoused by the dominant culture – why hide something you don't believe to be dangerous? Gordon explains that while no one was told what the effects of radiation were at the time, Kent's symptoms were "classic," and he "died by inches" of a fast-moving pancreatic cancer, another marker of the test site's slow and deadly violence (152).

Solnit is interested in Janet Gordon's gradual discoveries, in the slow effects of the test site's violence. That the symptoms of radiation were known, that the Atomic Energy Commission's P.R. videos were deliberately made to "manipulate" public understandings of nuclear testing, and that the test site's location was chosen because it was understood to be a "virtually uninhabited area" not only serve to reveal that the government was in on the act; these facts become a call to arms for Gordon (154). She explains that finding out that the government knew what they were doing "made me

³³ Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 283.

angrier than I had ever been in my life” (153). Deliberately subverting the government’s description of the site, Gordon refers to herself, her family, and the white and indigenous residents of the sacrifice zone as “virtual uninhabitants” (154). She creates with this name a kind of counter-community – and a counternarrative – to the workers on the test site, the government officials, and the scientific and military powers responsible for the test site’s dominance in the desert. That these people are *uninhabitants* pertains more to their refusal to be treated like the inhabitants of the test site – that is, to become silenced, sacrificial victims of nuclear testing – than their status as outsiders; Gordon’s story centres upon her family’s emplacement, her connection to the desert, yet locates within their resistance a kind of alien status in a landscape that expects silence, submission, and sacrifice from those who live there. By including Janet Gordon’s story, Nixon argues, “Solnit repopulates the emptiness by bringing into focus the people who had been turned into ghosted casualties of a federal project of imaginative self-enclosure that concealed them from view.”³⁴ She refuses, in recounting this tale, the dominant myth of emptiness upon which the test site’s very existence rests. Beck writes, “the production of ‘wasteland’ ... includes the production of waste populations.”³⁵ Including Janet Gordon’s testimony in *Savage Dreams*, Solnit refutes the notion that any population in this desert is merely wasted or sacrificial.

Gordon’s narrative reveals not just the brutality of the “collateral” damage the test site has engendered, but also the incensed reactions these illnesses, deaths, and hardships have inspired. Gordon’s anger acts as a rallying cry at the Peace Camp, and Solnit records her narrative not as a victim’s testimony, but as a tale of endurance,

³⁴ Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 153.

³⁵ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 7.

diligence, and perseverance that characterises the decades of protests that have led to the actions in which Solnit herself now participates. In recording Gordon's story, Solnit engages in the feminist history of the confessional. Leigh Gilmore writes, "women find in confessional discourse a subject position that grants them the authority from which to make truth claims," drawing attention to the ways the patriarchal silencing and erasure of women's experience has been combatted by women actively telling their own stories, particularly to one another.³⁶ Including the autobiographical narrative of another woman, and recording it verbatim, Solnit gives her text over to a collective or collaged feminist narrative, piecing together not only her own impressions of the land around her, but stories from its many residents, too. This collage becomes a moment of formal fusion within Solnit's desert narrative that once again serves to undercut the fission-like separating force of the 'isms of domination' present in/on the Southwest.

Marcus O'Donnell notes that "Solnit's strategy of narrating conversations directly models her sense of engagement and writerly discovery with, rather than merely through, her sources;" she is in conversation with these women, she makes space for their voices, and resists the urge to paraphrase, condense, and simplify.³⁷ Engaged in such an inclusive act of witnessing, Solnit embeds an ecofeminist partnership in her very *telling of* the desert; she engages in "listening to, hearing, and responding to" these women's stories, stories which themselves listen to the "voice of nature," the bodily and environmental responses to nuclear testing, rather than the

³⁶ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 225.

³⁷ Marcus O'Donnell, "Walking, Writing and Dreaming: Rebecca Solnit's Polyphonic Voices," *Journalism* 16, no. 7 (October 2015): 949, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914553078>.

official government narrative.³⁸ Thus, emphasising a sense of connection not just with the land but with and between the people in it, Solnit portrays the desert not just as a zone of sacrifice, but one of survival, too. After all, Gordon's narrative shows not a woman broken by her emplacement within the sacrifice zone, but a woman incensed and driven to action by her experiences living downwind of the nuclear test site. It is thus emblematic of the wider ecofeminist narrative Solnit situates within her disruption of, and action against, the sacrifice zone. Through the inclusion of the voices and stories of the "uninhabitants," Solnit's desert becomes a place of action and survival, at odds with the dead, empty, sacrificial character it is typically given.

Susana Cavallo asks, "is testimony a form of autobiography? Or is it a revolutionary act performed in the name of a collectivity?"³⁹ In *Savage Dreams* it becomes both. Individual narratives become collective as Solnit uses them to expose the toxicity of the desert, calling to mind a key characteristic of *testimonio*, that the narrator "speaks with the first-person singular 'I' as a means of representing the collective experience of all people in the same socio-political situation as the narrator."⁴⁰ Janet Gordon speaks in the voice of the virtual uninhabitants, and including this first person in her work Solnit adds to the chorus of voices speaking against the silencing, erasing effects of the 'isms of domination' at work in the Nevada desert. Once again, fusion is the marked effect of Solnit's desert narrative, as a kind of collective autobiographical narrative emerges. The shared stories of the test site become an autobiography of community, of place, a shared narrative of resistance to

³⁸ Merchant, *Earthcare*, xix.

³⁹ Susana Cavallo, "Witness: The Real, the Unspeakable, and the Construction of Narrative," *The Journal of the Midwest Language Association*, 33/34 (2000): 1, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1315336>.

⁴⁰ Shonna Trinch, "Risky Subjects: Narrative, Literary Testimonio and Legal Testimony," *Dialectical Anthropology* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): 188, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-009-9105-x>.

the 'isms of domination' that hold the site and its surrounding area under the sign of empty. In this way, then, the desert is not only peopled; it is storied, voiced, retold on connective, resistant terms. Engaging in such an act of collectivity, Solnit refracts another woman's more intimate knowledge of the land's toxic effects through her own understanding of the desert to resist the subjugating forces of nuclear testing's discourses of sacrifice.

These stories emerge throughout *Savage Dreams*, and Solnit's focus, when detailing the activism at the Nevada Test Site, is consistently on the presence and power of women in the fight against nuclear testing. In addition to Gordon's testimony, Solnit details her discovery of the Women Strike for Peace movement, made during a family reunion in which she learns her cousin "had been organizing against nuclear testing and war since the fifties and had begun demonstrating at the Nevada Test Site in 1962" (95). Through a combination of her cousin's testimony and her own research, Solnit pieces together the story of this group of women. She writes, "the reason WSP was born as a women's-only movement ... was that in SANE (ancestor of the nuclear-free movement) and other organizations, the men deliberated interminably, and the women were left out" (101). The importance of women's marginalisation as a motivating force for action thus stretches as far back as the fifties, as Solnit points out:

Though the most prominent voices were men's, the strength of the [anti-nuclear] movement came from women. What fallout brought about seems to be not only a specific political movement, but a profound loss of faith in authority and a consequent spirit of insurrection. ... The instruments of the Cold War, the bombs themselves, were endangering the people they were supposed to protect (98-99).

The ambiguous “they” here plays upon the dual notion of the government as the protectors of the United States – suggesting that the government’s bombs were endangering its people – and the notion of women as protectors of families – the bomb refuses to allow them to protect their own. Despite its essentialist origins (the group “was as traditional as the Virgin of the Fields in its insistence that women were the guardians and nurturers of life”), WSP emerged from an ecofeminist philosophy (100). By privileging women’s narratives at the test site, Solnit feeds into her own ecofeminist connections to and understandings of the land by gesturing towards women’s involvement in redressing both the site’s and the antinuclear movement’s gender imbalance – which, in the case of the test site, is drawn from a dangerous commitment to patriarchal dominance, played out in the exploitative and careless attitudes of the scientists and bomb tests themselves.

Working against the various ‘isms of domination’ responsible for the test site’s (slow) violence, Solnit shows with these narratives that, as Gilmore writes, “because testimonial truth often exceeds empirical evidence, we look to testimony for both more and less than the facts can document.”⁴¹ In *Savage Dreams*, testimony provides what the test site’s ‘official’ narrative deliberately lacks; the human, emotional effects of nuclear testing on individuals, on families, and on communities. In particular, maternity has continually proven a powerful activist force at the site. Williams writes in *Refuge*:

The women couldn’t bear it any longer. They were mothers. They had suffered labor pains but always under the promise of birth. The red hot pains beneath the desert promised death only, as each bomb became a stillborn. A new contract had been made and broken between human

⁴¹ Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 15.

beings and the land. A new contract was being drawn by the women, who understood the fate of the earth as their own.⁴²

Writing of the mother and Mother Earth, Williams, like WSP, invokes a bond with the earth that rests on a gendered opposition to the masculine, militarised violence of the people and the land on and around the test site. While both depictions are essentialist, they are nonetheless powerful in their refusal to adhere to the ‘official’ designation of the test site as a sacrifice zone in the name of national security. As mothers, sisters, and cousins, women connect in these stories through bloodlines and kinship, and work against the power of nuclear fission to destroy these physical and figurative bonds. In coming together, in creating what Gilmore refers to as a “testimonial network,” which she defines as “circulatory systems that connect the discourses and sites through and across which persons and testimony flow,” the women Solnit meets, speaks to, and describes, connect throughout *Savage Dreams* to render the test site and its surrounding desert a place of survival, a place of ongoing, enduring human and nonhuman presence.⁴³

Survival Zones

Women’s stories and actions are thus central to Solnit’s narrative of the Nevada Test Site. Within the testimonial network, Solnit finds women challenging the accepted narratives of the test site and the toxic land(scape), and by utilising Janet Gordon’s story in particular, Solnit opens her text to include various counternarratives that challenge the government’s rhetoric in the same way as Solnit herself undermines the military discourses responsible for upholding the site’s characterisation as a sacrifice

⁴² Williams, *Refuge*, 288.

⁴³ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 3.

zone. Later in *Savage Dreams*, Solnit continues this testimonial network, as she recounts the story of her time spent with the Dann sisters, two Western Shoshone women whose ranch sits in the ostensibly ‘empty’ desert land of north-central Nevada. The Danns are also virtual uninhabitants, triply erased in the dominant cultural understanding of the desert by their identities as rural farmers, Native peoples, and women, and residing – as all of the uninhabitants do – under the sign of empty. Harding writes, “part of the intricacy of places once thought of as empty comes from their diverse appropriations over time. Their successive palimpsestic layers become apparent through the various stories and human existences that have given them consistency.”⁴⁴ Solnit recognises these layers and consistencies in the enduring connection between the Shoshone people and this land. She writes, “the Western Shoshone never moved anywhere,” describing an emplaced people, and pointing to the ways their lands have been illegally bought and sold by white settlers for centuries (185). Countering the dominant narrative, Solnit quotes Western Shoshone Chief Raymond Yowell’s assertion that “the land cannot be sold” (186). Conflicts over sovereign land are at the forefront of Solnit’s narrative of the Nevada desert, and her particular focus on the legal battle between the Dann sisters and the federal government over their ranch in Northern Nevada highlights at once the seriousness and the ridiculousness of these back-and-forth legal battles.

Just as she utilises militaristic language to decry the treatment of protestors at the test site, Solnit frames the Danns’ land struggle in the vocabulary of nuclear war. She begins the chapter – entitled “The War” – with, “the war began suddenly, though not without warning” (191). This militarised language relates to Masco’s discussion of the ways nuclear vernacular – the specific language of nuclear war and testing –

⁴⁴ Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, xxi.

has leaked into everyday language and experience. He describes the “strange reliance Americans now have on nuclear threat to organize politics and experience,” pointing out that “so many Americans, from so many different social positions ... understand ... non-nuclear, non-military event[s], in decidedly nuclear terms.”⁴⁵ The discourse of nuclear war is so embedded in the language of the American people that it is seemingly universally applicable to moments of crisis or disaster. Solnit utilises this very language to expose the insidiousness of the nuclear vernacular and its part in upholding discourses of dominance. Like nuclear war, the battle for the Dannels’ ranch land in *Savage Dreams* begins suddenly, but is an event for which they have been preparing for decades. Solnit describes Carrie Dann’s account of the beginning of the dispute over grazing permits that began two decades prior to Solnit’s visit to the ranch, including Carrie’s remark, “if they’re so right, like they say, that they took it in 1872, why didn’t they just show us the documents on that?” (160). Here, Carrie gestures to a much longer dispute, and a much longer period of preparation that pertains more broadly to the Western Shoshone’s past dealings with the federal government. For both a few weeks and several decades those involved and interested in the Dannels’ struggle have been on red alert, poised to act for years as various forms of colonial power have been enacted on/in their land. Solnit is part of this group, recounting, “within an hour or so of hearing the alert, I was on the road for the ten-hour drive to Crescent Valley. I had never volunteered to go off to a war before” (191). Like a well-trained civilian jumping up to assist in the event of nuclear war, Solnit drops everything and heads to the ranch.

When she arrives, she acts as lookout, observing rather than directly

⁴⁵ Joseph Masco, “Bad Weather: On Planetary Crisis,” *Social Studies of Science* 40, no. 1 (2010): 28; 28–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/27793340>.

participating in the actions against the roundup. She recalls, “I pointed out that the hot springs at the base of the mountain were as good a place as any to watch from ... so I spent a morning soaking in a tub with a periscope next to my soap, taking in leisurely panoramic scans of the valley” (193). This account is reminiscent of the activist narratives of bodily immersion discussed in chapter one. Similar to the ways Solnit’s movement in/through water in Yosemite marks a dedication to the land(scape) that resists the various ‘isms of domination’ responsible for its exploitation, Solnit’s peripheral role in the Danns’ land war here can be described as “relational activism,” the term used to describe the “behind-the-scenes” work many women activists undertake, which “[draws] attention to the importance of community, networks, and communication in contributing to long-term change.”⁴⁶ That is, while soaking in the tub means Solnit misses being on the ‘front line’ of the day’s action, she nevertheless plays a vital role in the day’s community and communication. “Watching” in this instance thus takes on an importance that far exceeds observing the view (as one might be prompted to do in, say, a national park). It is, as Kathleen Dean Moore asserts, “an energized form of paying attention.”⁴⁷ Solnit’s active watching of the desert, though comically described in terms of her relaxing in the hot spring, marks not a detached, aesthetic view of the landscape, but rather works as a politically active, confrontational and alert looking in which the site/sight of the land(scape) itself represents the call to action. It is another example of Solnit’s subversive use of the dominant narrative. Solnit is watching for signs of the Bureau of Land Management moving onto the ranch

⁴⁶ Sara O’Shaughnessy and Emily Huddart Kennedy, “Relational Activism: Reimagining Women’s Environmental Work as Cultural Change,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Cahiers Canadiens de Sociologie* 35, no. 4 (2010): 552, <https://doi.org/10.2307/canajsocicahican.35.4.551>.

⁴⁷ Kathleen Dean Moore, *Great Tide Rising: Toward Clarity and Moral Courage in a Time of Planetary Change* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2016), 86.

to round up the Dann sisters' cattle, but her actions are akin to scanning the horizon for mushroom clouds, poised and alert for the first signs of warfare. By narrating an event not directly related to nuclear testing via the language of the militarised sacrifice zone, Solnit gestures towards the ways both nuclear and colonial violence share similar origins in the various 'isms of domination' against which Solnit and the Danns are working.

Talking about how the roundup "nearly succeeded" back at the ranch, those involved in the day's events gather to watch a video recording of the action (193). Having been absent from the action herself, Solnit's experience of the day comes at a remove, and there is a sense in which this remove diminishes the urgency or threat of the dispute. The desert roundup loses its potency on the small screen; it becomes farcical. Solnit is aware of her own involvement in this – Carrie Dann "laugh[ed] at [her] for bathing while history was made" – and the whole account is full of stage-crossing, door-slamming theatrics (193). Here, the ranch roundup takes on the same choreography as the protests at the Peace Camp, in which activists were carried off the road by sheriffs in an event "silent as a pantomime" (12). Again, then, Solnit circles back to her subversive engagement with military activities and discourses. By talking about the land struggle as though preparing and watching for a nuclear explosion, Solnit refuses to play into the notion of the desert as simply a landscape of fear any longer, instead manipulating the language of fear to describe a moment of triumph (the roundup, after all, did not succeed). Far from dismantling the activist network at the ranch, the day's events have culminated in a moment of joyful, vital connection around the television screen. Solnit thus recounts a community that laughs together at the ridiculousness of the whole affair. She laughs along with Carrie for being in the bath during the roundup, and plays up the cartoonish nature of running to

and from buildings because of the lack of telephone lines connecting to the ranch. And, in drawing attention to them in tandem with the use of nuclear vernacular, she aims to expose the ridiculousness of warfare in general.

Using the Dann land dispute as a metonym for the nuclear war of the West, Solnit exposes the foolhardy nature of warfare, yet maintains its devastating and emotive consequences. She writes:

The federal government versus the Western Shoshone boiled down to Joe Leaf twisting Carrie Dann's arm. I had come to Nevada because of the great apocalyptic end-of-the-world war, a war of great bombs and technologies annihilating cities or continents or species of the weather itself, and it had changed into a man bruising the wrist of a fifty-nine-year-old woman over some cows, but it was still the same war, and in this round, she had won (196).

The seemingly inconsequential nature of this battle against a fifty-nine-year-old woman and her cows is held up against the backdrop of all-out nuclear war, and violence operates at every level. Solnit distils both nuclear war and the Dannels' ranch dispute down to their common root in the dominant forces of colonialism, patriarchy, and the military. Both the bombs at the Nevada Test Site and the bruise on Carrie Dann's wrist are emblematic of the vendetta against the desert lands and their people, born of a military-industrial history that renders the desert a wasteland constructed by the various 'isms of domination.' As Kuletz asserts:

If we look beneath the rhetoric of progress so common in the postwar twentieth century ... we find a familiar triad: the military, science, and industry. These comprise the institutions that have most benefitted from nuclearism and whose interlocking desires have resulted in, among other things, the emergence of a nuclear wasteland in the

interdesert region populated by communities with far less prestige, privilege, and power.⁴⁸

Tacitly invoking the patriarchal origins of such powers, Kuletz gestures towards the dominant forces against which, I am arguing, Solnit's ecofeminism works. After all, it is important that in this instance the women have won; despite the bruise, Carrie is victorious. In recounting the collective, active power of women in the face of such dominant forces, Solnit gestures towards the impact and joy of incremental victories against the forces of patriarchy and colonialism at play in this account; the roundup only "nearly" succeeded. As Solnit writes in *Hope in the Dark*, "most victories will be temporary, or incomplete, or compromised in some way, and we might as well celebrate them as well as the stunning victories that come from time to time."⁴⁹ In many ways, these victories need to feel like they are one and the same, and a "nearly" works just enough to keep those fighting – for land, for freedom, for equality – going.

This is where the nuclear discourse splits off, though. There is no "nearly" about the success of nuclear war; the test site has made sure that in the event of nuclear war, US weapons would certainly succeed. Amy Hungerford asks, "what do we imagine is destroyed when we imagine nuclear destruction? or more specifically, What do we represent when we represent nuclear destruction?"⁵⁰ In Solnit's imagination, nuclear destruction means a loss of community, and of individual powers to act. The test site takes away small victories, the kind of victories that add up to winning the war. Without them, war begins, and ends, suddenly. The victory at the ranch thus suggests a different approach to the desert, one which views it as a place of

⁴⁸ Kuletz, *The Tainted Desert*, 15.

⁴⁹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 78.

⁵⁰ Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 49–50.

survival, a collective and victorious survival predicated on the mobilised action and power of women.

Gothic Toxicity

As part of this collective action, Solnit discusses her own experience of touring the test site and crossing the cattleguard that marks the site's boundary. In these accounts, the desert takes on a gothic edge, sliding into the uncanny as the eerie fears of the dust's toxicity continually resurfaces in Solnit's account of the nuclear land(scape). As such, Solnit begins to expose the gothic reality of the desert obscured by the dominant culture's refusal to accept the toxic effects of nuclear testing. Lawrence Buell defines "toxic discourse" as a representational tool that "readily montages into gothic" in its ability to disturb, to evoke the uncanny, to make people both fearful and uneasy.⁵¹ Once again evoking the sense of the desert as a landscape of fear, Solnit considers the potential peril in which she puts herself by visiting the nuclear desert, writing, "I don't know now whether coming to the Test Site will kill me, whether some small particle of strontium or cesium in the dust will inaugurate a course of growth that will prove fatal" (42). The possible consequences of her exposure to nuclear fallout are chilling, and this contemplation acts as a reminder of her precarious position every time she visits the test site.

The desert is rendered a landscape of fear from both sides; Solnit is told to fear it in one sense by the Department of Energy – as a place in which to fear arrest and prosecution, but to feel that safety precautions are confidently being taken – and in another sense by fellow activists – as a place to fear the radioactivity of the land itself,

⁵¹ Lawrence Buell, *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture, and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2001), 42.

but to pursue arrest and trespass as forms of activism. Thus even the fear this land(scape) evokes is a kind of paradox whereby competing discourses of danger and safety paralyse even the activists working against such narratives. Solnit recounts the precautions taken in the Peace Camp and at the Test Site by protestors, and records the “terrifying” guidelines given to them by American Peace Test:

There is little that can be done to protect your body from beta and gamma rays which are unseen and penetrate your body. Alpha particles, however, may have longer term effects. They are found on dust particles that can be breathed in or ingested. Cover your face when walking in the wind. Do not eat food dropped on the ground. Don't use bare, dirty hands for eating. ... A large test can throw someone three meters in the air at Ground Zero and kill them (16).

The horrific reality of this place becomes overt only through toxic gothification. The cold imperative of these instructions hides the stark reality of exposure to fallout; they detail the prevention, but shy away from the cause and effects of nuclear exposure. As discussed above, in describing the threat of nuclear dust, Solnit uses her own fears, her individual narrative, to put back into the desert what even the activists organising walks are afraid to include; the emotional fallout of physical exposure. Too momentous, perhaps, to even admit, this kind of emotional potency is avoided on all sides. This may be because, as Daniel Cordle writes, “much of the justification for civil defence was that it would transform ‘terror’ (directionless panic) into more socially useful ‘fear.’”⁵² Cordle identifies a subtle shift in the language of nuclear war, and thus, of the test site, in its movement from terror to fear. Here, Cordle draws attention to the concealment built into the nuclear vernacular. Hidden behind ‘fear’ – useful in the sense that it mobilises, activates, and yet silences citizens – is the abject

⁵² Daniel Cordle, *States of Suspense: The Nuclear Age, Postmodernism, and United States Fiction and Prose* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 3.

terror, the diffuse and paralysing dread most would feel if they could truly comprehend the potential effects of nuclear explosions – effects left out of the ‘official’ narratives on both sides of the cattleguard.

In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit thus works to expose these effects. In Janet Gordon’s description of her brother’s death, Solnit locates the physical and emotional reality of radiation poisoning. Gordon is utilising the language of terror; the severe burns, hair loss, and fast-acting cancer Kent experienced are the reality even the above instructions obscure at the test site. Moreover, the monstrous ferocity with which these effects took hold, coupled with the first person account embedded within Solnit’s framing narrative (so typical of the gothic), render the whole testimony a gothic horror story. In Solnit’s refusal to obscure the effects of nuclear testing, she enters into a mode of toxic discourse in which the visceral, brutal effects of nuclear testing are thrown into relief again and again, a relief that reveals in its abject terror and horror the realities that have remained hidden on both sides of the cattleguard. Fusing in her story the physical and emotional fallout of nuclear technology, Gordon holds up the gothic reality of this place against the government’s claim that the area is safe. In her connective inclusion of Gordon’s story, then, Solnit locates another counternarrative, albeit a frightening, unsettling, revelatory one.

Keen to further interrogate the ‘official’ narrative of the test site against which Gordon’s testimony works, Solnit enrolls on a tour of the test site given by an employee of the Las Vegas Department of Energy. She describes her journey to “Ground Zero” in terms of an uncovering, a discovery of the monstrosities beyond the cattleguard. She writes, “aerial photographs of the Ground Zero region show an arid surface pockmarked with depressions and crisscrossed by roads like long slashes, a surface that looks more like the devastated skin of a plague survivor than the familiar surface

of the earth” (207). Much like Yosemite’s drowned and unburied trees discussed in chapter one, Solnit utilises an anthropomorphic, gothic image to uncover the horrors concealed within the landscape. Yet, while the trees posit a recalibrated relation to place, the violence enacted upon the land here serves to reveal the damage wrought by the dominant forces of nuclear technology; the roads “slash” the land(scape), and the craters are pockmark scars, a lingering image of the deliberate human violence enacted on this place. Ground Zero thus represents a visible expansion of the military-scientific violence enabled by nuclear testing, which Kuletz gestures towards when she describes how “the concept of the laboratory was extended outward to include the desert valleys, high pinion forests, and mountain ranges;” the desert itself has become a scientific experiment.⁵³ This experiment renders the land(scape) abject, monstrous, as Solnit’s metaphor of humanoid disease attests. Limerick writes, “combined with the difficulty of sustaining life on uncertain water and food, this ‘skeletal’ impression of the naked – more precisely, the flayed – earth gave deserts their almost universal associations with death.”⁵⁴ In Solnit’s rendition of the desert land(scape), Limerick’s figurative gothicisation is actualised; the land *is* flayed. Peeled back and ripped apart by nuclear testing, the desert becomes a thing of nightmares as its toxicity becomes more and more apparent.

The nightmare continues as Solnit moves further into the site. Like something out of a suburban gothic television show, Solnit describes the tour’s stop at “Doom Town,” the collection of houses built solely to be exposed to nuclear blasts: “the closest three were destroyed by the test, named Annie. Annie was the first in the Upshot-Knothole series of spring 1953, the series that killed so many sheep in Utah

⁵³ Kuletz, *Tainted Desert*, 43.

⁵⁴ Limerick, *Desert Passages*, 5.

and probably killed Janet Gordon's brother" (209). Drawing an overt connection between the destroyed houses and Kent Gordon's death, Solnit reminds us of the ways these events – so diligently separated by the test site's 'official' narratives of emptiness and harmlessness – are inextricably linked. Moreover, by including the name of the test, Solnit gestures towards the patriarchal undertones of nuclear testing: naming the bomb Annie, scientists attached femininity to an object they sought to control, manipulate, utilise, and whose true power they refused to acknowledge or respect.

Nearly forty years later, these damaging attitudes still permeate Solnit's experience of the test site. In particular, while the tour guide responsible for taking Solnit around the test site neglects to mention the deaths and mutations of cattle in the desert, Solnit fills in the gaps. Although he assures her that "our biologists for the longest time have kept a running catalog of the wild horses," Solnit herself recalls "Dan Sheahan [another farmer whose testimony Solnit includes in *Savage Dreams*] once spoke of encountering a herd of horses that wandered east onto the Sheahan lands with their eyes burnt out, left empty sockets by a blast. And Citizen Alert was publicizing a warning to hunters that deer meat from the region might well be too radioactive to eat" (204; 205). In each connection Solnit makes, the test site's toxic 'leakiness,' its inability to contain any of its ill-effects, becomes apparent. David Teague writes, "the lesson of the desert, as taught by the progression of representations of it that have arisen in Anglo American literature, is that the idea that a wilderness and a civilization can coexist with just a boundary line between them is not tenable."⁵⁵ In nuclear terms, Solnit's experiences and recollections of the test site confirm that no boundaries – not distance, not silence, not the cattleguard – can stop the monstrous impacts of nuclear fallout.

⁵⁵ Teague, *The Southwest in American Literature and Art*, 144.

The burnt out eyes of the wild horses are thus indicative of a much broader sinister effect; the test site's veneer of safety looks good enough at a distance – the warning signs, the boundary lines, even the protective clothing are all costumes of safety – yet up close, the horse that seems fine is blind and bleeding, and the landscape that looks rocky and dusty is flayed and toxic. The land is neither safely inhabitable, nor uninhabited, and in this doubly unsettling narrative, Solnit repositions herself within the paradox of the desert space. By journeying to the epicentre of nuclear testing, Solnit is able to hold together – and thus expose – the contradictions of the Nevada Test Site in an act, and in a text, that engenders the pursuit of an alternative, ecofeminist, understanding of this place, and considers, however monstrous, the connections that may be drawn here. Crucially, these connections are drawn in narrative, as Solnit's writing becomes the thing most resistant to the dominant cultural understanding of the Nevada desert through its intent to expose and undermine the violent technoscientific erasures taking place in this land(scape).

As Solnit's account reveals, presence and vitality have never been the goal of the Nevada Test Site, even when purportedly working in the name of civil defence. The houses were never meant to be lived in, the horses never meant to be approached. And yet, despite her description of damage and disease, the land itself survives; it is a plague *survivor*, not a casualty. In much the same way, on her tour of the site Solnit experiences a startling revelation; it is teeming with wildlife. Solnit writes, “when we came out [of one of the houses], a pale bird dived at us from the rafters, chattering furiously,” and “at the Sedan Crater, a lark swung by the rim at great velocity” (209). That these birds have found refuge in the depths of the Nevada Test Site marks a stark opposition to Rachel Carson's bird-less fable that is now so emblematic of environmental degradation. In *Silent Spring*, Carson writes, “there was a strange

stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone?” asking readers to consider the eerie nature of a place without wildlife.⁵⁶ She describes a land “silent, deserted by all living things.”⁵⁷ This silence is what Solnit expects from the test site. She expects a place so thoroughly destroyed, so continuously disturbed that it surely cannot sustain life.

Uneasy, Solnit writes, “I kept feeling that somehow the small animals had been planted to make the landscape seem reassuring, that I was in a nature movie about Our Friend the Atom” (209). For Solnit, then, it is actually *seeing* animals living in the test site that makes it unnerving, even uncanny. It is as though the test site is so utterly strange that the narratives of survival and sacrifice are fused; the birds flying around the test site may well be a sign of hope, but they are also a sign of the strange, of danger, of death. The birds are “pale” and “furious,” swinging angrily through the air. They are hostile, ugly things, perhaps recalling planes – flying, pale and vast, across military land, these birds are shadows of the intended fate of the nuclear bomb itself, to fly through the air towards ‘enemy’ land. In this sense, the wildlife Solnit sees on the tour reinforces the idea that the test site is dead space, sacrificed and monstrous, and the birds are descriptors of the purpose of this place. Moreover, the birds also literally lead monstrous lives. They are isolated, emaciated, and call to mind Carson’s question, “who would want to live in a world that is just not quite fatal?”⁵⁸ Even the survival narrative has turned monstrous; after the plague this place is pockmarked, it cannot return to its previous state, and the gothic wildlife reflects the more general worry over how to relate to a toxic and uncanny land(scape) that has permeated Solnit’s narratives of dust, death, and disease.

⁵⁶ Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 22.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 29.

Breakdown

Employing the toxic gothic, Solnit's descriptions once again evoke Gelder's assertions that horror often reveals that which has been obscured (see chapter one). Throughout the first half of *Savage Dreams*, Solnit recounts gruesome tales of radiation poisoning, and reveals the effects of fallout on life in and around the test site, in order to prompt a kind of stark honesty in her understanding of this familiar yet dangerous land(scape). Solnit's worries are not assuaged by any of the narratives she receives from the test site, not from the tour guide, nor even from the advice given by activist organisations. Searching for a new narrative of the nuclear desert, Solnit circles back to the counternarratives that have brought her to the centre of the test site. She writes, "it was the stories that brought it to life for me, the stories of [the activists] Pauline and Rachel and Janet, of the atomic veterans, the local people" (211). She goes on, "now I was being wafted around on a tissue of tourism – on nuggets of curious information that painted no picture of the real effect of the 953 or so nuclear bombs that exploded in this place" (211). In the end, Solnit reiterates what she has shown throughout; the very telling of the test site's slow violent effects on these people's lives – in narratives that are peppered with, but not governed by, nuclear vernacular and discourses of war, crisis, and toxicity – is the most potent form of activism in this place. By focusing on the activist narratives of the people around the test site, Solnit demonstrates the connective ecofeminist ethics that underscore her work as a whole. This place has more to offer than the open secret of nuclear testing, it can be both fearful and breath-taking at once, and the way to dismantle nuclear war at the test site is to hold the pieces all at once, and show it for what it is. Fused in the narratives Solnit and the virtual uninhabitants tell, it is the bruise on Carrie Dann's wrist, Kent Gordon's death, and

the dust that settles on Solnit's clothes. Once broken down, seen for what they are – the detrimental effects of various 'isms of domination' – these violent actions become easier to resist.

However, breaking down is precisely the problem of nuclear technology. Alongside the past and present effects of nuclear testing, Solnit details the difficulties of dealing with decaying nuclear waste into the future. Centring on the unfathomably long half-life of plutonium, Solnit's discussion of the proposed nuclear waste storage strategies in Nevada emphasises the futility of attempting to prepare for 24,000 years of storing radioactive waste. Alan Nadel writes, "in nature, things waste with a purpose, and hence they are not waste."⁵⁹ Similarly, Kate Soper asserts, "waste understood as the unused or inutilizable remains of human productive activity and consumption ... must today count as one of the major markers of the distinction between humanity and the rest of nature. All animals excrete, but only humans create waste."⁶⁰ Both Nadel and Soper read waste as a distinctly human creation and problem. Much of the waste generated in the last century – from nuclear materials to single-use plastics – has created a problem to which there is no obvious or immediate (or indeed, existing) solution. Nuclear waste, in its ability to harm all life in both the present and the future, thus becomes doubly indicative of a technoscientific disregard for both the present state of the earth, and its ability to sustain life into the future. This has been known since at least 1949, when the General Advisory Committee to the Atomic Energy Commission wrote, "we are alarmed as to the possible global effects of the radioactivity generated by the explosion of a few super bombs of conceivable

⁵⁹ Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 51.

⁶⁰ Kate Soper, 'Waste Matters,' *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 14, no. 2 (2003): 129, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455750308565528>.

magnitude. If super bombs will work at all, there is no inherent limit to the destructive power that may be attained with them.”⁶¹ If there is no limit to the power, there is no limit to the destruction. In particular, there is no limit to this destruction into the future, as it takes millennia for nuclear waste to decay, and more waste is produced, and improperly stored, every day. The stuff of nightmares, nuclear waste comes to act in *Savage Dreams* as yet another indicator of the slow violence of/in the nuclear land(scape).

Solnit’s focus on the futility of nuclear waste storage is motivated by an interest in futurity that contributes to the ecofeminist undercurrent of all her work. Yet it is fiendishly difficult to comprehend. Like the dust that may or may not cause harm in the future, nuclear waste presents a temporal paralysis, whereby the time its dangers take to materialise is too long for us to truly imagine. In this sense, nuclear waste is an example of what Morton calls a “hyperobject,” a thing “massively distributed in time and space relative to humans.”⁶² Yet the inability to comprehend the ill-effects of nuclear waste is sidestepped altogether by those in power. As Solnit wryly states, “plutonium and other wastes weren’t considered pollutants, since they didn’t go into the environment – but where would they go?” (78). Highlighting at once the naivety and the wilful ignorance of this governmental claim, an ignorance built into the evasive vocabulary of those in power, Solnit locates within the narrative of nuclear waste the same disregard for consequences by which nuclear testing is itself so marked. With a lack of awareness of the ongoing dangers of nuclear waste – or perhaps

⁶¹ James B. Conant, Hartley Rowe, Cyril Stanley Smith, L. A. DuBridge, Oliver E. Buckley, J. R. Oppenheimer, “Annexes to the General Advisory Committee Report of October 30, 1949,” in *War No More: Three Centuries of American Antiwar and Peace Writing*, ed. by Lawrence Rosenwald (New York: Library of America, 2016), 298.

⁶² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.

a deliberate shying away from the facts of plutonium's half-life and ineffective waste storage – the storage strategy put in place by the US government has been consistently lacking. Solnit describes “rusting barrels in the ocean off San Francisco,” and “leaking storage tanks in Hanford, Washington,” all of which are “time-bomb monuments to the underestimates of the past” (78). The disregard for nuclear safety into the future is inextricable from the disregard for environmental and health implications in the present. By describing the future of this waste in the nuclear vernacular – the current storage facilities are “time-bombs” – Solnit mirrors the inescapability of nuclear waste in the very language with which she describes it. It underscores every aspect of desert life.

Including the details of the planned Yucca Mountain nuclear waste storage facility, Solnit further emphasises the incapability we are faced with when dealing with nuclear materials. She writes, “as far as many scientists and activists are concerned, adequate storage is an idea that has not been realized yet, and may be unrealizable” (78). On both sides of the cattleguard, then, the inescapable truth is that the future of nuclear waste is unknown and unpredictable, and no one is equipped to deal with it effectively. Seeing Yucca Mountain as the exemplar of destructive and short-sighted scientific practice, Masco writes, “the nuclear waste storage project at Yucca Mountain is where the desert modernism of the NTS formally confronts its own apocalyptic excess and, in an effort to control that excess, is expanded – exponentially – to the point of self-contradiction and failure.”⁶³ In contrast with the “desert modernism” of the test site itself – which Masco defines as the simultaneous character of the test site as “a fantasy playground” and a “technoscientific wasteland” – the proposed Yucca Mountain facility unravels any and all faith in technoscientific

⁶³ Masco, “A Notebook on Desert Modernism,” 36.

progress/process.⁶⁴ The futility of scientific prediction when it comes to nuclear waste also echoes Elizabeth Ammons' claim that "Western science practices the very alienated reasoning that has led us to believe that human beings can and should conquer and control nature."⁶⁵ Nuclear testing is therefore entangled in a paradox of its own creation, as its scientific aptitude, in terms of arms development, becomes its very ineptitude when it comes to waste storage. It is both progressing and prohibiting. Moreover, its faith in the control of nature – encapsulated by the faith that Yucca Mountain may be modified to contain millennia of radioactive waste – is an unequivocal failure embedded in the very language used to deflect and obscure the dangers of toxic pollutants.

Recognising the ineffectiveness of science's promises, Solnit explains that, due to the unpredictability of the nuclear future, the government agencies responsible for storing waste have landed upon an arbitrary length of time for which they must be able to do so. The 10,000 years they have allocated covers less than half of the dangerous half-life of plutonium, and aside from coming up with an effective waste storage technology, Solnit recounts how the problem of communicating the toxicity of nuclear waste storage that far into the future is also pressing:

The [Department of Energy] expects that in 10,000 years our language and culture will be extinct, since none has ever lasted a fraction of that time. Marking the waste-deposit sites in such a way that the warnings will last ten millennia and be meaningful to whomever may come along then has been something of a challenge to the DOE's futurists. There were proposals ... to establish a nuclear priesthood, which would hand down the sacred knowledge from generation to generation. Others proposed forbidding monuments of a vastness that would survive the erosion of all those years, though any monument could attract curiosity and no inscription was guaranteed to make sense (82–83).

⁶⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁵ Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 170.

Sounding like the plot of a bad science-fiction movie, the nuclear priesthood and/or vast monument ideas are outlandish at best. Faced with such a monumental, and itself ridiculous, task, science has reached its epistemological limits. It relies on religious narratives – a ‘priesthood’ – and in its turn away from rationality, towards faith, it ultimately undercuts its own ‘scientific’ authority. Much like the blue of distance’s resistance to the authoritative narratives of Enlightenment science we saw in chapter one, the epistemological breaking point of nuclear waste marks a turn away from dominant cultural narratives both in Solnit’s work and in the desert itself.

This turn away is engendered by the incomprehensible temporal scale of the nuclear waste problem. The reality of the situation is that this future stretches so far beyond any kind of human future of which we are aware that planning for it seems nigh on impossible. As Morton contextualises it, the half-life of plutonium stretches “almost as long into the future as the Chauvet Cave paintings are in our past.”⁶⁶ This is a dizzying length of time that masks the dire consequences of such technology. Stretched to its, our, epistemological limits, the nuclear land(scape) once again morphs into a gothic nightmare. As Fred Botting claims, “the future is anxiously perceived as another place of destruction and decay, as ruined as the Gothic past.”⁶⁷ The ruins of the test site – the shells of suburban homes, even the dust that covers them – send echoes into the future, signalling the ongoing toxicity of nuclear waste. Thus, far from destroying simply the land’s present, the future of the Nevada desert is bound to gothic toxicity in perpetuity.

⁶⁶ Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 120.

⁶⁷ Fred Botting, “Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 279.

As we have seen, the dominant culture views the desert simultaneously as a dead place and a site of unprecedented technoscientific progress. Part of the strategy of ignoring the ill-effects of nuclear waste is to ignore the holes in the very notion of progress and human ingenuity. As Jane Caputi asserts, “the invention of atomic weaponry is commonly believed to be the crowning achievement of Western intellectual exploration and conquest. Yet, as nuclear waste continues to pile up, with no safe way to contain it, ... even those most mired in denial must begin to question ... the ‘wisdom’ of such ‘progress.’”⁶⁸ Caputi draws attention to the dangers, even violence, of blindly accepting such narratives of progress. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit’s narrative of nuclear waste storage questions and counters this progress narrative by evoking the collapse of linear time into the present moment. Masco writes, “the industrial waste of a nuclear-powered state proves to be uncontainable, exceeding the power of the nation-state that produced it to predict its future effects.”⁶⁹ For Solnit, the sci-fi fantasies that characterise the proposed Yucca Mountain facility confirm the ridiculousness of the nuclear endeavour – much like she highlights the strange theatrics of protests, or the farcical quality of the events at the Dannels’ ranch. Turning once more to the people living and working near the test site she concludes her exposition of the nuclear waste problem with an alternative narrative of the mountain itself. She writes, “Western Shoshone and Southern Paiute elders remember Yucca Mountain as a place to gather chia and stick-leaf, and to hunt big-horn sheep. And they tell of a great snake that crawled down Forty-Mile Canyon and lies beneath the mountain still” (83). Turning to a narrative so far removed from the perverse

⁶⁸ Jane Caputi, “‘The Heart of Knowledge’: Nuclear Themes in Native American Thought and Literature,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 16, no. 4 (January 1992): 8, <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicr.16.4.3x187237723268q2>.

⁶⁹ Masco, “A Notebook on Desert Modernism,” 33.

pantomime of nuclear waste storage – and which directly counters the characterisation of the desert as a site of relentless technoscientific progress – Solnit places her own emphasis on the necessity of locating enduring and alternative narratives in the land itself.

By invoking the knowledge of Native peoples at the Yucca Mountain site, Solnit reveals an alternative future, one in which the futilities of Western science are realised, and the importance of both indigenous and ecofeminist understandings of the land as an ongoing and eternal presence are privileged. While Solnit recognises the difficulty of achieving this in a place already so marred by technoscientific violence, she nevertheless invokes the narrative of the “great snake” that “lies beneath the mountain still.” Doing so, Solnit gestures towards a temporal collapse that facilitates an understanding of place outside of the linear progression of millennia that is caged by Yucca Mountain’s 10,000-year plan. Solnit thus evokes Edward Soja’s claim that, “we can no longer depend on a story-line unfolding sequentially, an ever-accumulating history marching straight forward in plot and denouement, for too much is happening against the grain of time, too much is continually traversing the story-line laterally.”⁷⁰ Soja’s claim emphasises not only alternative narratives, but alternative temporalities that actively resist the dominant culture’s emphasis on narratives of progress. It is in this alternative temporality that Solnit ultimately situates her ecofeminist understanding of the renewed and renewing desert land by fusing the stories separated by the dominant culture’s characterisation of the desert.

⁷⁰ Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989), 23.

Imaginary Time

The dominant cultural understanding of the desert relies on the linear march of history Soja denounces. Walter Prescott Webb writes, “the West [is] short on chronology ... its history is brief, a story soon told.”⁷¹ Webb’s assertions demonstrate the dominant cultural impression of the desert, emptying it not only of occupants, but of human history, too. Undercutting this, Solnit depicts the test site as a place engaged in a strange collapse of time, subscribing to the notion that a linear narrative does not give a complete account of this land. Thus, Solnit represents the site as holding not only multiple spatial identities in one location – survival zone, sacrifice zone, home, war zone – but multiple temporal identities, too. The test site is a place of futuristic ambition, born of the anxieties of the past, and played out repeatedly in the present: it is a place on/in which the past, present, and future – both of human life and beyond it – converge. Masco writes, “in the desert West, both citizens and officials have come to rely on tactical amnesias and temporal sutures to enable a precarious – if addictive – cosmology of progress, one fuelled by high-octane combinations of risk, secrecy, utopian expectation, and paranoid anxiety in everyday life.”⁷² Solnit seeks to resist these “tactical amnesias,” instead working to reveal, all-at-once, the desert’s past, present, and future. The General Advisory Committee to the Atomic Energy Commission already had a good idea, when they wrote their report, of the dangers nuclear technology would pose into the future: “the application of this weapon with the consequent great release of radioactivity would have results unforeseeable at present, but would certainly render large areas unfit for habitation for long periods of

⁷¹ Walter Prescott Webb, “The West and the Desert,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 8, no. 1 (1958): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4516198>.

⁷² Masco, “A Notebook on Desert Modernism,” 24.

time.”⁷³ They were keenly aware of the immense and ongoing destructive force of nuclear weapons. Yet, as Masco asserts, and Solnit’s work shows, evasiveness and wilful ignorance have since characterised the nuclear narrative, as its effects on the future have been screened off by narratives of ‘progress’ and ‘national security.’ Complicating these narratives, Solnit shows not only the effects of nuclear testing as they exist on the land, but also the toxic land’s effects on the past, present, and future of its inhabitants.

In this sense, much in the same way she contests the temporal stasis enforced by the Wilderness Act (discussed in chapter one), Solnit works on rebuilding connections through time, as well as space. That is, the temporal identity of the desert itself permeates the narratives of its people and their actions. Solnit’s activism, both her engagement in antinuclear action and her writing of it afterwards, relies on the fusion of past events in present testimony (the narrative of Janet Gordon’s family and Dan Sheahan’s account of the blind horses), and on the enduring presence of people throughout time (the past, present, and future presence of the Western Shoshone). It also comes to a head in the generational conflation that happens in the connections between, for example, local families, veteran activists, and Native peoples made at the Peace Camp (156). Each version of activism at the site comes from a concern for the future because of the realities of the past. In the same way the splitting action of nuclear fission is eschewed in favour of community fusion, Solnit rejects the splitting of time along the line of “tactical amnesia.”

Thus, to borrow another metaphor from physics, Solnit conceptualises the desert as a place existing in the realm of “imaginary time.” Stephen Hawking argues

⁷³ Conant et al., “General Advisory Committee Report,” 300.

that imaginary time exists on a vertical axis to real time's horizontal. As in movement through space,

if one can go north, one can turn around and head south; equally, if one can go forward in imaginary time, one ought to be able to turn round and go backward. This means that there can be no important difference between the forward and backward directions of imaginary time.⁷⁴

To use Hawking's assertions conceptually, the desert in Solnit's work exists in the realm of imaginary time in that it is able to remember a future that has not yet happened – it is a vision of the future nuclear apocalypse playing out in the desert every day, a vision that directly undercuts the dominant culture's assurance that the site's present danger is all in the name of future security and progress. Hawking asks, “where does the difference between the past and the future come from? Why do we remember the past but not the future?”⁷⁵ At the Nevada Test Site, this difference seems to be eradicated altogether.

Many of the events I have discussed illustrate this fascination with warped/warping time. Describing the video of the roundup at the Danns' ranch, Solnit writes, “history, which once happened the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce, now comes around again as videotape” (193). Acknowledging the strangeness of the day's events, Solnit draws attention to the way her exposure to the roundup exists in a loop or spiral of relayed stories; it comes filtered through the stories she hears, through the view from her periscope in the hot spring, and on the screen while the videotape plays. Solnit is not exposed to it directly, just as she is not exposed directly to a nuclear detonation, but she sees footage of the roundup at the Dann ranch,

⁷⁴ Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History Of Time: From Big Bang To Black Holes* (London: Bantam, 2011), 163.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

and footage of mushroom clouds on her tour of Ground Zero. Furthermore, like the bomb, the cattle roundup has been enacted again and again; the Danns were first served legal notices in the seventies, and the Western Shoshone have been subject to colonial violence for much longer. The day's round-up folds into the Danns' land dispute, which speaks back to the Indian Wars of the nineteenth century, which take us all the way back to 1492. Like the bomb, the roundup repeats itself on the same spot of land, layering event after similar event on the same soil, accumulating damage and violence each time. Here, the site's slow violence is looped, contracted, the slowness reduced to, or evidenced by, its endless repetitions. Decades, even centuries of history folding into the days' events mirrors the way nuclear testing is concentrated into a barely varying image of a mushroom cloud on a black and white screen. While both realities are distorted by the screen on which they are viewed, both events carry real consequences. To return to Beck's idea of the desert screen, which relies on the production of wasteland and hides the violent actions taking place upon it, the screening effect of secrecy in the desert is one that avoids the reality of its consequences.⁷⁶ Thus, like the spatial concealment of secrets in the desert behind the more immediately obvious violence, this collapse of time seems to enact a kind of historical erasure that Solnit seeks to resist. Instead, she draws attention to the temporal fallacy of the Nevada Test Site by overtly describing its endlessly repeating, looped and violent reality.

On the test site tour "[Solnit] saw aerial views of [underground test] collapses over and over again on the overexposed documentary footage: The earth shuddered or rippled as though it were made of thick liquid, but the ripple ran inward as though the film were running backward" (207). Describing the above-ground view of below-

⁷⁶ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 21.

ground nuclear testing, Solnit observes the collapse of craters that now litter the desert. These craters represent a kind of temporal collapse as the film “run[s] backward,” collapsing the event into something that starts in the future – in the sci-fi world of the Cold War arms race – and continues into the past – into the wasteland identity of the desert that has been upheld and exploited by Euroamericans for centuries. Reminiscent of “the fold,” which Gilles Deleuze uses to describe the way matter, things, events connect in the “multiple,” which is “not only what has many parts but also what is folded in many ways,” these craters represent many, even all, possible outcomes, histories, and presents of nuclear testing in one “origami” image.⁷⁷ Various violent events fold into one another. In the realm of imaginary time this is a war being fought on planetary terms, and in the bruise on a Carrie Dann’s wrist. It is the geological evidence of vast desert beauty, and the characterisation of that vastness as a dead wasteland. The craters act as a kind of vertical vanishing point, collapsing time into a receding triangle that pinpoints not the moment of explosion, but the point at which all of its consequences – the future effects of fallout, the present impact of the nuclear blast, and the desert’s past, present, and future as varying kinds of (toxic)wasteland – exist simultaneously. Written into the folding image of the craters, then, is a moment of fusion. In opposition to the blasting apart of nuclear fission, Solnit sees connection in the converging craters, which become symbols in which the reality of this place, in every temporal moment, is distilled into a moment of devastating collapse. This connection, or fusion, which so far has signalled an active, ecofeminist engagement with the land, here takes on the same monstrous quality as the desert’s gothic toxicity itself.

⁷⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London: Continuum, 2006), 3; 7.

Yet in this connection Solnit still finds opportunities to counter the dominant character of the desert land(scape). Opposing the tactical amnesias of nuclear testing, Solnit writes, “since 1963, even most antinuclear activists haven’t paid much heed to the Test Site. Nuclear war, whether you are for or against it, is supposed to be a terrible thing that might happen someday, not something that has been going on all along” (5). Invoking once again the ‘official’ narratives coming from both sides of the cattleguard, Solnit asserts that nuclear testing has always been happening, and will always happen; the nuclear war performed by the test site has been there “all along.” While inaccurate in terms of real time – nuclear testing began above ground in Nevada in 1951, and went underground in 1963 – in terms of imaginary time, the eternity of nuclear testing speaks to the ways the desert-as-wasteland has been an enduring conceptualisation of the arid landscape that readily feeds into and upholds the designation of the test site as a national sacrifice zone. It helps to write the land as dead. The desert has been stripped of any kind of shifting ‘natural’ identity, in the form of vegetation, historical human identity, population, or even geological change, due to the altering forces of radiation and explosion on the rock faces of the surface of the desert itself. It has also been subject to a collapse in human history, as it is, at once, a future post-apocalyptic landscape in which the debris of human life is littered, a ‘present’ suburban town subject to a nuclear blast, and an anthropological site in which evidence of human habitation stretches back millennia.

Each of these presences/presents exists simultaneously, stacked up and collapsed, like the craters, into a single temporal and spatial moment. Thus, while Jacques Derrida asserts that “nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event,” Solnit depicts it as something that it always occurring,

something that has always occurred, and will always occur.⁷⁸ The desert exists on a temporal plane other than the ‘real’ time of cause and effect and thus contradicts its own designation as a triumphant site of technoscientific progress. The character of imaginary time would suggest that the suburban house Solnit sees on the tour of the test site exists in its both before- and after-state, as it was/is constructed as both an example of the effects of nuclear testing – so destroyed and rendered an object of the past – and as an example of the endurance of human ingenuity – so an object of endurance, standing in the desert in perpetuity. Yet, as both-at-once, it represents a toxic human failure. The notion of the test site existing in the realm of imaginary time lifts it out of its comfortable place in narratives of progress and national security, and exposes – without the uncertainty of a safe future (because the future is already happening at the test site, and it is far from safe) – the unsustainable, dangerous destruction that is, at best, futile, and, at worst, an apocalyptic death wish. Solnit’s portrayal of the odd temporality of the test site becomes in this light a call to act, to reassert the importance of fusion over fission and overcome the violence and dominance of the technoscientific, military narrative.

Collapse

Using her description of this death-drive to incite, and emphasise the importance of, action at the test site, Solnit takes to task the very terminology used to describe nuclear “tests.” She writes:

Test is something of a misnomer when it comes to nuclear bombs. A test is controlled and contained, a preliminary to the thing itself, and

⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)” trans. by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 23, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464756>.

though these nuclear bombs weren't being dropped on cities or strategic centers, they were full-scale explosions in the real world, with all the attendant effects. I think that rather than tests, the explosions at the Nevada Test Site were rehearsals, for a rehearsal may lack an audience but contains all the actions and actors. The physicists and bureaucrats managing the U.S. side of the Arms Race had been rehearsing the end of the world out here, over and over again (5).

By characterising the tests as “rehearsals,” Solnit reiterates the kind of time-loop effect of the Nevada Test Site, in which the nuclear explosions are endlessly and destructively repeated, with no change in the actions of the testers, but with more and more fallout, radiation, and destruction in each bomb’s wake; the effects are real, and the tests have consequences. Similarly, by rehearsing for the apocalypse over and over again, the test site exemplifies both the fear and the exultation brought about by nuclear advancements; the fear of annihilation and the pride in technological progress come to a head within the technology of the bomb itself. The apocalyptic narrative in which Solnit frames her descriptions of the bomb tests thus suggests not a resigned fatalism, but a wilfully destructive end-of-days that is acted out again and again as a posturing mechanism for the US government. Beck writes, “the Cold War was, in fact, fought in the American West as a hot war, [it] replays history from, as it were, the other side, not as a danger averted but as a catastrophe that did indeed take place.”⁷⁹ Far from simply a “test,” nuclear detonation was a mode of enacting power, of fighting a war without leaving home soil. Solnit, too, writes, “the bombs set off in Nevada seemed instead a way of making war by display and displacement, as some cultures and species do – demonstrating their ability to attack rather than actually doing so” (6). Like the slow violent effects of radiation, the war of the test site is displaced, not immediately apparent as war because of its designation as a “test,” but nevertheless

⁷⁹ Beck, *Dirty Wars*, 294.

bearing all the signs of conflict. Like the craters, nuclear “rehearsals” enact a simultaneous past, present and future. They repeat the past of every test that has come before them; they enact an immediately destructive present; and they extend this violence into the future, all in one explosion.

And the collapsed time of this explosion ends up in particles of dust covering the Nevada desert. The first half of *Savage Dreams* is entitled “Dust, Or Erasing the Future” (1). In the scope of real time, erasing events that have not yet happened is impossible. In imaginary time, in which, Hawking asserts, it may be just as possible to remember the future as the past, erasing the future may be entirely possible. In this sense, the dust embodies the future violence the test site may enact. It contains within it the (potentially) deadly effects of nuclear fallout. Yet the test site is constructed – narrated – in such a way as to conceal or even destroy evidence of this violent future. From the evasive information Solnit receives from the test site tour guide, to the government narratives concealing the effects of radiation from those living in downwind areas, time and again the test site’s very existence relies upon acts and stories of concealment. Erasing the future – of inhabitants, of place – ensures the test site can exist in a kind of permanent present, not having to take into account, to be held accountable for, any of its long term ill-effects.

Conversely, the notion of futurity, of connecting beyond the present and into a future relationship with the land, is an urgent concern of ecofeminism. Vandana Shiva writes:

How the planet and human beings evolve into the future will depend on how we understand the human impact on the planet. If we continue to understand our role as rooted in the old paradigm of capitalist patriarchy – based on a mechanistic world-view, and industrial, capital-centred competitive economy, and a culture of dominance, violence, war and ecological and human irresponsibility – we will witness the

rapid unfolding of increasing climate catastrophe, species extinction, economic collapse, and human injustice and inequality.⁸⁰

Attempting to erase the future, the Nevada Test Site seeks to relinquish all responsibility for the ties its actions have to the most pervasive ‘isms of domination.’ Shrouded in the militarised narrative of national security and technoscientific progress, the site obscures the colonial and capitalist impulses that sent Euroamericans west in the first place.⁸¹ Yet, by situating the site within imaginary time, Solnit refuses to let it get away with this avoidance. Piling the future onto the past and the present, and revealing it all-at-once, Solnit emphasises the already destructive effects of nuclear testing, as well as gesturing towards its ongoing destruction. She writes, “just as the MX Missile was giving up the ghost in the early eighties, Yucca Mountain succeeded it as a doomsday future for the state of Nevada. The government, which hasn’t been able to make any conventional use of public, or Shoshone, land in Nevada, seems hell-bent on making it useless for everyone and everything for all time” (77). Reading the test site as a place that seems intent on building a succession of doomsday futures that exist in perpetuity, Solnit exposes the odd temporality of this place that seeks – but ultimately fails – to relinquish all responsibility for the ‘future’ ill-effects that have been happening there for decades already.

In this sense, Solnit’s overarching fascination with the desert is born of, and ties into, her own involvement with activism at the test site. Her presence at antinuclear protests, her time in plastic handcuffs and on coaches full of activists driving through the desert dust, culminates in the two hundred pages of protest that

⁸⁰ Vandana Shiva, preface to *Ecofeminism*, Critique Influence Change Edition, ed. by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (London: Zed Books, 2014), xviii–xix.

⁸¹ Marc Reisner identifies fur trapping, the Homestead Act, and the expansion of the railroads as the ventures that sent the most Euroamericans West, all of which garnered huge financial gain. See *Cadillac Desert*, 15–51.

make up the first half of *Savage Dreams*. Solnit's focus is on survival, on the ways her experience of the test site goes against the understanding of the desert as an empty, expansive, dead wasteland that has allowed for the continued detonation of nuclear weapons for decades. Thus, as Ammons writes, "the question of human survival is finally not scientific or technological, but moral and spiritual."⁸² At the test site, Solnit sees the destructive future the place has in store. In *Savage Dreams*, she exposes it. It is a future that has been happening for decades, repeating – rehearsing – the apocalypse and accumulating the toxic violence of nuclear fallout. Yet rather than retreating from it, Solnit faces it head on, she walks towards it. Solnit exposes the fallacy of scientific and technological 'progress' at the test site by framing her own experiences there in empathetic connections with other people, and an appreciative, protective depiction of the land itself. She writes, "it's terrifying that we may destroy the land before we learn to live with it, but the process of improvisation, the murkiness of the future, are exhilarating. The one thing the American landscape promises is that the future will look nothing like the present. I like being part of an unfinished project, however disastrous it has been to date" (182). Engaging in this unfinished project, this ongoing story, Solnit places herself in hopeful relation to the future of American land(scape)s. Refusing to believe that this future may only be destructive, but conceding that it has left a lot of debris in its wake, Solnit encounters, once again, the paradox of the desert. Solnit counters narratives of violence and destruction with stories of hope, and the protests in which she engages are incrementally successful. The voices and power of the women she meets help lift the desert out from under the "sign of empty." Her engagement with rewriting, in various ways, the narrative of the desert proves that other ways of reading, relating to, and being in this land(scape) are

⁸² Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 29.

not only possible, but vital to the future of the desert and its inhabitants. Refusing to read or write this land as dead, Solnit refuses the dominance of nuclear technology by understanding the desert instead via an ecofeminist narrative of action, connection, and futurity.

Conclusion: “That Timeless Night”

Writing the collapsed temporality of the test site space, Solnit exposes the “successive palimpsestic layers” of this land(scape).⁸³ Fusing together the past, present, and future of the desert, Solnit reaches a point at which her own successive layers of fusion allow her to not only expose the myth of dead, empty, sacrificial space encapsulated by the present ravaging of the desert, but to re-allow a place so mired in the destructive present a past and a future. That is, holding these things in her narrative all-at-once, Solnit sees in their strange, fused energy, a way out. And her way out is walking. In the final chapter of *Savage Dreams*, “Full Circle,” Solnit recounts a moonlit walk to two standing stones on a hill above the Peace Camp. Taken in the aftermath of the day’s protest, and taken merely for the pleasure of taking it, this journey lacks the urgency with which Solnit recounts most of her desert experience in *Savage Dreams*. Instead, this walk signals another engagement with the temporality of desert space.

Cordle characterises the Cold War period as existing in a kind of “fraught stasis,” a simultaneously fixed and endless state of stagnated anxiety.⁸⁴ Solnit’s descriptions of the desert outlined above contend with this fraught feeling, but in the closing narrative of the Nevada desert, she relinquishes anxiety: she just walks. She writes, “to walk toward the problem is an act of responsibility, an act of return, and an

⁸³ Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, xxi.

⁸⁴ Cordle, *States of Suspense*, 14.

act of memory. The walkers walk into that homeland with all its hundreds of bombs' worth of fallout to shoulder the burdens of the past" (377). With this, Solnit collapses the temporality of the protests at the site – they are, at once, walks of the past, present, and future. Solnit understands these walks in terms of both their sense of responsibility and as acts of memorial, and the description of walkers shouldering the burden of decades of nuclear testing on this land invokes a literal carrying forth; the actions in the desert not only affect the present halting of nuclear tests, but carry that into the land's future. Nadel writes, "the atomic age was thought of and continues to be thought of as both hope and horror."⁸⁵ While Solnit has been engaged throughout *Savage Dreams* in pointing out the horror, in the final chapter she circles back once again to hope. Thus, although Nadel's hope comes from understanding the Cold War as an era of technological progress, Solnit's hope comes from the counternarratives of protest and action that have characterised her own Cold War experience. To walk, Solnit asserts, is to find hope, and hope for the future, as Ammons says, is about re-learning our relationship with the earth.⁸⁶ John Blair Gamber writes, "the rhetoric of pollution and the rhetoric of pure wilderness spaces to be preserved from human contamination add to the perception of environmentalism as a movement of exclusivity."⁸⁷ If Solnit's task in the wilderness is to complicate the very pristine impression the term 'wilderness' projects, her task in the desert is more radical still. More than merely exposing the dominant culture's exploitative actions, Solnit's depiction of the Nevada desert rewrites the land(scape) on ecofeminist terms, taking into account the presence

⁸⁵ Nadel, *Containment Culture*, 19.

⁸⁶ Ammons, *Brave New Words*, 165.

⁸⁷ John Blair Gamber, *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins: Waste and Contamination in Contemporary U.S. Ethnic Literatures* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 184.

of pollutants, dangers, and erasures but nevertheless asserting the vital presence of the desert land and its (un)inhabitants.

Solnit's walk takes place on the eve of Columbus Day in 1992, a day that marked for the US's indigenous population, "half a millennium of invasion, extermination, and slavery, nothing to celebrate" (374). Amongst the Peace Camp actions, sweatlodges, and storytelling, Solnit's walk marks another moment of memorial and protest on the site of the desert. Taken on the eve of such a vexed and temporally-bound day, Solnit's walk is reactionary, even revolutionary, in its very timelessness. She writes:

We began to walk toward [the standing stones] in the same clear moonlight that had been shining all night every night since I'd arrived, and walked for a long time without the hill becoming larger or nearer. We speculated on whether it was a small near hill or a large distant one: Even in daylight desert distance is hard to gauge. The desert floor seemed to roll right up to it, but it could be that a dip of any width lay between us and the foot of the hill.

The journey was made more demanding by the constant necessity of weaving in among the thorn bushes and cacti: It was almost always impossible to pursue a straight course, nor could we go more than a few steps looking ahead rather than down. On the ground, the rocks were becoming larger, and the streaks of quartz that ran through them looked like petroglyphs. It was easy to see by the light of the moon. Everything was perfectly clear and shadows were sharp, but nothing was bright, and there was no color to this cold light. It was like a dreamworld or a land of the dead in which time seemed less certain (382).

The moonlight's timelessness – it shines "all night every night" – characterises Solnit's walk as whole. Seeing the landscape that is usually baked by the hot sun in this cool, colourless light changes the experience of the desert. It also reduces the desert's association with nuclear testing; devoid of heat, the light in this description is in direct opposition to the sudden, hot, flashes of nuclear testing. As such, Solnit

removes her depiction of the desert almost entirely from the reality of nuclear testing in Nevada. Yet rather than becoming an act of erasure, this removal underscores the narrative that precedes it. In the moonlight, “everything was perfectly clear,” there are no secrets and Solnit sees this land(scape) for what it is. It is deceptive – its “distance is hard to gauge” – and it is “demanding.” It is also a “dreamworld.” The desert here exists outside of the violent daily reality of the test site.

In fact, it is outside the usual codes of human existence; Solnit walks and walks “without the hill becoming larger or nearer,” as though she herself is suspended, spatially and temporally, in this world outside the everyday. Even the quartz lifts Solnit out of the typical long-distance view of the desert, as she is forced to look up close at the shining ground. In the ghostly world of the moonlit desert, Solnit relinquishes the temporal confines of the daytime land(scape). Time is “less certain,” and there is a palpable feeling of possibility, of hope, in the perfect, eerie clarity of the night-time desert. The suspension evoked here thus takes on a new quality; Solnit is not stuck in the stasis of the desert, she floats above it, seeing not its paused immediacy, but the stretching past and future of the place layered in the quartz, in the distance, and in the struggle of the present moment. Finishing her walk, and entering back into the linear time of the Peace Camp, Solnit writes, “in that world of bright light and companionable solitude, it seemed perfectly plausible that a century or two had passed” (383). Fusing two centuries into one night, Solnit celebrates the elasticity of desert time, and uses it to posit an understanding of the desert space as more than threatening, as more than beautiful; as something that did, and therefore will, endure.

It will last beyond the human, and in particular it will last beyond the Western notion of the very centrality of human importance – an idea key to the various narratives of dominance responsible for nuclear technology. Two centuries might have

passed without Solnit noticing; the desert does not exist for her alone. *Savage Dreams*' final chapter is characterised by this sense of endurance, this expansion beyond the present, the human, the self. At the Peace Camp, Solnit recalls:

During those days of seeing the full moon rise in the east as the sun set in the west and then the sun rise in the east as the moon set a little way north of sunset's country, as though the two chased each other across the sky in an interval of perfect symmetry, I felt for the first time what I'd known as long as I can remember: that the earth is nothing but a sphere spinning through a space with other, brighter spheres in it (384).

The realisation of her own place within the larger community not just of the West, not even the earth, but in space itself brings Solnit a new awareness of the power and potential latent in her work. The largeness with which she sees the universe represents not a futility, but an acknowledgment of the importance of the actions she engages in and of the people she meets. Expanding both outwards and inwards, this feeling – this emotional response to knowledge she has long possessed – pushes Solnit to capture not only the facts of the events in the desert, but their emotional potency. In terms of Gilmore's assertion that we "look to testimony for both more and less than the facts can document," Solnit's own testimony here provides more than the facts.⁸⁸ Including her own narrative, Solnit links her relationship to this place to the various stories she has encountered within it. Her account, like those from Carrie Dann and Janet Gordon, provides an emotive, experiential vision of the desert outside of the dominant narrative. Characterised throughout the text by her focus on the desert peoples'

⁸⁸ Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 3.

experiences of nuclear testing, Solnit re-centres the narrative in the final pages on her own understanding of this strange, timeless land(scape).

And what she achieves, finally, is a fused narrative of the land's inhabitants that has been the driving force of her time in, and account of, the Nevada desert. She ends the chapter, and the book, by writing, "what else is there to tell, but that the circle [of people at the Peace Camp] became so large its far side was out of sight behind tents and the rolling terrain, or that we left for San Francisco late that day, Diane, Rachel, a woman from Seattle, and I. This time I was just going back, because I was already home" (385). Expansion in the desert is, for Solnit, not indicative of the force of the bomb, but of the power of people to enact change. Expansion encapsulates, connects, and fuses together across the land(scape), as the ripples of the various narratives she has included throughout the text wash over this final moment. Describing the group of women of which she is a part as she drives away, Solnit calls back to the (eco)feminist networks she has encountered throughout her time in Nevada; she describes a community of women, all engaged in action and all engaged in an appreciative relationship with the desert. That Solnit is at home in the desert is indicative not just of the land(scape)'s familiarity, however vexed it may be, but also in the communities that arise and endure within, through, and around it in spite of its toxicity. In the final word of the text, Solnit challenges all of the military, technoscientific, capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal narratives that characterise this desert as a sacrifice zone. Far from uninhabited, and actively alive, the desert land(scape) Solnit writes in *Savage Dreams* is not dead, the dominant culture did not manage to kill it. It is home.

Chapter Three

The City

“Like most aesthetics this one contained an ethic, a worldview with a mandate on how to act, how to live.”¹

Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (2005)

Introduction: Into the Labyrinth

Despite the explorations of ‘natural’ land(scape) that appear throughout her work, Solnit refers to herself in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* as “a city dweller” (108). In both *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* (2013), Solnit tells stories of her life in San Francisco, recounting not those trips into the land(scape)s discussed in chapters one and two, but more introspective narratives that spring from Solnit’s city-dwelling daily life. In this chapter, I read the city as an ‘aesthetic,’ a representational mode marked by an engagement with circling, associative, meditative metaphor. As a representational tool, the city in *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* demonstrates an ecofeminist ethic based on the same principles of connectivity and care that have characterised Solnit’s explorations of America’s ‘natural’ land(scape)s. I argue that both texts, in their focus on the introspective, on life in the city, memories of youth and experiences of care, demonstrate an ecofeminism that extends the “partnership ethic” introduced in chapters one and two to include those aspects of Solnit’s life not overtly engaged in feminist or environmentalist acts. This chapter thus works slightly differently to the previous two chapters, focusing not on the exterior importance and

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 88. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

influence of place, but considering the internal, introspective life Solnit writes. Following Timothy Morton's assertion that "place as a question is *internal* to the very question of self," this chapter makes room for a discussion of the introspective autobiographical narratives in Solnit's texts that I read as originating from within and around this city aesthetic/ethic.² With this in mind, I argue that *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* display an ecofeminist ethic not only via their content but in their formal preoccupation with connection, association, and care.

Marc Eli Blanchard asks, "how can the idea of the city, which is based more on myth than on reality, become the model for many other things we take for granted in our lives, including our language, our mode of making stories, our own selves?"³ Considering these intersections, this chapter argues that the strands of language, storytelling, and autobiography that collide in *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* are folded into, or engendered by, the urban environment(s) with which both texts are concerned. *A Field Guide* contains a chapter on Solnit's youth in San Francisco, one that links the city with formative adolescent experiences. *The Faraway Nearby* documents Solnit's experiences of illness, both her own and her mother's, and takes place in the interior; in urban every day spaces such as homes and hospitals, and inside the sick, worried, or questioning mind. This introspection becomes key. By connecting adolescence to a development of introspection and selfhood in *A Field Guide*, I link Solnit's city-dwelling ecofeminism to the idea of autobiography itself, and extend this into an analysis of *The Faraway Nearby*'s preoccupation with memory and meaning-making. Both texts discussed in this chapter are the most 'about' Solnit herself, a fact,

² Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 176 (italics in the original).

³ Marc Eli Blanchard, *In Search of the City: Engels, Baudelaire, Rimbaud* (Saratoga: ANMA Libri, 1985), 20.

I argue, that relates to the urban, everyday character of their settings. Burton Pike writes of the city as “a totem for attitudes, feelings, and beliefs outside the realm of reason It has represented, with remarkable constancy, antithetical feelings which seem to be irreconcilable: order and disorder, mighty heart and paved solitude ... nowhere city and utopia.”⁴ These contradictions and simultaneities go some way to explaining why the city is such a useful, not to mention evocative, location and metaphor for Solnit’s narratives of self, particularly of self-in-relation-to her mother, her family, her friends, her environment. In the sense that it represents a concentration of space and narrative – the city represents a reduction in the space individuals have to live, but also, consequently, increases the likelihood that lives, and stories, will intersect – the city becomes not just a place *in* which the self finds expression, but a place *through* which to express that self. In turn, the city becomes for me a place not only in which to locate Solnit’s ecofeminism, but through which to consider it. Thus, I explore not only the physical urban setting of the texts, but the contradictory feelings and experiences those texts document.

The self in Solnit’s work is multiple, contradictory, shifting and simultaneous. It relies on the comingling of many narratives, the crossing and connecting of many paths, and it is in these narrative connections that I begin to read Solnit’s work as not only ecofeminist in content, but as formally ecofeminist, too. After a discussion of the labyrinthine urban environment in *A Field Guide*, I turn this reading back onto itself to contend with the formally labyrinthine *The Faraway Nearby*. If *A Field Guide* is concerned with the physical urban environment and its use as a metaphor for the adolescent psyche, *The Faraway Nearby* extends this concern by interrogating the

⁴ Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 137.

uses and importance of metaphors themselves in representations of introspection. Thus, while my analysis never wholly relinquishes the urban environment that gives rise to it, I nevertheless move beyond the literal city-setting of Solnit's work to consider the figurative qualities of her writing. I therefore use the labyrinth, as a metaphor, to move away from the urban beginnings of my discussion and consider the formal decisions arising from this metaphor in Solnit's writing – decisions that, I argue, demonstrate another, formal or stylistic layer latent in Solnit's ecofeminist ethics. Connecting this formal quality to ethics of care, as a way of attending to, voicing, and managing usually confounding experiences, I unpack the ways Solnit works against a different, but related, set of 'isms of domination' that would purport to constrict and control the narrative she tells and the experiences she has in a way just as characteristic of her ecofeminist ethics as those seen in chapters one and two. Centring on the mutability of both place and self, this chapter demonstrates the ways a shifting, partial understanding may present an alternative to dominant ways of thinking about care and connectivity in terms of both people and place, now and in the future.

City Ruins

The city appears in *A Field Guide* as the setting of Solnit's youth in a chapter entitled "Abandon." The chapter ruminates upon the upheaval and turmoil felt by young people, a feeling reflected, as Solnit suggests, by/in the punky urban environment of the early 1980s (88). "Abandon" pairs ruined buildings with adolescent minds to depict people and places that fall outside of the dominant culture. In this sense, Solnit's depiction of the urban environment comes to work against similar 'isms of domination' to those discussed in chapters one and two. Solnit writes,

a city is built to resemble a conscious mind, a network that can calculate, administrate, manufacture. Ruins become the unconscious of a city, its memory, unknown, darkness, lost lands, and in this truly bring it to life. With ruins a city springs free of its plans into something as intricate as life, something that can be explored but perhaps not mapped (89).

Emphasising the indeterminacy of the city, its criss-crossing pathways and sensory overload, Solnit sees the intricacies of the (neglected) urban landscape reflected in the intricacies of the (young) human brain; both remain elusive, undefined, and fall outside of the narratives of progress and profit that fuel the modern city (neither are economically ‘productive’).

Solnit connects her urban wandering in the 1980s with her discovery of punk rock, writing,

punk rock had burst into my life with the force of revelation, though I cannot now call the revelation much more than a tempo and an insurrectionary intensity that matched the explosive pressure in my psyche. I was fifteen, and when I picture myself then, I see flames shooting up, see myself falling off the edge of the world, and am amazed I survived not the outside world but the inside one (90).

Solnit reflects upon her own inner turmoil in the same register she uses to describe the sprawling unconscious mind of the city; both are chaotic, both are freeing, “insurrectionary” and lively. In this sense, both teenagers and abandoned buildings exist within city spaces, but exist antithetically to a dominant culture that privileges notions of progress, capital gain, order, and the status quo. At fifteen, Solnit is below the age of consent, cannot drive, and cannot vote – she is structurally disempowered by her youth, and cannot contribute politically or economically to the city, but she remains open to and engaged in modes of countercultural expression (punk rock) that

provide her with meaning. This experience of both disempowerment and liberation is the key to inhabiting both the city and the self. In her discussion of the explosive, fiery forces of punk music, Solnit connects urban space to ideas of “exploration, becoming, and pain” that, Patricia Meyer Spacks argues, are a fundamental part of the adolescent experience.⁵ Thus, reflected in the topographical indeterminacy, the topographical possibility, of urban ruins, the expressive adolescent mind marks a defiantly chaotic presence in the centre of the rigidly ordered urban environment.

Pike writes of the ways “seeing [the city] from street level is to experience it actively. Here one finds oneself in a labyrinth.”⁶ Tapping into the simultaneously disorientating and liberating experience of the labyrinth, Pike asserts the possibilities latent in actively experiencing a disorienting urban space. The idea of the labyrinth is key, then: it gestures towards a quest, an initiation, and an emergence. Indeed, in Greek Myth, Theseus undertakes his journey into the labyrinth as a young man, and his emergence signals a kind of coming of age.⁷ In *A Field Guide*, a labyrinthine ruined hospital becomes an active participant in Solnit’s own coming of age, a place in which she recognises her own potential. She describes her experience of shooting a short film there as a gift that engendered her own “becoming” of sorts, an unravelling thread that marks the development of her identity as a writer:

Perhaps the whole film was a gift that the filmmaker gave me, an encouragement to write my own escape, and the film too a ribbon as long as the thread with which Theseus traced his way out of the

⁵ Patricia Meyer Spacks, *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination* (London: Faber, 1982), 3.

⁶ Pike, *The Image of the City*, 34. In a sense, the labyrinth precedes the city. Rodney Castleden, in *The Knossos Labyrinth: A New View of the “Palace of Minos” at Knossos* (London: Routledge, 1990), explains that the ancient ruins of the Labyrinth sit next to the classical city of Knossos, which “used a simplified version of the monument’s plan as its cipher” (16). In this instance, the city was constructed deliberately to mimic the labyrinth to emphasise the space’s indeterminacy.

⁷ Gaetano Cipolla, *Labyrinth: Studies on an Archetype* (New York: Lagas, 1987), 25.

labyrinth in Crete. The hospital covered an entire city block with five stories of corridors and chambers. It was surrounded by one of those iron fences like a row of joined spears we'd scale before entering one of the cellar windows broken by squatters and explorers whose traces we occasionally found. Its intricate vastness reminded me of all those Borges tales about labyrinths and endless libraries, and part of the premise of my story line was that the hospital was thought to be infinite, an interior without an outside. It was a metaphor for an existential malady and an excuse for our heroine – me in an old white nightshirt – to keep wandering those decrepit corridors with their dusty light for our film (93).

The film connects stories and cities, people and places, its labyrinthine ribbon unspooling as Solnit explores the psychological resonances of place. We follow Solnit into the labyrinth as she unwinds the story of the ruin. Sandwiched between geographical and architectural information about the ruin – that it covers five blocks, that the windows are broken, in short, visual and visible information – is a coded rendering of topographical and, by extension, spatiotemporal indeterminacy. The fence, like spears, sets the temporality of the building at odds with city blocks and five story buildings; the spears seem to place it in the past, or at the very least, encode it with a kind of violence. Similarly, the mention of both squatters and explorers, breaking and entering, in one sentence creates a jarring sense of intrepidity and illegality – although it is unclear which refers to whom (after all, narratives of 'intrepid' exploration are often couched in illegality of some sense or another). William Viney argues, "part of [ruins'] dynamic, evocative ability to suggest a wide range of associations issues from the temporal divisions between their use and their status as waste."⁸ Collapsing the use-history and the waste-history of the hospital into one descriptive sentence, Solnit deliberately destabilises the hospital's character as a

⁸ William Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 128.

way of drawing attention to the instability of the identities of those running around inside it. Doing so, she gestures towards their “becoming.” She also gestures towards her own story-telling; in the slippage in the term “story” from floors to narratives, Solnit begins to weave a story *of* the ruin as the ruin itself gifts her images to use as metaphors for her own adolescent experience. In this conscious pairing between self and place, Solnit locates a similar connective impulse to the ecofeminist place-narratives discussed in chapters one and two.

Utilising the same reciprocal relationship upon which Solnit bases her depictions of land(scape), then, the film both inspires and is inspired by the endlessness of the hospital’s vacant corridors. They are real, they stretch and wind the five floors, but Solnit adds another dimension to the architecture, using the corridors as a stand in for infinite, and thus unsettling, space, and a troubled psyche – which bends back to evoke the sense of unsettling space latent in the vast emptiness of the physical ruin to begin with. The labyrinthine ruin and its adolescent ‘inhabitants’ are irreversibly fused in their status as wayward urban outsiders. Moreover, as a story we are reading, the passage itself acts like a labyrinth, beginning and ending with the film: we read our way into the centre of the narrative (we enter through the cellar window into the hospital) via a narrative of the film and the filmmaker, and back through the storyline and protagonist to end back at the object of the film itself. There is thus a travelling through – in – the mutability of the urban environment in the very writing, and reading, of this text, one that utilises the labyrinthine qualities of built space to explore the development and location of selfhood.

Ruins are prophetic; they give us a glimpse of what the city as a whole may one day look like. Miles Orvell considers the ruin part of “the [slow] devolution of

things that is a by-product of social and economic change.”⁹ Emphasising this devolution, Solnit writes of the cities of her youth in the Cold War context in which she inhabited them; “in the 1980s we imagined apocalypse because it was easier than the strange complicated futures that money, power, and technology would impose” (106). Here, the ruined city as a whole seems to suggest a sudden ending (an ending befitting the dramatic adolescent mind, perhaps), yet in light of Orvell’s claims, ruins themselves are not apocalyptic – they are not sudden, they are slow, they are not ended but always ending. They are “entropic.” Orvell, using this term, writes of ruins as “the detritus left behind in the headlong, at times reckless, rush to the future that otherwise drives our culture,” describing the ways ruins make “concrete and visible the entropic narrative of industrial civilization.”¹⁰ The hospital is part of this narrative, part of a slow, relentless decay indicative of an urban environment built on the promises of capitalist success but failing to live up to such narratives of unending progress. Zbignew Lewicki provides a definition of entropy that is useful here: “the essence of the theory is that the universe is subordinated to a constant and irreversible process of ‘dying’ or, more precisely, of turning its energy into waste. The process can be neither stopped nor reversed – and there will be no regeneration.”¹¹ A bleak prospect, but one particularly pertinent when considering the abandoned hospital. The ruin in *A Field Guide* is entropic in the ‘naturalness’ of its decline – the slow speed, the incremental decay, and its situation within an urban landscape that remains vibrant, thriving, alive. In this sense, the ruin echoes Dylan Trigg’s assertion that “ruins might be thought of

⁹ Miles Orvell, “America in Ruins: Photography as Cultural Narrative.” *American Art* 29, no. 1 (2015): 9, <https://doi.org/10.1086/681651>.

¹⁰ Ibid., 14.

¹¹ Zbignew Lewicki, *The Bang and the Whimper: Apocalypse and Entropy in American Literature* (London: Greenwood, 1984), xv.

as living organisms embodying notions of progress, forgetfulness, and reclamation.”¹² More explicitly, Anna Tsing’s characterisation of ruined landscapes as “lively despite announcements of their death” gestures towards the possibility latent in environments – and, by extension, people – existing outside of dominant cultural norms.¹³ That is, in their aliveness, ruins represent a resistance to the cold concrete stillness of the city, a kind of antidote to the (adult) order Solnit and her friends are seeking to avoid.

City Life

The urban environment in *A Field Guide* is a part of Solnit’s work against ‘isms of domination’ that would have the city characterised only as a place of progress, and which ostracises or discounts land(scape)s existing outside of such narratives. The indeterminacy, the possibility, entangled in the ruin’s character thus becomes part of Solnit’s ecofeminist counternarrative. Solnit’s description of the ruin begins, “the most beautiful thing in the abandoned hospital was the peeling paint” (87). This sentence throws into relief the tensions built into the ruin, tensions that are part of “the temporal divisions between [its] use and [its] status as waste”: beauty and abandonment.¹⁴ The emptiness that characterises this abandonment is offset by the beauty Solnit reads in it, a beauty that does not add to the ruin’s use-value, but adds instead an emotive resonance that she connects to her own adolescent experience. The peeling paint, mundane, forlorn, becomes iridescent in the “shafts of light” illuminating the hospital’s interior (87). Arnold Berleant writes, “applying concepts such as beauty, appreciation, and sublimity to environment forces us to rethink our

¹² Dylan Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 249.

¹³ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the Universe: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 6.

¹⁴ Viney, *Waste*, 128.

basic assumptions about what constitutes appreciation, a work of art, creation, and, indeed, human experience in general.”¹⁵ The aesthetic engagement with ruin here is not the distancing, deadening interaction with ‘wilderness’ against which Solnit works in *Savage Dreams*. It is, once again, drawn from the same impulse that engenders an embodied, affective connection with wild land(scape)s seen in chapter one.

As Berleant states, by applying notions such as beauty and appreciation to a place so typically read as situated outside of these categories we can begin to reassess their place, their value to us, to the world. It is worth recalling, here, that the value Solnit reads, that I read, into these places is not commercial value, but an affective, hopeful appreciation of place. Thus, the starkness of the hospital’s ruin – a starkness upheld by the dominant culture’s pejorative attitude towards ruin in general – is transformed by the beauty of Solnit’s metaphors; she writes of the falling paint as “curled scrolls” and “fallen leaves,” evoking a dream-like, floating light-scape in which we drift alongside her through the beautiful ruin (87). Solnit’s metaphors situate within the paint, within the very walls of the hospital, stories in the form of curled scrolls, and the ‘natural’ in the echoes of a seasonal cycle of falling leaves as the flakes of paint fall to the floor. Solnit thus reads a figurative natural environment into a place already “abandoned to nature” (88). In this sense, Solnit utilises the same radical wildness that characterises her interaction with the land(scape) in Yosemite to offer a similarly alternative, accepting, celebratory narrative of an urban place that is also deemed useless by the dominant culture. Indeed, there is a sense in which, by removing it from the city’s economic systems, Solnit also removes the hospital from the capitalist structures that ensnare the US healthcare system. Beyond the city’s

¹⁵ Arnold Berleant, *The Aesthetics of Environment* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1992), 2.

economy, which is responsible in many ways for the material and ethical ‘ruin’ of healthcare systems as denoted by the degraded building itself, the hospital may be recognised once again as a site or space of care. This time Solnit cares *for* it by writing about it, while the building simultaneously provides a nurturing location of sorts for a group of wayward adolescents.

As seen in chapters one and two, Solnit is unwilling to characterise the wilderness and the desert as inert, dead landscapes, thus refusing dominant capitalist-patriarchal narratives in favour of an inclusive, connective, and vital depiction of nature. In *A Field Guide*, Solnit explains that “one of the allures of ruins in the city is that of wilderness: a place full of the promise of the unknown” (88–89). Invoking a term for land(scape) to describe an urban environment, Solnit gestures towards the muddling of place that leads to an alternative view of urban ruins by moving beyond the dominant cultural narrative. That is, the ruin’s very ‘nature’ represents something outside of the coldness of the city, yet it also resists being reframed entirely as a place *of* ‘Nature.’ After all, if we read in this use of the term “wilderness” the same ironies and scepticisms that underlie it in Solnit’s accounts of Yosemite, the ruin’s “promise of the unknown” is not an unknown to be conquered and quelled, but an unknown to be inhabited, explored, *felt*, and thus works against the dominance of capitalist-patriarchal narratives of ownership, control, and knowledge. Perhaps, then, this is another iteration of wildness. Either way, land(scape) works to find a foothold in the urbanity of the ruin, and in describing the hospital between these two states, Solnit lifts the hospital out of the neat boxes of the urban and the rural, of growth and decay, into an in-between space that allows alternative narratives of, and attitudes towards, place (and, thus, self) to be modelled. After all, the hospital is suspended in its state of decay, and it is important to note that decay is not a static state. Microbial decay

lives, it changes constantly. It is, as Tsing says, “lively,” much like the adolescents running around inside it in an attempt to resist the stasis of the adult urban environment.

The ruin is an “edgeland,” a place suspended between or amongst the urban and the rural, somewhere that reveals the tensions and contradictions that emerge when industrial buildings are left to waste. Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts write, “at their most unruly and chaotic, edgelands make a great deal of our official wilderness seem like the enshrined, ecologically arrested, controlled garden space it really is.”¹⁶ In the chaos of the ruined hospital, Solnit locates a radical engagement with place that indirectly counters the same narratives against which she works when decrying the limiting and damaging effects of the Wilderness Act on America’s land(scape)s (see chapter one). Jos Smith writes of edgelands as forming “distinctively modern nature;” they are paradoxical places in which ‘nature’ and the urban exist at once.¹⁷ He considers them to be “*intricately*, rather than *simply*, liminal. In this sense, military ruins in remote areas, and wastelands in the heart of a city might also be considered edgelands for the simple fact that they have fallen out of currency.”¹⁸ The ruined hospital has, in a sense, “fallen out;” it no longer performs its ‘purpose,’ and so it exists outside the economic, capital-driven city (again, remembering that hospitals are part of capitalist economic systems in the US). Farley and Roberts consider edgelands in terms of medical metaphor; they write of the way these places “atrophy because their blood supply is cut off,” because they are taken outside of the

¹⁶ Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: Journeys into England’s True Wilderness* (London: Random House, 2012), 8.

¹⁷ Jos Smith, *The New Nature Writing: Rethinking the Literatures of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 114 (italics in the original).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 105.

socioeconomic order.¹⁹ In this sense, the ruined hospital it is once again akin to adolescents in that they, too, exist outside the city's economic life, by generating very little capital and contributing to the city's economy comparatively little. Moreover, the condition of adolescence is always teetering on the edge of an adult future, and if, as Rachael McLennan points out, "adolescence is typically portrayed as existing on the edges, in the margins," the ruin's marginal status provides the perfect place from which to contemplate this adult future.²⁰ The same is true in reverse, as the ruin, like teenagers, becomes a societal 'fringe;' it, too, exists on the "edges."

As an in-between place, the ruin reflects a sense of the invisible, ignored, or suspended actions of places and people outside of the economic rhythms of the city. The ruin, and the young people inside it, exist beyond – and are unseen by – the city's conforming inhabitants. Thomas Hine writes, "because the young people are not quite visible, and certainly not fathomable, adults avert their eyes from what they do"; their marginal existence leads to an invisibility if not within the commercial view of the city then at least in the production economy of that urban place (after all, as Hine notes, while teenagers do not generate much capital, they are a huge consumer market).²¹ As Vandana Shiva reminds us, "an economy of commodification creates a culture of commodification, where everything has a price and nothing has value."²² In *A Field Guide*, the value of the ruin – and its adolescent counterparts – is precisely its position outside of the economics of commodification, once again reflecting the essential caring function of the hospital outside of the private healthcare system of

¹⁹ Farley and Roberts, *Edgelands*, 151.

²⁰ Rachael McLennan, *Adolescence, America, and Postwar Fiction: Developing Figures* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 15.

²¹ Thomas Hine, *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager: A New History of the American Adolescent Experience*, (New York: Perennial, 2000), 47; 23–24.

²² Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, xvii.

the US. In recognising the ruin as a place outside of this socioeconomic order, Solnit posits the edgeland as a space not just for adolescent rebellion, but as somewhere through which, in life and in writing, to work against the dominant forces of capitalism in her city home.

City Ghosts

Playing on the sense of invisibility, and on the in-between status of teenagers, Solnit deploys gothic tropes to emphasise her own outsider status. In the film, she becomes a “haunting wraith,” her visual ghostliness brought about because “the shafts of light behind [her] were so strong on either side of [her] neck that [her] head seemed at times to detach from [her] body and hover above it” (87). A ghostly, liminal figure within the already indeterminate ruin, Solnit doubles the chaotic potential of this place by reading herself, too, in an in-between-ness that seems full of the possibilities of youth, and which resists the rigid ordering of the city around her. Indeed, this gothic register extends to her depiction of the city as a whole, in which she describes “vacant lots like missing teeth [that] gave a rough grin to the streets we haunted” (88). The young haunt the decaying urban landscape, ghostly adolescents suspended within but not belonging to the places they move through, existing in the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Solnit reflects on the gothic sense of death and growth latent in both the ruin and in her friends: “in adolescence, at the height of life, you begin to grow toward death. This fatality is felt as an enlargement to be welcomed and embraced, for the young in this culture enter adulthood as a prison, and death reassures them that there are exits” (92). This moment signals a tipping point, a point of precarious balance in which children become adults by understanding decay, by moving from growing to wasting; they become entropic themselves. Moreover, the ruin – the hospital and the

stories Solnit tells about it – signals a movement towards the interior, towards introspection, towards a labyrinthine mind that haunts Solnit’s account of the hospital – after all, this account comes from the memories gathered by the “explosive” psyche of that time.

“Abandon” is an homage to the chaotic experiences Solnit shares with her friends, experiences that are made formally labyrinthine by the twists and turns the narrative takes, from the hospital, to the city, to her friends, to her own psyche, and back again. Trigg writes, “through being overlooked, the ruin has been reclaimed, and thus rendered open to the indeterminate.”²³ Opening herself to the indeterminate – becoming ghostly – Solnit locates within the ruin an ephemerality that comes to shape her experience and appreciation of both people and the world, and in framing this realisation in a narrative of damaged, changing, even fleeting bodies and buildings, Solnit emphasises the fragility of our relationships and our environments. Exploring both the monstrosity and the beauty of the ruin, Solnit engages in a similar characterisation of place as seen in chapters one and two. It thus follows that the ecofeminist ethics of care and connectivity that generate these characterisations reflect upon not only her depiction of urban places, but on the people that move through them, too. In the stories of the hospital and her friends, which are perhaps a single, labyrinthine, story, Solnit crystallises the importance of the link between people and place that is latent in the rest of her work, and uses these links to tell yet more ecofeminist narratives that counter the dominant forces of capitalism and progress that render both the ruined hospital and its adolescent inhabitants ‘useless.’ *A Field Guide* thus calls for a joyful engagement with people and places so often ‘abandoned’ by these power structures.

²³ Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay*, 249.

The City, the Psyche

Using the ruined hospital as a metaphor for a chaotic adolescent psyche, Solnit gestures to a connection between place and constructions of self that reflect the ways we are connected to and formed by our environments; place is integral to her conception and creation of self. In *The Faraway Nearby*, Solnit furthers her exploration of the labyrinthine psyche by linking it to her ageing mother's experience of Alzheimer's. Wendy B. Faris writes, "the design of the labyrinth simultaneously represents a puzzle and a solution, a journey and an arrival, it embodies the way in which urban texts can be seen as both maps and routes, as descriptions and projects."²⁴ The labyrinth, as an extension of the city location that began this chapter, is thus the place that, in its simultaneity, its descriptive quality, becomes most useful as a spatial stimulus moving forward. That is, having read the labyrinth within and onto Solnit's experience of urban living in *A Field Guide*, I will now use this labyrinthine reading to reflect back upon the ways Solnit constructs introspective and individual experience in *The Faraway Nearby*. Continuing the focus on care that emerged with Solnit's representation of the ruined hospital in *A Field Guide*, the rest of this chapter thinks through the ways Solnit's labyrinthine writing formally explores her experiences of caregiving and illness, arguing that Solnit's stylistic choices are as much a part of her ecofeminist ethics as the content of her work. I subsequently begin a consideration of the ways this metaphor, and metaphor more generally, works as part of Solnit's ecofeminism. I am thus opening this chapter up to its own spatial mutability, as I begin to explore the places that are figuratively if not physically linked to urban locations in

²⁴ Wendy B. Faris, "The Labyrinth as Sign," in *City Images: Perspectives from Literature, Philosophy, and Film*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1991), 38.

Solnit's writing. Allowing for these shifts becomes a way of unpacking the ethics of care and connectivity latent in the formal and stylistic decisions Solnit makes and interrogates in *The Faraway Nearby*.

While not the 'troubled' psyche Solnit writes into the ruined hospital in *A Field Guide*, the Alzheimer's brain in *The Faraway Nearby* nevertheless represents a labyrinthine consciousness of sorts. Penelope Reed Doob lists "enforced circuitousness; disorientation; the idea of planned chaos; the *bivium* or critical choice between two paths; inextricability; intricacy; [and] complexity" as characteristics of the labyrinth.²⁵ These characteristics make the labyrinth an effective metaphor not only for turbulent adolescent years, but for the shifting, muddled brain of the Alzheimer's patient. Indeed, David Shenk employs the labyrinth as metaphor for the effects of the disease on the brain: "like the winding and unwinding of a giant ball of string, Alzheimer's unravels the brain almost exactly in the reverse order as it develops."²⁶ Referring here to "retrogenesis," the condition by which Alzheimer's sufferers lose their memories in reverse order, beginning with recent memories and gradually moving back through childhood, Shenk evokes the unspooling of the thread in the labyrinth, the same image Solnit uses in *A Field Guide* to gesture to her own coming of age. Both call back to Theseus' quest to kill the minotaur, but in Shenk's use, the metaphor is necessarily unresolved; the spool will never be rewound, and the patient will not exit the labyrinth. The Alzheimer's brain may thus be understood as labyrinthine in the sense of its tightly wound, disorientating and incoherent nature, but nevertheless withholding any promise of escape and resolution. Labyrinths are a built

²⁵ Penelope Reed Doob, *The Idea of the Labyrinth from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 2.

²⁶ David Shenk, *The Forgetting: Understanding Alzheimer's; A Biography of a Disease* (London: HarperCollins, 2002), 123.

environment created for purposes of initiation and introspection, but the Alzheimer's brain as labyrinth becomes trapping, with no possibility of self-discovery/recovery. The metaphor itself, then, starts to muddle. Shenk also details the way the brain becomes overcome with "plaques and tangles," the manifestations on the brain responsible for memory loss. These, he writes, lead to "a psychic barrier [which] arises between the victim and the outside world."²⁷ The labyrinthine brain is only half formed – the patient walks into, but not out of, the labyrinth – and it is this partiality, this incomplete and irresolvable metaphor that provokes Solnit's interrogation of metaphor, memory, and stories in *The Faraway Nearby*.

The text is, at once, a narration of illness, of Solnit's experiences as her mother's carer, and a meditation on the self, on the ways we retain a semblance of this self in memory and as memories disappear. These questions all revolve around how we tell the story of our selves, and Solnit reads storytelling in terms of the labyrinth; both contain "beginning, confusion, perseverance, arrival, and return," would like "thread on a spool."²⁸ The labyrinth contains, even relies on, features of narrative to effect its purpose; it is a journey into a physical place but, more importantly, it is a journey into a story. Locating the story within the labyrinth, and vice versa, Solnit relocates the purpose of self-narrative, moving it outside of the incomplete labyrinth of the brain, and placing it – placing the story of her own and her mother's experience – onto the page. Solnit writes, "in this folding up of great distance into small space, the labyrinth resembles two other manmade things: a spool of thread and the words and lines and pages of a book" (188–89). The labyrinth is, at once, the brain, and the story of that brain. So begins Solnit's engagement with the possibilities and

²⁷ Ibid., 204.

²⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (London: Granta, 2014), 188. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

indeterminacies of metaphor. Like stories, like, to an extent, the hospital that allowed Solnit a place for/of creative and emotional expression in *A Field Guide*, the labyrinth becomes a place of refuge, of sense- and meaning-making in an otherwise chaotic, troubled and troubling place/narrative/mind. It is from within this metaphor that Solnit begins to engage with other forms of place-based metaphor through/in/by which to tell meaningful stories of care that demonstrate an extension of the ecofeminist ethics we have already seen.

Apricots as Metaphors

G. Thomas Couser claims, “with memoir, meaning is not so much the issue. We may take it for granted that we get the meaning. Memoir is likely to be less ambiguous, less oblique, less metaphorical or symbolic.”²⁹ *The Faraway Nearby* emphatically rejects this notion. Meaning-making is a key concern of the text, and metaphor becomes the tool with which this meaning is both sought and made within chaotic narratives and experiences of illness. Susan Sontag decries the militaristic metaphors that diminish an experience of illness due to an inaccurate, even silencing, emphasis on ‘fighting’ disease. Importantly, the metaphors of which Sontag writes are drawn from dominant cultural formulations of illness as unnatural, and of treatment as combative. She explains, “abuse of the military metaphor may be inevitable in a capitalist society, a society that increasingly restricts the scope and credibility of appeals to ethical principle, in which it is thought foolish not to subject one’s actions to the calculus of self-interest and profitability.”³⁰ Reading medical discourses in terms

²⁹ G. Thomas Couser, *Memoir: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 178.

³⁰ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin, 1991), 96–97.

of individualism and profit, Sontag gestures towards the same ‘isms of domination’ against which Solnit works throughout her writing. Engaging in this resistance, metaphor in *The Faraway Nearby* works in vastly different ways to the mechanistic, militaristic metaphors for, say, cancer and its treatments, employed by Western medical discourse. Just as Solnit removes the ruined hospital from its implication in narratives of dominance in *A Field Guide*, then, Solnit’s metaphorical content in *The Faraway Nearby* comes not from a militaristic discourse, but, once again, from place.

The Faraway Nearby opens with an account of the day Solnit received a harvest of apricots from a tree in her mother’s garden. The apricots arrive because Solnit and her brothers are moving their mother out of her suburban home, where she can no longer cope. Describing the apricots’ arrival in her San Francisco home, Solnit writes, “sometimes the key arrives long before the lock. Sometimes a story falls into your lap. Once about a hundred pounds of apricots fell into mine” (4–5). Solnit highlights the ways we construct narratives out of events, out of surroundings. Pushing on this tendency to narrate our lives, Solnit makes metaphor out of metaphor; the lock-and-key image explains the importance of the apricots, which also become a metaphor/allegory/image in this text. So begins the string of what Michelle Dicoski calls “Solnit’s list-like metaphors,” moving in “packs” throughout the text.³¹ Piles of metaphors, like piles of apricots, proliferate in *The Faraway Nearby*, a text attempting to locate meaning in the experience of an incomprehensible degenerative disease. And if, as Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik assert, “metaphor has ... a subversiveness of its own; it can threaten the stability of the dominant discourse by its ability to disrupt the threshold of meaning,” metaphors – particularly, as we will see, the apricots – in *The*

³¹ Michelle Dicoski, “Wild Associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the Lyric Essay,” *TEXT* 39 (2017): 2; 4, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue39/Dicoski.pdf>.

Faraway Nearby become another way in which Solnit works against dominant cultural narratives.³² In this case, Solnit uses the narrative of her own and her mother's illness to work against the militaristic approaches to disease proffered by Western medicine, instead working to understand the self in connective relation to others and place even within disorienting and disruptive experiences of illness.

The apricots, from a tree, connected to the earth, are harvested by Solnit's younger brother and delivered in cardboard boxes. Spatialised, in their connection to a suburban California home, the apricots are another image drawn from place, lifted – like the ruin, like the labyrinth – out of their physical significance in the narrative into the figurative, into narrative itself. Removed from the tree, the apricots are physically removed from their context; they float as signifiers without a signified, and their meaning, their purpose, becomes shifting, elusive. As such, the apricots become as much a stylistic tool as a narrative one. Writing about Joan Didion, Chris Anderson points out her “recourse to imagery,” describing the way “her telling of the effort to understand those images can be seen not as failures but as structural solutions to the problem of describing what can't be described.”³³ For Solnit, the apricots become just this, a tool for describing, or attempting to describe, the indescribable experience of illness, as both patient and carer. Metaphors, Martina Zimmerman argues, “structure basic understandings of our experience, and can influence our actions in relation to this experience.”³⁴ In illness, metaphors thus serve a purpose of comprehension, they allow for an ordering of experience, a plan of attack.

³² Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women's Fiction* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 4.

³³ Chris Anderson, *Style as Argument: Contemporary American Nonfiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 154.

³⁴ Martina Zimmerman, “Alzheimer's Disease Metaphors as Mirror and Lens to the Stigma of Dementia,” *Literature and Medicine* 35, no. 1 (2017): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1353/lm.2017.0003>.

This, though, is exactly the problem Sontag identifies when she denounces militaristic metaphors. As an organisational tool, metaphors are necessarily incomplete, they do not fulfil the whole task because illness, particularly something like Alzheimer's, cannot be organised. Instead, then, metaphor itself comes to stand for *the chaotic experience* of illness. The myriad meanings of the apricots in this text go some way to explaining this, and I want to unpack – unbox – the apricots a little here before positing a reading that extends this understanding of Solnit's "recourse to imagery" as moving beyond even this chaos, into an associative, accumulative extended metaphor that becomes an image of (the experience of) care itself. Ultimately, this depiction of care is underpinned by the same ecofeminist ethics that underlie Solnit's earlier work, which make up what Carolyn Merchant calls "earthcare," an ethic premised on "dynamic relationship[s]" and an expansive view of the world in which humans are not dominant, but part of a wider sense of life, place, futures.³⁵ Moreover, the fact that the apricots are drawn from place represents an extended and constant connection to the earth even in language: always appreciative of and attentive to the world around her, Solnit looks there for representational aid as well as for physical places in which to seek and locate both introspective and connective experiences.

The apricots, therefore, are more than a metaphor for illness; they evidence a continued engagement with the natural and human world in Solnit's work. But they are also just apricots. They are a foodstuff that requires immediate attention. Solnit writes, "to keep them from crushing one another under their weight or from rotting in close quarters, I spread them out on a sheet on the plank floor of my bedroom. There

³⁵ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xix; xxii.

they presided for some days, a story waiting to be told, a riddle to be solved, and a harvest to be processed” (5). Solnit pays attention to the fruit both physically – it is spread out waiting to be preserved – and narratologically – the apricots become a story waiting to be told. Metaphors thus tumble into metaphors, as Solnit both sees the apricot as an allegory (“but for what?”) and uses allegory to explain them (15). Like the labyrinth, they are captured by and through the language of storytelling. And the metaphors multiply:

This abundance of unstable apricots seemed to be not only a task set for me, but my birthright, my fairy-tale inheritance from my mother who had given me almost nothing since my childhood. It was a last harvest, a heap of fruit from a family tree, like the enigmatic gifts of fairy tales: a magic seed, a key to an unknown door, a summoning incantation. Bottling, canning, composting, freezing, eating, and distilling them was the least of the tasks they posed. The apricots were a riddle I had to decipher, a tale whose meaning I had to make over the course of the next twelve months as almost everything went wrong (12–13).

In this passage, the apricots stand for family, magic, storytelling (another kind of magic for Solnit?), a key, inheritance (family again?), and sustenance (all of these things?). They are emblematic particularly of the difficult and often menial tasks assigned to women – which are so often exercises in care – both in stories and in life. They evoke anxiety, but also mystery, worry, and fascination. They are read as both an abundance and a lack, a mother’s legacy and a mother’s apathy. In this sense, the apricots are full of promise – they become other things, they evolve and sustain – but they are also always on the verge of collapse, of decay. And they are acting as a metaphor for displacement; on the plank floor of a house they are, literally, out of place.

Jack Zipes explains that “fairy tales are written and told to provide hope in a

world seemingly on the brink of catastrophe.”³⁶ The apricots, and the stories or fairy tales they evoke in this passage, in Solnit’s life, are both a marker of and a way of navigating the catastrophe of illness. The apricots are precarious, poised, teetering on the edge of *something*. In each metaphor, in being all of these metaphors at once, the apricots call for a kind of balance that Solnit works constantly to maintain, a balance that leans into rather than rejects multiplicity. As Solnit writes her story, she maintains this balance or suspension through her exercises in deciphering, in narrating and meaning-making, as everything else around the apricots falls apart and away.

Suzanne Nalbantian, explaining how memories form in the brain, writes, “whereas the almond-shaped amygdala is seen in the immediate reception of emotion, the seahorse-shaped hippocampus has come to be known as the processing center which strengthens connections over time between incoming perceptions into consolidations that become memory.”³⁷ Nalbantian’s explanation offers a useful parallel with the way the apricot metaphor functions in Solnit’s text. At first, the apricots are an emotional burden, they are a near-impossible task: “I had expected them to look like abundance itself and they looked instead like anxiety, because every time I came back there was another rotten one or two or three or dozen to cull, and so I fell to inspecting the pile every time I passed by instead of admiring it” (5). Every time Solnit walks by – much like every time she sees her mother – she notices a change. Perhaps the apricots are an allegory for the decaying neurons in her mother’s brain, then. Or perhaps the apricots represent the anxiety Alzheimer’s causes in carers. Solnit explains, “I never knew when the phone would ring with an emergency, and

³⁶ Jack Zipes, *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and their Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 1.

³⁷ Suzanne Nalbantian, *Memory in Literature: From Rousseau to Neuroscience* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 136.

when the phone didn't ring, I worried about whether she was in such dire straits that she didn't have access to the phone or the capacity to use it. I was constantly on edge, waiting for the next crisis" (6). Like the ever-appearing decaying apricots, little catastrophes invade Solnit's focus. Suddenly, time that should be spent working is disrupted by anticipating phone calls, by inspecting apricots. Later, though – in the process of writing the text – the apricots become a gift, an opportunity to read meaning into/onto a difficult time. They also become literal gifts; Solnit passes out jars of preserved apricot halves, jams, liqueurs to friends and family. So, when they are first received, the apricots are an emotional burden, a flash of sensory anxiety probably treated in the amygdala. As Solnit reflects upon their presence in her life, in her narrative, they are, quite literally, consolidated into something she can understand, an image held in the hippocampus. They become a memory; stored, suspended, in jars on a shelf. Perhaps, then, the apricots are a metaphor for the process of *memory*-making as well as, or even within, the exercise of meaning-making so important to Solnit's experience of her mother's illness.

Solnit also invokes the apricots to explain the fraught relationship between mother and daughter. She writes, "that vast pile of apricots included underripe, ripening, and rotting fruit. The range of stories I can tell about my mother include some of each too. ... Some of the urgency to be justified in my existence and to survive has fallen away, though the story remains, a hard pit after the emotion has gone" (19). Here, Solnit engages the apricots-as-stories metaphor, prescribing this particular metaphor and seemingly refusing readers the opportunity to engage in meaning-making of our own by overtly drawing a link between the fruit and her relationship with her mother. The hard pit of bitter emotion she reads in the maternal relationship relates the apricots explicitly to particular memories, and places them in particular

relation to the narrative as a whole. Yet again, though, it is possible to read the apricots as more than this metaphor. They are still the key that arrived before the lock appeared. They are still anxiety, decay, and abundance. They are still a gift and a burden. Their simultaneity, their all-at-once-ness, is what makes the apricots such an evocative metaphor. Framed broadly in terms of both her mother's memories and the memory *of* her mother, the apricots resist diagnosis – much in the same way Alzheimer's is rarely diagnosed with absolute certainty. The symptoms are so various, and so varied from patient to patient, that without the retrospective certainty of an autopsy, diagnosis is officially only "probable Alzheimer's."³⁸ There is thus a resistance to certainty, to order, to absolute meaning, running – explicitly and implicitly – through the text as a whole, and which tacitly demonstrates a concern with the imposed order so characteristic of the 'isms of domination' against which Solnit continually works.

Within this tangle of metaphors (to which I myself am contributing – "tangles," after all, are what appear in the brain of the Alzheimer's patient) it is also possible to read the apricots as metaphors for the experience of narrating illness. As a task or burden, the apricots represent the living 'I,' the protagonist of the text – the Solnit experiencing the difficulties associated with Alzheimer's care, of preserving, culling, distilling a hundred pounds of apricots. As a gift, as gifts, the apricots are reframed through the writing 'I,' the Solnit looking back on these events and understanding their pattern, their importance. Metaphor-making in this sense is an act of retrospect, of reading *onto* an experience the meaning it has come to hold. After all, if we read this text as a memoir, it is safe to assume (or, at least, we are being asked to believe) that these apricots existed.³⁹ Solnit really did suspend a hundred pounds of them in vanilla

³⁸ Shenk, *The Forgetting*, 35.

³⁹ This assumption of 'truth' is part of what Philippe Lejeune calls the "autobiographical pact." Lejeune refers to the assumed shared "*identity of name* between author, narrator, and

syrup. They are not merely an image or device as they would be in fiction. Rather, they are an object, an event, that provokes a different kind of metaphor- or meaning-making. Peter Schwenger writes, “the familiar presence of things is a comfort ... they are domesticated, part of our routine and so of us [T]heir long association with us seems to make them custodians of our memories ... yet all of this does not mean that things reveal themselves, only our investments in them.”⁴⁰ Once again, the apricots are (also) just apricots. In this sense, the apricots mark a kind of critical impasse, an image acting as what Lauren Berlant describes as “a holding station that doesn’t hold, but opens out into anxiety, that dog-paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure.”⁴¹ Solnit’s use – and my analysis up to this point – of the apricots is exactly this kind of circling around; it feels impossible to grasp, to get hold of the ‘truth’ of the apricot metaphor(s), as they become labyrinthine in their circling, withholding, elusive potential meanings.

It is in the process of thinking through, of documenting, her investment in them that Solnit comes to instil the fruit with an overarching meaning, however partial, however multifarious. Denis Donoghue argues that “we need [metaphors] because ordinary, proper meanings are not enough.”⁴² For her mother’s illness, for her experiences of it, the reality of the disorientating day-to-day experience is not enough. Implicating the apricots, our ability as readers, and her ability as a writer to make sense of them, in an impasse, Solnit suspends the image, creating almost-meaning, and

protagonist” that matches the author’s name on the cover and the stories told by the narrator/experienced by the protagonist and therefore assumes that the book is relaying ‘fact.’ *On Autobiography*, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 14 (italics in the original).

⁴⁰ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3.

⁴¹ Lauren Berlant, “Starved,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (July 2007): 434, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-2007-002>.

⁴² Denis Donoghue, *Metaphor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 135.

almost-sense out of a chaotic, nonsensical experience. Rather than relay the illness narrative as one of redemption and recovery, rather than relay a linear narrative of mother and daughter, sickness and health, Solnit ventures instead into stories, into piles of apricots.

The apricots are an example of what Sylvia Plath would call “poetical toothbrushes,” a part of “the rich junk of life [that] bobs about us: bureaus, thimbles, cats, the whole much-loved, well-thumbed catalogue of the miscellaneous.”⁴³ They are part of the detritus of life, of the things that seem inconsequential, until they are not. Bill Brown writes of the way objects become “things” when they no longer work, when they no longer fulfil their purpose (when the car breaks down, for example). “Thing,” he argues, “names less an object than a particular subject-object relation.”⁴⁴ Apricots, alone, are apricots. Apricots, in relation to Solnit, to her mother, to the narrative itself, are things, indeterminate in their thingness, and at each turn – of the text, of my argument – reveal a new relation to the narrative, to Solnit’s experience of illness. They are, as James Geary describes metaphor itself, “a digression that gets to the point.”⁴⁵ As things, as more-than objects, the apricots become more than single metaphors too; unwilling to be held to one meaning, unsatisfied to mean solely one thing, they invoke the same simultaneity seen in the ruined hospital in *A Field Guide*, and in the labyrinthine psyche, all of which gestures back to the principles of multiplicity and connection that have been central in my analysis of Solnit’s work throughout this thesis. That is, Solnit accepts, connects to, utilises, and cares for/about

⁴³ Sylvia Plath, “A Comparison,” in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: And Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber, 1977), 64.

⁴⁴ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258>.

⁴⁵ James Geary, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2012), 13.

the apricots (and her mother) because or in spite of their difficulty. In the same way Solnit is able to celebrate and accept a paradoxical, toxic, and toxifying land(scape) in *Savage Dreams* (see chapter two), here is she is able to accept and explore the impasses built into experiences of illness and caregiving, once again reflecting an accepting, connective ecofeminist ethic.

But for What?

The apricots appear in the narrative before the illness that prompts their appearance in Solnit's home. In this muddling of time, Solnit emphasises both the temporal precariousness in which we lead our lives, and the reordering possibilities of stories. To echo Sontag's views on illness and metaphor, it may be ethically dubious for Solnit to prioritise the narrative of the apricots over the narrative of her mother – to prioritise the metaphor over the material, lived experience. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which this prioritising is precisely because of an understanding of the limits of narrating her mother's experience. Paul John Eakin points out an ethical quandary in the depiction of Alzheimer's sufferers. He asks, "are we diminished as persons ... when we can no longer say who we are? And while we can, what are our ethical responsibilities toward those who can't?"⁴⁶ Solnit takes responsibility for narrating her mother's illness, for accounting for a self her mother can no longer declare and define. Yet the apricots have to be used as a stand-in for an experience of illness, in all its chaotic, confusing character, because the alternative is also incomplete; Solnit does not, cannot, have access to the whole of her mother's experience. She therefore turns to the affective resonance of metaphor to partially bridge this gap, to avoid, rather than

⁴⁶ Paul John Eakin, "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" *Narrative* 12, no. 2 (2004): 123, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2004.0004>.

become complicit in, the silencing ill people often experience. Trigg writes of “the dynamic between decline and silence” that characterises ruined buildings: “the temporal moment in which the presence of violence withdraws.”⁴⁷ While he refers to ruined places, engaged in a temporal suspension in which violence has fallen away to leave neither silence nor destruction, this dynamic can be read onto Solnit’s narration of her mother’s decline. In the *narrating* of Alzheimer’s, Solnit removes the violence of the illness, an act that, far from diminishing her mother’s experience, frees up the experience to be at least partially voiced, partially attended to via metaphor.

The apricots thus become the tool through which, the place in which, Solnit inhabits, suspends herself within, her mother’s illness. They begin to act as a kind of multifarious shorthand for the incomprehensible experiences Solnit is having. She writes, “two summers before the apricots, my mother had begun to get confused, to get lost, to lock herself out of her house, to have serial emergencies” (5). At first, the disease is not stated. Within the temporality of these events, the disease was not known, meaning Solnit herself could not confidently state, in real time, that these “serial emergencies” were due to Alzheimer’s. In the telling of the story, though – within the temporality of the text – the delay in revelation proves artificial; we have already been introduced to the apricots that arrive as a result of this disease. They are, literally, our way into the story. There is thus a doubleness at play, in which Solnit the living and Solnit the telling are at different stages of understanding. The Solnit within the narrative is taking responsibility for the mother the Solnit writing the text is narrating. Ethical responsibility doubles, as Solnit begins caring for her mother, and later – but in the same temporal moment, on the same page, in the text – begins writing a woman who can no longer ‘write’ her self. The apricots are therefore also an image

⁴⁷ Trigg, *The Aesthetics of Decay*, 242.

of gaps or silences, of an inability to completely tell the story of which they are a part. Their very unreadability makes them a formal or stylistic element that echoes the mutability of the content of Solnit's story; we do not know what the apricots are allegorising at any given moment in much the same way that Solnit simply does not know what will happen, what will change, next for her mother. Solnit thus suspends us, too, in an impasse of sorts, in which we both read and yet cannot read the different metaphorical meanings of the apricots, an impasse that reflects back Solnit's own experience of the uncertainty engendered by her mother's illness.

It is important to note at this point, though, that the apricots always mean something. Solnit's work is not an exploration of postmodern breakdowns in meaning. Elizabeth Ammons considers the potentially negative impact of some postmodern ideas on the potential of activist literature: "Postmodernism's antifoundationalism, endless skepticism, and deep commitment to nihilism, often under the guise of irony, as if believing in nothing is just a harmless quirk of really smart people and has no consequences, mirror and in fact derive from predatory capitalism's contempt for the earth and life on it."⁴⁸ Linking postmodernism to other 'isms of domination' against which, I argue, Solnit works, Ammons' claim draws attention to the fact that meaninglessness may be the most unhelpful stance when it comes to various forms of justice, climate justice first and foremost. It is important, then, that in *The Faraway Nearby*, Solnit is not sceptical about metaphor, she is open to it. She uses it not to speak nihilistically about the state of the world, but to emphasise the very *meaningfulness* of that world and reflect it not by distilling the apricots into a homogenous meaninglessness, but by piling them up in various combinations that

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 149.

speak, at different times throughout the text, to her experiences of caring for and narrating her mother's illness.

(Earth)care

It is therefore important to begin considering the apricots' overarching meaningfulness. In their various piles, at different moments with the text, the apricots are elusive, slippery and unyielding. In a similar way, Solnit's mother appears vastly different at various points; a doting mother, a callous woman, a nervous, shy young adult, an ageing stranger, even a "geriatric delinquent" (10). A cumulative reading of both mother (discussed below) and apricots is thus the ultimate act of meaning-making in *The Faraway Nearby*. In this accumulation, I want to suggest that, taken together, taken all-at-once, piled up in their many meanings, the apricots become an approximate allegory not for illness itself, but for experiences, and ethics, of care. Kathleen Dean Moore writes of care in relation to both people and place. She calls the "beautiful, complicated ways that love for people is all mixed up with love for place" an "ecology ... of caring."⁴⁹ In previous chapters I have been interested in the ways Solnit connects with and attends to the world around her. Above, I was interested in the ways Solnit gestures towards the 'ruined' state of care in a capitalist city, and how Solnit counters this by exercising a form of representational or narrative care towards a place responsible for her own coming of age. Here, I am interested in the ways this care-driven impulse towards connection extends to the people Solnit loves, too. In the apricots, in the narrative of her mother's illness, there is a deeply embedded ethic of care that draws from the same love and care as the ecofeminist approach to land(scape)

⁴⁹ Kathleen Dean Moore, *The Pine Island Paradox: Making Connections in a Disconnected World* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2005), 34.

discussed in chapters one and two. It is possible, then, to read back onto Solnit's human-human relationships the ways in which she fosters and relearns her enduring relationships to the earth. It is important to remember, after all, that the apricots come from a real place, a real tree. Showing care for the preservation of the apricots is a literal extension of a love for place, of a sense of responsibility to the land. In many ways, Solnit's care for her mother, and for the apricots, is another example of the "partnership ethic" so important to Solnit's work. This partnership "treats humans (including male partners and female partners) as equal in personal, household, and political relations and humans as equal partners with (rather than controlled by or dominant over) nonhuman nature."⁵⁰ In this light, rather than drawing an essentialist connection between women and caregiving, the "care" I read in Solnit's writing is a reciprocal, attentive and ethical commitment to the wellbeing of people and the planet.

Moore writes, "*care* has many meanings; one isn't enough. *To care for* means to have a love or fondness for. *To care for* means to attend to the needs of. But before there were these verbs, there was the noun, the root of all caring. *Care* comes from the Greek word *karas*, a lament, a song of sadness."⁵¹ Moore's multiple meanings of care can be read in the simultaneity of Solnit's apricot metaphors. Indeed, care is the overarching sentiment with which Solnit approaches the fruit. In the rush to preserve them, Solnit attends to the needs of the fruit by preserving them from rotting, dying. Consequently, she attends to the needs of people by creating a lasting food supply. In passing the apricots out as gifts, Solnit expresses love and fondness, thanks and appreciation. She feeds them to her friends, and back to her mother. Then there is the noun, the lament. In many ways, the whole of *The Faraway Nearby* is a lament, a sad

⁵⁰ Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 196.

⁵¹ Moore, *The Pine Island Paradox*, 89 (italics in the original).

song not only about the death of her mother – which the text proper does not include – but about her relationship with a mother who was resentful, even cruel. It is only in the acknowledgements that Solnit includes news of her mother's death:

I finished writing this book several months before the death of my mother, Theresa Allen (1928–2012). After she was gone, I felt more strongly the presence of the dark-haired, yearning, thwarted young woman before I existed, and the mother I must have clung to as a tiny child. The middle-aged woman who had so confounded me for decades became just one figure among many, and I missed the ancient, gentle, far-gone person who brought up the rear of the parade (259).

Here, Solnit finally laments the loss of the mother she has been 'losing' in increments throughout the text. Before this moment, Solnit locates within these losses not sadness but joy, a removal of bitterness. There is a belatedness to Solnit's mourning that has less to do with the death of her mother than with the retrospective understanding of both the burdens and exhilarations of care-giving, and of the fraught nature of her relationship with her mother pre-illness. Recounting the stage of the disease in which her mother "was a happy child," Solnit remarks, "my heart lagged behind, for I was still sometimes struggling against the extinct mothers of bygone years, working out the past, or working over the past, when the present was something else entirely" (232). As in the text's acknowledgements, here Solnit sees her mother as more than one person, as a collection of personalities, some she recognises, some she only imagines.

Sontag considers the way "the most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing."⁵² Dehumanisation is a risk in the slow decline of Alzheimer's, a disease characterised by the gradual loss of self. By expressing the

⁵² Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, 124.

multiplicity of her mother's personality, Solnit recognises the layers of humanity often buried within the difficult day-to-day experience of this illness. Bringing up "the parade," the accumulation of selves acquired throughout life, is another person in a line of personalities, and it is important that this humanity is recognised, no matter how difficult. In terms of care, Solnit's heart lags, she has to wait until after her mother has passed away to understand the love involved in the care she gave even at times so wrought with hurt and anxiety. In this way, the text, particularly its extended apricot metaphor, is a lament, a sad song, *karas*, that holds up the chaos of Alzheimer's care and reframes it as a kind of gift. That is, while Solnit laments her mother's death, she also treasures her experience of care, and in doing so, demonstrates her investment in the positive outcomes of partnership and attention to people and – via the place-based apricot metaphor – land(scape).

In Retrospect

As part of the caring lament, in the acknowledgements and throughout the text, Solnit presents a cumulative reading of her mother, in which different personalities pile up to create the woman she becomes in her final days, a woman for whom Solnit feels a lingering affection. As such, in spite of her illness, Solnit's mother becomes a person through whom mutability becomes a positive, even affirming quality. Though experiencing retrogenesis, Solnit's mother is not travelling smoothly back to childhood; she retains the traces of her past selves both in Solnit's memory of her and within the narrative. Solnit writes:

The whiteness of the page before it is written on and after it is erased is and is not the same white, and the silence before a word is spoken and after is and is not the same silence. Snow falls before and after the growing season; the era of my harmonious relationship with my mother

flourished before my memory begins and after hers faded. She herself was being erased, a page returned to whiteness (222).

Solnit understands the ways identity accumulates, in both our understanding of our self and in others' perceptions or memories. Again, Solnit acknowledges the slipperiness of the image; the white page both is and is not the same; her mother both is and is not a child, is and is not a woman to whom Solnit both can and cannot relate. In the parade of her mother's shifting and connected personalities, Solnit echoes Virginia Woolf's famous claim, "we think back through our mothers if we are women."⁵³ *The Faraway Nearby* deals explicitly with the complexities of this lineage, of Solnit's difficulties relating to and celebrating this relationality. Solnit writes about her mother in order to understand, at least partially, the uneasy, fraught nature of their relationship as it is increasingly reframed by experiences of illness and care that push her to (re)consider the formations and implications of the shifting selves of both mother and daughter.

Thinking back through her relationship with her mother is difficult, even traumatic, and Solnit turns once again to narrative to understand it. "The queen's envy of Snow White is deadly," she explains; her mother's bitterness is a familiar tale (21). Zipes describes fairy tales as "survival stories with hope."⁵⁴ By invoking a fairy tale to both tell and understand her relationship with her mother, Solnit utilises a familiar story that becomes a shorthand for her own struggles to survive within it, echoing Bruno Bettelheim's assertion that "the fairy tale suggests how the child may manage the contradictory feelings [about the mother] which would otherwise overwhelm

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2004), 88.

⁵⁴ Jack Zipes, *Why Fairy Tales Stick: The Evolution and Relevance of a Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27.

[them].”⁵⁵ Solnit continues, “there was nothing I could do, because there was nothing I had done: it was not my actions that triggered her fury, but my very being, my gender, my appearance, and my nonbeing – my failure to be the miracle of her completion and to be instead her division” (21–22). Emphasising the gendered way in which Solnit’s mother viewed her children, Solnit draws attention to the diminishing, diminutive affective relation that existed between the two women. Consequently, we might wonder why Solnit cared for her mother at all. Merchant explains that “a partnership ethic is grounded, not in the self, society, or the cosmos, but in the idea of relation.”⁵⁶ If Solnit is living by the same ecofeminist ethics that prompt her to protest nuclear testing (see chapter two), here her ethics ask her to care for her mother in spite of their fraught relationship, and entirely because of a sense of relation and responsibility. Quite aside from societal pressures to care for the ill – a task which, again, disproportionately falls to women – and beyond seeing herself in her mother, Solnit cares for her mother because of the partnership she agrees to in her ethical life.

In order to understand her own actions, Solnit engages in “thinking back,” in a retrospective interrogation of her mother and their relationship. The writing of memoir implies, even implores, retrospect. The writing ‘I’ and the written ‘I’ are different people, at different times. Autobiography is, necessarily, an account of the past. Yet there is a tension within *The Faraway Nearby* between a careful, care-driven reconstruction of the past, and of the disease’s resistance to the passage of time. Literally: short-term memory is the first to go, and Alzheimer’s patients find themselves living an endless string of todays, oblivious to the prospect of the future and lacking memories of the recent past. When Solnit’s heart lags, she is aware of it

⁵⁵ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (London: Penguin, 1991), 69.

⁵⁶ Merchant, *Radical Ecology*, 83.

precisely because her mother is not; the memories of bitterness only remain for Solnit, as her mother forgets more and more.

Attending to, caring for, the loss of her mother's memories is Solnit's primary role, one that emphasises these narrative tensions more and more as the disease progresses. In a particularly poignant account, Solnit tells the story of her mother's persistent desire for new lipsticks in the middle stages of the disease. Solnit describes how her mother "wanted a lipstick; she often did in that era. I bought them regularly and they vanished regularly" (227). Speaking of the illness in "eras," Solnit marks a retrospective organisation, in which she has sorted her memories into piles that correspond to the stages of illness. Acknowledging this retrospect, she writes, "now it's obvious that it didn't matter what shade I bought; the goal was to have a lipstick because a lipstick signified something. But it seemed like respect to treat her like a woman who'd want to select her lipstick color with care" (227–28). As the 'protagonist' of the story, Solnit takes care to help her mother choose the correct shade. As the writer, she knows it was irrelevant to do so, but also understands the importance of taking the care anyway. She concludes the anecdote with, "probably shortly thereafter the lipstick vanished. Not so long after that she forgot about lipstick" (228). It is an end we know is coming, but it is still quietly devastating. Like the apricots, the lipsticks are everyday objects imbued with significance. In their thingness, the lipsticks signal a shifting subject-object relation for both Solnit and her mother, within the narrative and through the narrating. Thus, as with the apricots, Solnit is vague about their significance – they stand only for "something." This echoed ambiguity serves to signal both the vast importance and the great insignificance of lipstick. Vastly important because her mother is so adamant she wants it, so careful to pick out the right shade. So insignificant because she forgets about lipstick's very

existence shortly after. Or, perhaps, it is the other way around. Perhaps the lipsticks are important because they will soon be forgotten, and insignificant because of their status as everyday desirable objects.

Both the temporality and the symbolic resonance of the lipstick is twisting, muddled. As it is relegated to a thing, an obsession, of the past, Solnit also understands its immense importance in her own future (there is a sense in which, perhaps, Solnit will never see lipstick in the same way after this incident). Disrupted in this way, the significances and insignificances of these objects, the lipsticks, the apricots, are passed between the written and the writing I, gesturing towards not only the tensions of the illness itself, but the tensions in the conventions of genre through which Solnit (partially) processes her experiences. The autobiographical narrative, much like the twisting, labyrinthine apricot metaphor, is muddling, conflicting, partial and withholding. The necessity of inhabiting the past is interrupted, disrupted, constantly by pulling memories into the present, and by acknowledging that the present was, in many ways, the *only* time of her mother's disease.

After all, 'today' is the only day for a late-stage Alzheimer's sufferer. The illness, as it moves through the brain, becomes about inhabiting the everyday, every day. As Shenk notes, "in the often deadening, disheartening world of Alzheimer's care, caregivers wake up thousands of days in a row facing the same tourist wanting to take exactly the same tour."⁵⁷ In illness, Solnit's mother is a woman who repeatedly wants a lipstick, but she also becomes a woman who relinquishes bitterness and gains joy. She becomes someone who is "liberated from the burden of her past," for whom "things became incomparable, each slice of cake the most delicious cake ever, each flower the most beautiful flower," someone "often almost giddy with enthusiasm"

⁵⁷ Shenk, *The Forgetting*, 195.

(225). Wrenchingly, though, she becomes someone who does not know she becomes these women; they vanish and re-emerge daily. Solnit thus sees storyteller as part of her role as care-giver: “I grew adept in handing her back her information about what she’d done, where she was, who she’d been, and who she was connected to” (225). In her role as protagonist as much as writer, Solnit is engaged in acts of narrative, and the separation between written and writing ‘I’ becomes similarly disrupted. Her mother remembers little of the people around her, but also little of the people she herself has been. The temporality of her decline is disrupted by her own obliviousness to it, and Solnit is tasked not only with witnessing the “parade” of her mother(s), but in narrating the parade back to itself, in another act of narrative care.

The narrative is thus always more than the story of Solnit’s mother. It is, as Solnit’s role(s) as storyteller demonstrates, a narrative of relation, of the partnership ethic, of care. Nancy K. Miller argues that “in autobiography the relational is not optional. Autobiography’s story is about the web of entanglement in which we find ourselves, one that we sometimes choose.”⁵⁸ If Solnit’s ecofeminist work is about connection, as we have seen in chapters one and two, it follows here that the conventions of genre she chooses to employ are also focused on this relationality. *The Faraway Nearby* often acts like a relational memoir, recounting not just the story of Solnit’s mother’s illness, but of Solnit’s relation *to* this story, and of the ways in which she – as writer, as daughter – is implicated within it. And this expands outward as Solnit considers the role of narrative in the meaning-making in which she is engaged: “where does a story begin?” she asks (27). “The fiction is that they do, and end, rather than that the stuff of a story is just a cup of water scooped from the sea and poured

⁵⁸ Nancy K. Miller, “The Entangled Self: Genre Bondage in the Age of the Memoir,” *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 544, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2007.122.2.537>.

back into it” (27). Here, Solnit ruminates on the ways stories – like selves – are by their very nature always and endlessly connected and related to other stories. In the text as a whole, she proves again and again how her mother’s illness is connected to the apricots, which are connected to Solnit’s house, which is connected to Solnit’s work, which is connected to stories, which connects back in all sorts of ways to illness, to fruit, to family, to place, to self. By memorialising, *memoirising*, her mother, Solnit generates another narrative of reciprocity and connectivity drawn from an ecofeminist impulse that privileges connection and relation, to people, to planet. In this way, Solnit inhabits – stylistically as well as narratively – an ecofeminist ethic that reflects back onto, or perhaps *into*, herself by narrating the chaotic, partial, complicated yet loving experience of caring for her mother.

Wounding and/as Healing

Enhancing the complexity of the narrative, and adding to these connective impulses, is the revelation partway into *The Faraway Nearby* that Solnit herself becomes ill. Once again, apricots are the key to the lock of Solnit’s own illness narrative: “I preserved the apricots that August, and my friend who had helped me with the first round of canning badgered me to have my first mammogram a few months later” (91). They are the associative link that begins her story of illness and recovery, but that also begins the story of her mother’s illness, and the story of the stories that help Solnit to navigate both of these experiences. While her mother’s Alzheimer’s circles the accounts of living and writing throughout the text, Solnit concentrates the narration of her own illness mostly in the chapter at the very centre; it is the linchpin of *The Faraway Nearby*, the minotaur at the centre of the labyrinth.

Subverting the way Theseus unravels Ariadne’s thread on the way to the centre

of the labyrinth in order to wind it up on the way out, Solnit leads towards the centre of her text – “Knot” – by preceding it with a chapter entitled “Wound” and following it with “Unwound.” Wound, as in coiled; winding the string on the way in, unravelling it on the way out. Gesturing towards not resolution but a kind of coming apart, this subversion marks a similar sense of suspension and precariousness that characterises Solnit’s experience as a caregiver. That is, situating her own illness in “Knot” is a formal example of the narratives of suspense and suspension maintained throughout the text. But then, perhaps these chapter titles refer to wound, as in injured. An incision, a weakening, the wounded, the ill. In this sense, the wound, which in surgical terms is actually the first step to recovery, is stitched, knotted, and one is ‘unwounded’ in/by recovery. Arthur W. Frank writes, “as wounded, people may be cared for, but as storytellers, they care for others. The ill, and all those who suffer, can also be healers.”⁵⁹ As wounded, Solnit frames her narrative in terms of quest and restitution (to use Frank’s terms, which, neatly, echo the myth of Theseus).⁶⁰ Playing with the heteronym “wound,” Solnit posits another image in which multiple, even conflicting stories are being told. The metaphorical journey into the labyrinth of her own illness – wound as in coiled – is disrupted by the way diagnosis, surgery, and recovery operate – wound as in injured. Importantly, though, on the page and in the text, these chapter titles mean both; “wound” is both an injury and a spool of thread. It is, as Frank’s discussion of woundedness and stories suggests, about both being cared for, and doing the caring. The whole of Solnit’s text attests to this doubleness, in which she is both caring and cared for, experiencing both her mother’s illness and her own in an overarching narrative of relationality in which she is both the sick and the healthy, the

⁵⁹ Arthur W. Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xii.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, xiv.

storyteller and the storied.

Solnit's illness is first introduced in "Breath," a chapter on the way into the labyrinth of the text. In it, Solnit encounters "a version of [her] body that had never existed before" (93). Journeying on/into the site of the body becomes the occupying task of both the surgeons and her narrative. To contemplate the – now sick – body she inhabits, Solnit relies once again on place-based metaphors. Frank writes, "when a person becomes a patient and learns to talk disease talk, her body is spoken of as a place that is elsewhere, a 'site' where the disease is happening."⁶¹ Tapping into the dissociation many patients feel between the self and the body during illness, Frank gestures towards the same medical discourses responsible for the military metaphors Sontag decries; both demonstrate a separation of the body from the person, as the body is 'attacked' by medical investigations and treatment. Solnit's description of the biopsy she has due to unusual mammogram results subverts this sense of the body being "elsewhere," by bringing that "elsewhere" into the body itself:

What size is a representation? No size at all, for we get used to seeing satellite photographs of continents the same size as snapshots of babies. These images looked like a night sky, hemispheres of darkness with pale streaky strands like clouds or vapor or the Milky Way in a desert night when the stars are so numerous they blur into radiant fields. Some of the bright areas, the microcalcifications or tiny calcium deposits that looked pale in that dark sky, were grounds for concern.

On the screen that day was an image that didn't look at all like me. It was me, and my fate, this mortal heaven they were exploring with instruments, guided by live X-ray images, working remotely, as though they were embarked upon a moon probe or an ocean-floor exploration. Pearls, bubbles, skulls, bowls of fruit, but in my case it was interior images; a portion of my body that had never even existed before, that strange night sky on the screen, had supplanted it (92–93).

⁶¹ Arthur W. Frank, *At the Will of the Body: Reflections on Illness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 12.

Playing with the scale of the image, Solnit warps the space of her own body into that of constellations. Breast tissue becomes galaxies, and by engaging particularly with the mediating properties of photographic images, Solnit posits an understanding of the site of the body predicated on seeing the unseen, on visually comprehending parts of the body hidden from view. As John Berger explains, “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.”⁶² Looking at the photographic images of the internal body, Solnit confronts not only the tissue, but what the tissue – in its ‘abnormality,’ its potential threat – means for her self, her life, her place in the world.

This quality is heightened by the gendered and sexualised connotations of the part of the body on display; breast cancer, and its associated conditions, is an illness typically considered a ‘women’s issue’ (in the sense that it affects more women than men), and as a de-sexualising illness, one that takes a (problematically) eroticised body part and treats it clinically, medically.⁶³ By reading her own breasts as night skies, Solnit divorces them even from the medical meaning of the body; they are bizarrely othered on the screen, and in the description of the image Solnit situates a subversive ‘elsewhere-ness’ that sees her body encompassing entire galaxies, refusing the diminutive, shrinking character women are so often asked to adopt. Moreover, using space – literally deep space, but also the figurative associations of vastness, endlessness we bring to our understandings of ‘space’ – to conceive of her own flesh, Solnit evokes a new kind of human-nonhuman connection, an extension of the

⁶² John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 2008), 9.

⁶³ For an account of the ways breast cancer in particular is seen as both a sexualised and desexualising disease, see Cherise Saywell, Lisa Beattie, and Lesley Henderson’s “Sexualised Illness: The Newsworthy Body in Media Representations of Breast Cancer,” in *Ideologies of Breast Cancer*, ed. by Laura K. Potts (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), 37–62.

ecofeminist impulse toward connectivity seen throughout her work. Here, by understanding her body through a spatial metaphor, she connects the self not just to the earth, but to the source, home, and site of that earth (remembering, after all, that everything we are comes from Space).

Solnit also reads this medical appointment in terms of exploration. Her body becomes an ocean-floor expedition, a moon-landing, a discovery. Solnit's body becomes a site of expedition, a location probed for knowledge – literally, a “tiny drill enter[s] [her] flesh again and again” (92). The imperialist undertones of this description prompt Solnit to read the detrimental effects of various ‘isms of domination’ on the site of her own body. To counter the dominance of this medical ‘exploration,’ she crumbles the image into another pile of metaphors; “pearls, bubbles, skulls, bowls of fruit” are not what Solnit sees on the screen, but they are images through which she comprehends the image on the screen, and, by extension, the invasive medical procedure producing those images. In this layering, this piling up, Solnit engages once again in metaphoric obfuscations, a muddling of images intended at once to mimic the disorientation of the illness experience, and to provide tools with which to understand it.

Yet this moment encapsulates discord and dissociation. In an image that both is and is not herself – echoing the ways in which, as discussed above, her mother both is and is not the same before, after, and during illness – Solnit sees great swathes of interstellar movement within her body, and she sees the ocean, she sees bubbles and pearls. In this sense, her body is not a site, perhaps not even sites, but absences of sites. Solnit's body is refracted through metaphors of gaps; it is the dark, unknown depths of the ocean, the air or the emptiness trapped in the bubble. Seeing herself as in some way ‘anti-matter,’ Solnit identifies a discordant emptiness on, in, the site of her body.

Heather Houser writes of discord as the state needed to reassess the world around you during an illness. Though considering it specifically in terms of AIDS memoirs, Houser's analysis of discord as an affective and epistemological state that gives rise to "revised understandings of nature, beauty, and health" via a 'suspicious' viewpoint derived from the reassessment of both one's body and, subsequently, one's environment is pertinent to a discussion of illness more generally.⁶⁴ Solnit's description of the biopsy image is discordant both in its physically disorienting effects – she lies "in a position that [becomes] excruciating because [she has to] hold it so long," and has to "twist" her neck to see the images on the screen – and epistemologically disorienting (93). That is, this is pre-emptive treatment, searching for pre-cancerous cells to be removed not because of their malignancy, but because of their potential to become so. As such, the entire illness experience is a chaotic projection into the unknown, and Solnit uses images of space, of the ocean, of places associated precisely with how much we *do not know* about them (perhaps reflecting current medical understandings of Alzheimer's), to describe an intimate and previously familiar place in, on, her own body.

Sustaining

Solnit takes up residence in the muddled, muddling image of the apricots to depict her own illness, too, remarking, "I was being pared at like an apricot with a bad spot" (93). She continues to meander through the image: "or, rather, a bad spot was being sought in the outer space under my skin" (93–94). Deliberately mixing her metaphors, Solnit pulls us into the discord and disorientation of her illness. Reflecting this disorientation

⁶⁴ Heather Houser, *Ec sickness in Contemporary U.S. Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 71.

on a wider scale, throughout *The Faraway Nearby* Solnit considers the ways in which people and places sustain and are sustained. Apricots sustain and are sustained, bodies are cared for and do the caring. Stories maintain and remember. Solnit writes, “human bodies sustain other bodies in various ways. ... The modern world of blood transfusions and organ transplants has been referred to by one writer as noble cannibalism” (204). The uneasy move between sustenance and cannibalism demonstrates the complexities of the illness experience; it is never, no matter how good the prognosis, a straight line from diagnosis to cure. Frank remarks that, with cancer, it is rarely the disease itself that makes the patient the most ill. Chemotherapy “was both the proximate source of [his] chaos, and a sort of solution to the problem it itself generated;” it is actually the cure that makes you feel ill.⁶⁵ In this sense, the body that has turned against itself – in the form of mutating cancer cells – is reinstated in/as self through violent and sickening symptoms. Through chaos, a potential cure emerges. This is thus similar to the kind of “noble cannibalism” of blood transfusions and organ donations, and to the deliberate wounding that is part of surgery; in order to sustain the body, things must be removed, taken from and placed into other bodies. The image, once again, becomes muddled.

Illness forces us to take stock, to reach out, to be cared for. Solnit, having detailed the lack of this kind of sustenance in childhood, is surprised by people’s willingness to care. She writes, “goodwill is something you put away like preserves, for a rainy day, for winter, for lean times, and it was moving to find that I had more than I had ever imagined. People gathered from all directions, and I was taken care of beautifully” (122). The apricots lurk beneath this account of care. Like preserves, care sustains Solnit before, throughout, and beyond her illness. She is able to relocate her

⁶⁵ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 107.

body because of care and cure. This moment marks an opening up – of herself, but also of the narrative. The revelation of the caring community that bands around Solnit comes in “Knot,” the chapter at the very centre of the text. Thus, in the centre of the labyrinth, Solnit finds care itself: she locates the sustenance of other people and it is this sustenance that allows her to travel back out of the labyrinth, out of the world of the sick. Solnit feeds on the preserves of goodwill, is sustained by the care of others, and by their bodies. Of her post-surgery body, Solnit writes:

I am myself a cannibal in a roundabout way. I was patched up internally with AlloDerm regenerative tissue matrix, a small scrap of what had once been someone else’s skin, presumably donated, then sterilized, stripped of its DNA, and turned into an expensive brand-name product. We divide up the world as though there were real borders rather than delicately shaded degrees between the crazy and the sane, the good and the destructive, and I think of cannibalism as also a matter of degree. To what extent, in which ways, are you a cannibal, and how careful are you about who you consume? We consume each other in a thousand ways, some of them joys, some of them crimes and nightmares (205).

Patched up by parts of other bodies, Solnit’s “cannibal” body becomes reminiscent, as she herself points out, of Frankenstein’s monster (137). The grafting of others’ body parts onto her body implies a question about where the self resides – is it in the mind, or the body? In opposition to the dominant cultural forces of Enlightenment science (which I discuss in chapter one, and with which, incidentally, *Frankenstein* takes issue), Solnit eschews the separation between the two. Her ecofeminism is explicitly based on dismantling the boundaries of self and land that allowed for the exploitation of people and the earth by the dominant culture in the first place. It thus follows that these principles end up arriving back on the site of Solnit’s self. In illness, her mind and her body should – according to the narratives of Western medicine – be separate, the body an “elsewhere.” But, as Frank asserts, “no one should be asked to detach

[their] mind from [their] body and then talk about this body as a thing, out there.”⁶⁶ To do so would be, at once, to diminish the experience of illness as happening in both body and mind, and consequently to endorse an artificial separation between the two.

Solnit, like Frank, refuses to endorse this Cartesian separation. Antonio Damasio argues there is an inextricable link between mind and body, explaining that “the brain and the body are indissociably integrated by mutually targeted biochemical and neural circuits.”⁶⁷ Even in scientific terms, the Cartesian separation of mind and body that has so shaped both Western medicine and Western attitudes towards land(scape) simply does not hold up. Damasio later states:

This is Descartes’ error: the abyssal separation between body and mind, between the sizable, dimensioned, mechanically operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizable, undimensioned, un-pushpullable, nondivisible mind stuff; the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgement, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body.⁶⁸

Collapsing the boundaries between the “dimensioned” and the “undimensioned,” between, perhaps, fact and feeling, Damasio locates the reality of a lived, embodied, but also ‘en-minded’ experience. To return to Solnit’s fascination with cannibalism, Maggie Kilgour asserts that the “unsettling of discrete categories is part of [cannibalism’s] horror: it is the place where desire and dread, love and aggression meet, where the body is made symbolic, the literal figurative, the human reduced to

⁶⁶ Frank, *At the Will of the Body*, 10–11.

⁶⁷ Antonio Damasio, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (London: Vintage, 2006), 87.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 249–50.

mere matter.”⁶⁹ Cannibalism relies on the Cartesian subject to construct an ‘other’; it relies on discrete categories. Referring to her own body as engaged in “cannibalism,” then, Solnit emphasises the interconnectedness of all things, once again demonstrating an ecofeminist ethic within a seemingly introspective narrative. In refusing the border between her own body and the bodies of others, and in refusing – as we have seen in earlier texts – to condone a separation between the human and the nonhuman, Solnit collapses Cartesian boundaries. Using illness as a way to consider and enact the ethical principles she associates with her relation to land(scape), the collapse of the mind/body dualism marks another engagement with the ecofeminist impulse as it acts upon her identity within illness.

Solnit’s narratives of relation and sustenance also link *The Faraway Nearby* back to the networks of women she creates and in which she participates across her work. Discussing breast cancer autobiographies, Diane Price Herndl writes of the “realisations that one both is and is not one’s body, and that one’s bodily identity can be severely compromised,” and the ways in which this “may open up new possibilities for understanding oneself as part of a group rather than simply an individual.”⁷⁰ For women with breast cancer, community – both during care, and afterwards in sharing or collectively telling stories – becomes key to re-embodiment. For Solnit, this community is built *on the site of* the body. She takes on, takes in, another person’s skin. Cannibalism thus becomes a subversive act of community-building, of narrating connection; the “joy” of this cannibalism is the bodily connection and the narrative

⁶⁹ Maggie Kilgour, “The Function of Cannibalism at the Present Time,” in *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 240.

⁷⁰ Diane Price Herndl, “Our Breasts, Our Selves: Identity, Community, and Ethics in Cancer Autobiographies,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (September 2006): 228, <https://doi.org/10.1086/505542>.

told about it. Bodies, stories, and the minds that make those stories, are thus no longer separate at all, as the written and the writing I in *The Faraway Nearby* both engage in acts of connection, of bodily and narrative community-building. Recognising links between women, on bodies, and between writer and readers, Solnit extends the connectivity of her ecofeminism into the care-driven narrative of her own illness. Becoming a literal version of what Frank calls “communicative bodies,” Solnit and the bodies of those donating to her recovery, to her sustenance, stand for and give voice to the somatic experience of illness (and mark another iteration of the feminist networks that were so important to Solnit’s connective activism discussed in chapter two).⁷¹

Consuming, Disintegrating

Yet, for all her focus on sustenance, Solnit becomes preoccupied with ideas of consumption. Engaging with the “matter of degree” with which she understands cannibalism, Solnit describes Subhankar Banjee’s photograph that “shows one polar bear eating another” (205; 155). She describes how

one creamy white bear stands up, its body pointing left and its head at the center, small ears, black eyes, black nose, clean fur, its tongue out but a mild expression on its face. The other bear’s head is at its center too, its eyes shut, its fangs exposed, its head stained with blood, and its body torn open and partially gone, as much red meat as white fur on display (155–56).

It is not until towards the end of this description that we really know which bear is eating which. The first bear, “mild,” “clean,” does not sound like the devourer, and the devoured, with its “exposed fangs” and “head stained with blood,” reads like it is

⁷¹ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 127.

the one drawing sustenance. The slippage between sustaining and consuming relates to the way, as Priscilla L. Walton puts it, cannibalism is a “signifier of both familiarity and strangeness.”⁷² The uncanny slippage between the bears emphasises both their familiarity – we can imagine a polar bear – and their strangeness – we are not used to images of bears eating each other. Yet both the familiarity and strangeness of this cannibal image points directly to global climate crisis. It exists due to melting polar ice that is “fragmented, vanishing sooner, appearing later, turning what was once the solid mass of the farthest north into open water. The country no longer belongs to them” (156). Within the narrative of sustenance is an engagement with the concerns of *sustainability* – not in the sense of sustainable economics or sustainable development, but in the very ability of the earth to sustain its human and nonhuman population. The land no longer sustains the polar bears, so they turn to each other – literally feeding off one another – to survive. And the land no longer sustains because the ice that forms it is melting in warming waters. An environmental narrative thus frames and is framed by Solnit’s ill body in its relation to cannibalism.

In this account, Solnit draws an important distinction between sustenance and consumption; here, one bear consumes another in a devastating act of cannibalism brought about by the ‘isms of domination’ responsible for the climate crisis. Sustaining implies reciprocity, balance, but in consumption, there is a tipping point, a power dynamic that shifts from the consumed to the consumer. “How careful are you about who you consume?” thus becomes a question not of who you give care to, but of who you take from, of who you rely on or exploit to sustain you (205). Embedded in the text’s consideration of sustenance is a narrative of the dangers and exploits of

⁷² Priscilla L. Walton, *Our Cannibals, Ourselves* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 152.

consumption. As someone connected to and sustained by other people, Solnit recognises the balance of sustenance on the site of her own body; the skin she has taken onto, into, her body is “donated.” In contrast, the polar bear’s life, because of its desecrated habitat, has been consumed. The move to consumption is one of the “crimes and nightmares” of cannibalism, and speaks to the desperate and wasteful way we relate to other people, nonhumans, the planet (205). In this way, the polar bear’s cannibalism serves to reveal patterns of human consumption.

This monstrous consumption is latent in the narrative from the very beginning. In *The Faraway Nearby*’s timeline, the apricots on the sheet in Solnit’s house begin to look like a corpse long before she describes the image of the polar bears. Solnit writes, “the pile began to look like an organism, a human-sized entity with a life of its own, the occupying army in my bedroom. Juices began to ooze out, as though I had a corpse decomposing on my floor” (12). As an army, the fruit is literally invasive – and echoes the military metaphors Sontag urges us to retire. As a decaying corpse, it reminds Solnit of the degeneration not only of her mother, but of life, of our bodies (which perhaps calls back to the entropic adult bodies Solnit describes in *A Field Guide*, above). With a life of their/its own, Solnit comes to understand the apricots, her mother’s disease, as unstoppable. And, linking the apricots explicitly to a dead, decaying, vanishing body, Solnit foreshadows her own preoccupation with wasting, her own worries about the/her body’s potential to fail.

The pile, a haunting image of wasting, is both an organism “with a life of its own” and a “decomposing corpse.” It is both dead and alive. The ooze of the apricot’s juices thus reads less like blood than it does a kind of gelatinous residue of something both less than and more than alive, of a kind of earthy goo made up of tiny organisms consuming and sustaining that stands in for the passage of time. In fact, then, the ooze

reads exactly as it is; the microbial breakdown of organic matter, captured, suspended on the sheet spread out indoors. Once again, the apricots are an impasse, and Solnit's inability to read them circles us all the way back to the impossibility of reading illness itself. There is chaos in the apricots, a chaos in terms of the illness narratives Frank describes, in which "no sense of sequence redeems suffering as orderly."⁷³ The apricots are a precursor in the text to an illness they actually followed, of which they were in fact a result. They present little ordering, although they are somewhat ordered by their broad characterisation as metaphor. The chaos of illness, as told by the deteriorating body of apricots, is an example of what, to David Punter, the gothic is all about: "the fate of the body as we strive for a fantasy of total control."⁷⁴ Narratives of care are part of this fantasy of control, and in the decaying apricots, in her questions about cannibalism, Solnit concedes that the neatness of the care-narrative she seeks is irretrievable. Instead – as with, say, engaging in appreciating and caring for a toxic land(scape) and its communities (see chapter two) – Solnit must inhabit the sick body, the illness experience. She must acknowledge, as Frank says, that illness is a part of life, and that in "recogniz[ing] the wonder of the body rather than trying to control it," the sick body (and perhaps, though without wanting to draw an essentialist connection between Solnit's body and land, the sick earth) is worthy of celebration, of care.⁷⁵ Which is to say, Solnit acknowledges without seeking to control, through an ordered narrative or singular metaphor, the presence of the apricots in her life, in her story, on her floor.

In this sense, the apricots mark the realities of the caring and cared for

⁷³ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 105.

⁷⁴ David Punter, *Gothic Pathologies: The Text, the Body, and the Law* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 17.

⁷⁵ Frank, *At the Will of the Body*, 59.

experiences within *The Faraway Nearby* even in their almost total metaphorical, disintegrated and disintegrating state. To use Frank's words, "my objective is hardly to romanticize chaos; it is horrible. But modernity has a hard time accepting, even provisionally, that life sometimes *is* horrible. The attendant denial of chaos only makes its horror worse."⁷⁶ The apricots represent the realities of illness and its chaotic effects/affects in a way no linear, resolved or resolvable narrative could do. In the monstrosity of the decaying apricots, Solnit locates the horror of chaotic, ill life. But it is important that she locates within them this life, even lives; the microbial life that sustains *because* of decay, and the apricots good enough to preserve, the time she spends with her mother that is somewhat free, finally, of the strains of their earlier relationship. What she is able to preserve, she cans to sustain herself, and what she must let go, she pares away.

The apricots resist the neatness even of this reading, though, as sometimes the paring and preserving – like biopsies, like surgery – are one and the same; to preserve, one must first pare, and some things are lost in the transition. But some things remain: there are apricots left over at the end of the narrative, and they signal something unfinished greeting us on our way out of the labyrinth: "Two pints of those apricots from a summer long ago still survive" (239). Along with Solnit, we have travelled in and out of the labyrinth, perhaps coming to some revelations, but, more than anything, realising *The Faraway Nearby's* resistance to neat, ordered readings. As a chaotic, partial image of care, which in turn consists of diagnosis, recovery, tension, relationship-building, reciprocity, embodiment, survival, and storytelling, the apricots are, ultimately, an interrupted and interrupting metaphor that brings our attention again and again to the ethical implications of Solnit's writing, an ethic based on

⁷⁶ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 112 (italics in the original).

approaching, inhabiting, celebrating experiences of care, uncertainty, and sustenance. To close my analysis of *The Faraway Nearby*, then, it is necessary to turn to the representational ethics and formal decisions that underlie the interrupted and interrupting nature of the text's illness-and-care narrative.

Narrative Disruption, Rupture, Interruption

Illness is disruptive. It means, as Frank says, "living with perpetual interruption" for both the ill and the caregiver(s).⁷⁷ In *The Faraway Nearby*, Solnit wanders through and between narratives. The apricots recur and subside, she weaves illness into narratives of Iceland, of walking, of *Frankenstein*, to name a few: interruption becomes a formal feature of a narrative attempting to contend with or contain the interruption of illness. Metaphor in *The Faraway Nearby* thus gives rise to questions not only of content and meaning, but of genre and form. Employing conventions of memoir, or demonstrating what Leigh Gilmore calls "autobiographics," the text asks us to situate ourselves, and it, in a particular relation to meaning-making that rests on our assumption that these events happened – the apricots, though metaphors for many of the experiences Solnit recounts, are also just apricots.⁷⁸ Because of this duality, it is possible to read *The Faraway Nearby* as an example of what Couser refers to as a "lyrical [memoir] ... called so because [it has] some of the qualities of poetry: brevity ... and reliance on imagery, rather than narrative, to communicate some truth about a life and an identity."⁷⁹ In its brevity and reliance on image, *The Faraway Nearby* certainly qualifies; it is a narrative less of a life than pieces of a life that converged at

⁷⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁷⁸ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 42.

⁷⁹ Couser, *Memoir*, 143.

certain temporal and/or spatial points. In the meandering, interjecting style of the book, Solnit echoes the interruptive quality of illness itself, and plays upon the fragmentation that characterises her experience by producing a fragmentary, interrupted text engaging with or containing passages of memoir. In its lyricism, in its reliance particularly on the images of the apricots and the labyrinth, Solnit engages us as readers in acts of meaning-making that utilise these elusive, interruptive qualities. As I have argued, the slippery nature of metaphor asks us to engage again and again in acts of meaning-making, and as a structured whole, the labyrinthine nature of the text asks us to surrender to, ride along with, the winding and unwinding, meandering and obfuscated narrative.

Solnit's work is undeniably lyrical. Smith writes, "in these layers of meaning" – which are integral to the lyric form and which Solnit employs in images such as the apricots – "there is an intertwining of the given and the made. The lyric makes its own truth at the same time as it reads and represents the given world."⁸⁰ Like Couser, Smith sees the centralising of a subjective truth as the key tenet of lyric writing. In Solnit's work, there is no doubt that we are receiving *her* truth – the writing is filtered through the 'I', after all – but also that this 'truth' is arriving because of an interested and embodied relation to the people and places influencing the narrative. Experiences are layered to form the 'truth' of the text; images and stories are piled like apricots, and sometimes the piles fall down and/or reform. Smith goes on, "the lyric produces its art in the 'telling' rather than 'the tale.'"⁸¹ *The Faraway Nearby* is *crafted*, evident even in the structure of the text – which Dicinoski describes as a journey into a labyrinth, moving from the "Apricots" through a series of chapters to "Knot," and back through

⁸⁰ Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 203.

⁸¹ Ibid.

this sequence to “Apricots” again. Dicinoski explains, “by structuring the book as a journey, in which each part is passed through twice, Solnit also builds associative links between different parts of the book. In this regard, the book itself mirrors the structure of the classical labyrinth.”⁸² The chapters of this book are layered in such a way as to require moving through, and to require an accumulative meaning-making, in which the first “Apricots” does not hold the same meaning as the last, much like, as discussed above, the white of the page, Solnit’s mother, is not the same before and after erasure/illness. The lyric quality of Solnit’s writing thus works in terms of Judith Kitchen’s assertion that this kind of writing “generates its meaning by asking its readers to make leaps ... It eschews content for method and then lets method *become* its content.”⁸³ The labyrinth is both an image and a method in this text, and in the comingling of the two the associative, accumulative quality of Solnit’s text emerges. In the telling of her mother’s illness, her own illness, in the stories of stories, Solnit produces an evocative, associative text that asks us not only to consider the meanings it posits, but to engage in acts of meaning-making that implicate us, too, in activities of care; we must also *attend to*, tend to, the images, the apricots, in this text.

Solnit’s works have been referred to as interconnected “collection[s] of essays.”⁸⁴ However, this categorisation discounts the very accumulative, associative form that is so central to Solnit’s writing. As a series of essays, these texts would need to be able to relinquish their structure, their order. In *The Faraway Nearby*, it would

⁸² Dicinoski, “Wild Associations,” 2.

⁸³ Judith Kitchen, “Grounding the Lyric Essay,” *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction* 13, no. 2 (2011): 121, <https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.2011.0028> (italics in the original).

⁸⁴ Marina Warner, “The Faraway Nearby by Rebecca Solnit – Review,” *The Guardian*, June 7, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/07/faraway-nearby-rebecca-solnit-review>, accessed 24 September 2019. See also: Siân B. Griffiths, “Review of *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* by Rebecca Solnit,” *The Georgia Review* 60 no. 1 (2006) 256–57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41402727>.

need to be possible to read “Unwound” before “Wound.” This would diminish not only the text’s ‘tale’ – there is a chronology of sorts, and it matters in terms of our ability to make meaning of the associations and connections Solnit draws – but also the ‘telling.’ Out of order, we lose the impact of the textual labyrinth, the ability to move successfully, meaningfully, from fringe to centre to fringe. We lose the zooming in and out of narrative and perspective that the text relies upon to convey its intermingling narratives of care. The beginning of the text is the entrance to the textual labyrinth: “sometimes a story falls into your lap. Once a hundred pounds of apricots fell into mine” – we are being told the beginning of a story, a fable or fairy tale; “once...” (4). The text has fallen into our lap, and with it, within it, we are also given, gifted, the apricots. We travel into the narrative alongside Solnit, and become participants, rather than witnesses, in its rendering. In telling her tale in the form of a labyrinth, Solnit sweeps us along with her in this journey of meaning-making, and asks us to notice, to experience another iteration of layered images, as the single-word titles of chapters (and I do think they are chapters, not essays) stack, literally, in the pages of the book, on top of one another. Frank suggests, “the story [of illness] is both interrupted and it is about interruption”; in another instance of simultaneity, we both witness interruption, in the meandering, associative narrative we read, and participate in *interrupting* as we pause in reading to think our own way through the metaphors Solnit presents, but refuses wholly to resolve.⁸⁵

Linking this kind of writing to place, Smith writes, “there is a parallel ... between the essay as a lyric form and the understanding of place as a creative process of inhabitation.”⁸⁶ Solnit, as seen in her immersive accounts of wildness, or her

⁸⁵ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 164.

⁸⁶ Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 203.

temporally altered accounts of the Nevada Test Site (see chapters one and two), is interested in the creative potential of relation to place. Here, this reflects back onto the textual space of the writing itself. Structuring *The Faraway Nearby* as a labyrinth, Solnit asks her readers to creatively inhabit the text. Solnit's personal accounts are thus engaged with autobiographics, which, "as a description of self-representation and as a reading practice, [are] concerned with interruptions and eruptions, with resistance and contradiction as strategies of self-representation."⁸⁷ Interruption is a reading strategy as much as a writerly act in *The Faraway Nearby*. After all, the text presents us with countless apricot metaphors, a labyrinth of chapters through which to travel, and questions posed throughout the book. The text opens by asking "what's your story?" – a question that then recurs (3, 143). We are continually invited *into* the text, and we travel through the labyrinth by turning pages, by moving from the first to the last "Apricots." The text becomes a deliberate engagement in community building not only within it (in terms of both Solnit's account of organ donation and of the narrative of her mother's multiple, intermingled personalities) but also around, beyond, it. Asking us questions, Solnit implicates us in a reply, she asks us to speak back to, to engage in, the narratives of care she posits throughout the text.

And in these questions, as in Solnit's images throughout the text, there is a place-based engagement in the narratives of the natural world. The final question in the paratextual line that runs along the bottom of the book (itself another essay or chapter that reflects upon and echoes the multifarious concerns of the book as a whole) asks "who drinks your tears, who has your wings, who hears your story?" (254). Drawn from a scientific paper entitled "Moths Drink the Tears of Sleeping Birds," this final question is the culmination of Solnit's travels along the bottom of each page into

⁸⁷ Gilmore, *Autobiographics*, 42.

another metaphor, into other metaphors that distil once again into questions of dependency and narrative. “Who drinks your tears?” in particular asks who you (we) sustain, what depends upon us. The earth, as the rest of her work attests; the earth depends on us to connect to it. There is thus a sense in which the lateral, associative and surprising connections Solnit draws throughout this text are a formal example of the content of her other work, of the importance of drawing and maintaining connections across, with, and within places.

The Faraway Nearby, while not explicitly engaged in the activist content of Solnit’s other work, demonstrates a formal engagement with ecofeminist principles of connection, sustenance, and reciprocity. More than this, Solnit engages us in a writer-reader partnership ethic, in which she acknowledges our participation in the narrative she tells, in the world she inhabits. The narrative is thus necessarily unfinished, leaving us with a sense of ‘work to be done.’ When Solnit asks in *The Faraway Nearby*, “what if we only wanted openings, the immortality of the unfinished, the uncut thread, the incomplete, the open door, the open sea?” she engages us in a consideration not of narrative closure, not of recovery, but of a continued and continuing engagement with futurity that is paramount in the narratives of *A Field Guide* and *Savage Dreams*, as we have seen (249). Formally, then, this text works to enact much of the ecofeminist content of previous texts by implicating us in an interpretive act that engages our own ability to care for, and connect to, people and place.

Conclusion: Out of the Labyrinth

Solnit wrote *The Faraway Nearby* to make sense of everything going wrong in her life. Frank argues, “in the chaos narrative, troubles go all the way down to bottomless

depths. What can be told only begins to suggest all that is wrong.”⁸⁸ Through what Dicinoski calls its “wild associations,” *The Faraway Nearby* resembles a chaos narrative not just in content but in form.⁸⁹ It is ‘chaotic’ insofar as – like the path of the labyrinth – associations between topics and stories cannot be predicted. Formal and stylistic choices mediate our experience where content cannot, and we, as readers, are asked to trust the path of the text, to trust the depths of what is being told. By engaging readers in acts of meaning-making throughout *The Faraway Nearby*, Solnit gestures formally to the quality I have argued is central to the activist accounts in her earlier books: the text works to relearn relationships, to people and to the earth, by calling into question the ways we think about, and narrate, human experiences.

Toying with conventions of genre, withholding meaning and asking questions, Solnit refuses various ‘isms of domination’ at the level of form and style by *not* narrating illness in a straight line from diagnosis to recovery. Solnit’s ecofeminist activism is built into the form of this text, and demonstrates a further engagement with the ethics of care and connectivity that are so central to her writing. Solnit consistently relearns relationships throughout *The Faraway Nearby*; in caring for her mother, preserving the apricots, reading fairy tales and becoming ill, Solnit continually renegotiates her place in the world. She thinks through how she is connected to it, how she cares for it, and asks her readers to do the same. Smith writes, “the idea of lyric activism foregrounds a connection between the aesthetics of place-writing and the cultural activities of local grassroots projects of conservation and heritage.”⁹⁰ Place is the aesthetic of this text. In the apricots, in the labyrinth, Solnit locates an autobiographical self, a self related to others, situated within a body, and connected –

⁸⁸ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 99.

⁸⁹ Dicinoski, “Wild Associations,” 4.

⁹⁰ Smith, *The New Nature Writing*, 205.

intellectually, emotionally, physically, genealogically – to other people, other places. Though this text is not a conservation narrative, and while it does not engage the acts of protest or large-scale ecofeminist connectivity discussed in previous chapters, it does present a set of stylistic concerns that allow us to read these ecofeminist actions back onto, and from within, the text itself.

The Faraway Nearby invites us into its narrative, into an experience of illness and isolation that becomes part of a journey of connectivity and appreciation. Frank, discussing the purposes of endings in illness memoir, argues, “the good story ends in wonder, and the capacity for wonder is reclaimed from the bureaucratic rationalizations of institutional medicine. Being available to yourself ultimately means having the ability to wonder at all the self can be.”⁹¹ In its resistance towards the dominance of Western medical discourse, and in refusing to narrate these experiences of illness as one thing, in one way, *The Faraway Nearby* fulfils not only the requirements of a “good story” of illness, but also of a “good story” of environmentalism, one that balances wonder and warning, and emphasises connection and care over separation and exploitation. The text wonders at the self, wonders at the world around that self, and the connections made within and between people, place, nonhumans, and the planet. In line with Merchant’s partnership ethic, this overarching sense of relation marks a successful enactment of ecofeminist principles.

It is thus key that *The Faraway Nearby* ends not with recovery, nor with death. Solnit’s recovery/remission comes partway through the narrative, and her mother’s death is a postscript. Instead, the text ends in much the same way as *A Field Guide* and *Savage Dreams*; with a journey into the land. Solnit describes a canoe trip down

⁹¹ Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller*, 68.

the Grand Canyon. Partway through the trip, Solnit narrates a restless night spent walking around the camp while her travel companions slept:

I waded into the river, keeping the music of my movement through water to a faint sloshing chime, and slowly circumambulated the raft, one hand on its side for safety, a little intimidated by the pure cold mystery of the dark waters that tugged at me as the bank dropped away and I went in deeper. I walked into the river up to my neck and walked out on the other side of the raft, cooler (254).

Here, Solnit enacts a miniature version of the walking into and out of the labyrinth prompted by the text as a whole. Solnit literally submerges her body, her self, in mystery and darkness, and emerges changed, “cooler.” She has embraced the unknown, embarked on the journey, and returned an altered version of herself, an alteration that reflects the life-altering experiences of illness and care Solnit narrates throughout the text.

While this ending marks a clear, simplified journey into and out of the labyrinth, the text as a whole contends much more readily with the difficulties, impasses, and incomprehension associated with illness. Virginia Woolf’s “On Being Ill” similarly grapples with this difficulty. “I am in bed with influenza,” she writes, “but what does that convey of the great experience; how the world has changed its shape?”⁹² To merely state the illness is not enough; there is a sense in which Woolf is calling for a change in the very ways in which we read and recount illness. In the same way, Donna Haraway asserts that, in an era of climate crisis, “it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.”⁹³ *The Faraway Nearby* represents a

⁹² Virginia Woolf, “On Being Ill,” in *Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 103.

⁹³ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

renegotiation of *the way we tell* the illness experience, and, by extension, the way we think about the world around us, and our place within it. Solnit's introspective narratives resist resolution. She ends with a question, a suspension, a pause in a contemplative moment in which we, as readers, are asked to participate. Stylistically, formally, as well as narratively, it opens the way for an understanding of ecofeminist ethics not only in relation to land(scape), but to self, selves, within that land(scape). Amitav Ghosh argues that in the face of climate crisis, which represents an epistemological impasse like no other, "the act of reading itself will change" – it will require new engagements, new considerations on the part of both writer and reader.⁹⁴ In *The Faraway Nearby's* winding, labyrinthine narrative of illness and care, Solnit proffers a new narrative of ecofeminism that sees the key ethics of care and connectivity enacted in every story, on every page. It demonstrates a formal activism that invites the reader, too, to relearn the ways they engage with the text and, in turn, renegotiate their own relationships to humans and nonhumans alike.

⁹⁴ Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 84.

Chapter Four

The Road

“Walking is a mode of making the world as well as being in it.”¹

Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (1999)

Introduction: Walk with Me

As a built structure imposed upon the land(scape), and as a site that actively promotes the use of fossil fuels to run cars, the road seems an unlikely location for furthering Solnit’s ecofeminism. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, the subversive uses to which Solnit puts the road go some way to enacting the connective ecofeminist principles I have so far outlined in this thesis. Much like the city prompted my engagement with Solnit’s labyrinthine narratives in chapter three, the road in this chapter acts as a springboard for a more expansive analysis of the ways travel and motion work within and between four of Solnit’s works. In *Wanderlust*, Solnit suggests that walking plays an active role in shaping the environment. She is gesturing to the ways walking is an activist tool, and in this chapter I argue that for Solnit walking is a way of enacting the ecofeminist ethics of her work, thereby “making” the world she writes, as well as being part of that world. I thus move from driving to walking in order to suggest that Solnit’s works promote and call for an active engagement with walking as a way of not only being in/with the environment, but (re)making it. I begin by unpacking the ways driving, while environmentally problematic, may be a usefully connective act

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Granta, 2014), 29. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, abbreviated to *W*.

that at least partially demonstrates Solnit's ecofeminist ethics. I then move on to the more radical act of walking, reading it as both an action and a metaphor that connects events and accounts not only within the texts, but between and across them too. That is, I consider it not only an example of Solnit's connective ethics, but a tool for them, as well. This chapter therefore argues that walking as both a narrative and a stylistic tool is the action and image with which Solnit enacts the key ecofeminist principles of care and connection.

This chapter thus takes a slightly different approach to those preceding it. Rather than reading the texts separately, I read *Savage Dreams*, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* and *The Faraway Nearby* through and alongside each other, with the addition of Solnit's 1999 book *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. As part of the connective impulse of ecofeminism, I argue that Solnit's emphasis on walking throughout her work is a way of enacting an embodied, present interaction with the earth. I therefore ask not only where and how walking appears in these texts, but also consider the ways walking might be the connective impetus of the texts as a group, and what this might mean for pursuing, understanding, and enacting an ecofeminist philosophy drawn from and pushed beyond the pages of Solnit's book-length works. I weave between my chosen texts in order to emphasise the importance of motion and connection within and between their narratives. Understanding, as Tim Ingold writes, that "the experience of movement is bound to intrude upon observational practice," I echo the way Solnit's work is interested in considering the movements between places by extending this to privileging my own movements between texts.² I therefore move freely, and sometimes unevenly, between the texts and follow the associations between them, rather than splitting them up and considering driving and walking in

² Tim Ingold, *Lines: A Brief History* (London: Routledge, 2016), 105–6.

each. Doing so, I make a case for the unified power and purpose of Solnit's writings. While Solnit's subjects range from nuclear testing to Greek labyrinths, the modes in/with which these narratives travel are strikingly similar, and by tracing the links between texts I make a case for the activist potential within the texts as an ecofeminist unit.

The roads between these texts are both literal and figurative; much of Solnit's life, and thus her autobiographical narrative, is emplaced in the American West. As such, the texts share a geography, they traverse the same highways, and some narratives – such as driving through the desert to the Nevada Test Site – are repeated across texts. In a figurative sense, I read the connections between the texts *as* roads, as tracks between the narratives that move laterally through time and space. By moving across/through/between these texts and their subjects, I also nod to the style in which Solnit herself writes. Solnit describes the way *Savage Dreams* marks the starting point of her idiosyncratic writing style. In the text's twentieth anniversary preface, she explains:

Nearly everything I have written since has been in this hybrid style, with this permission to wander, drawing together those things that belong together, that need to be together in order to describe the whole in all its complexity, but are so often separated by genre or convention or style (the personal voice versus explanation of fact, first-person encounter versus historical background, analysis versus description, except that those things were never opposed).³

Emphasising this “permission to wander,” Solnit gestures towards the associative style I began to identify in chapter three. I place further emphasis on Solnit's stylistic

³ Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey Into the Landscape Wars of the American West*, 20th Anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), xx. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, abbreviated to *SD*.

wandering in this chapter, moving between Solnit's accounts of walking to the ways her work formally 'wanders' to argue that this 'wandering' is itself a part of Solnit's ecofeminist ethic. Pushing back against the negative connotations of an aimless or idle wanderer, Solnit's stylistic wandering resists the urge to order, contain, and contract, instead proposing a wide-ranging and expansive, connective, approach to both writing and living in the world. In this way, Solnit's wandering style works against dominant cultural forces in similar ways to her narrative content. Drawing upon features of what Ross Chambers calls "loiterature," I look in this chapter at the ways Solnit's wandering transgresses – trespasses – the boundaries between content and form. Chambers writes of the ways loiterature, "following associative drifts or the prompting of memory ... is digressive: it is organized, that is, by relations of resemblance and contiguity, metaphor and metonymy rather than the formal unity required by argument or the narrative of event."⁴ While Solnit's work never digresses to the point of unintelligibility – there is always a point, and she always returns to it – she nevertheless employs a loiterly, associative style that mimics the rhythms and imaginative, mental, and bodily experiences of walking.

I have already discussed the ways metaphor works in Solnit's writing (chapter three), and have considered, too, how the emotional experience of place affects her representations of it (chapter one). Here, I draw these together to consider the ways 'wandering' may itself be an example of an affective connection to land born of an ecofeminist ethic of care. Marcus O'Donnell describes how Solnit "creates a narrative of discovery and revelation that is grounded in her physical experience of place, walking and driving, and in her emotional experience of the landscape and its

⁴ Ross Chambers, *Loiterature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 31.

residents.”⁵ In this chapter, I trace my own lines of discovery within and between the four texts to consider the ways an ethic of ecofeminist connection functions both narratively and formally across Solnit’s work. In turn, I argue that walking – as an action, as a style, and as a metaphor – becomes a tool for “making” the world in Solnit’s work that reflects the ways her ecofeminist ethics push for rethought, relearned, relationships to place on connective, care-driven, and future-focused terms.

On the Road

There is something particularly ‘American’ about the idea of ‘the road.’ As a cultural signifier, the road in the US connotes mobility, expansion, progress, futurity – all those things that underlie the capitalist, colonial, and patriarchal narratives that Solnit takes to task in her consideration of the wilderness and the desert (see chapters one and two). As lines drawn onto these spaces, roads act as physical markers of a (Euroamerican) human presence; they overlay the land(scape). As Matthew Paterson puts it, the “use of cars is deeply embedded in the reproduction of global power structures. These daily consumptive practices and experiences simultaneously produce environmental degradation on global and local scales and also help to reproduce capitalist, statist, patriarchal identities and structures.”⁶ Similarly, Mary Tiles and Hans Oberdiek write, “the automobile – literally, ‘self-moving’ – spoke, and continues to speak, to our sense of individual freedom, rootlessness and our desire to go wherever we want when we want for whatever reason.”⁷ Cars and driving echo or reproduce ideas of freedom and

⁵ Marcus O’Donnell, “Walking, Writing and Dreaming: Rebecca Solnit’s Polyphonic Voices,” *Journalism* 16, no. 7 (October 2015): 950, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884914553078>.

⁶ Matthew Paterson, “Car Culture and Global Environmental Politics,” *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 2 (2000): 257, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210500002539>.

⁷ Mary Tiles and Hans Oberdiek, *Living in a Technological Culture: Human Tools and Human Values* (London: Routledge, 1995), 56.

individualism so central to the idea of America. Perhaps because of this, the ‘road trip’ is an American institution, a national treasure of sorts that creates, as Ronald Primeau puts it, a “sacred space.”⁸ Primeau explains that “roads and cars have long gone beyond simple transportation to become places of exhilarating motion, speed, and solitude.”⁹ Like the wilderness and the desert, the road carries a set of ideological signifiers that speak to a particular experience of American landscape espoused by the dominant culture. It would thus seem to follow that Solnit takes this myth to task in much the same way as she rejects notions of “wilderness” and forges connection with a hostile and toxic desert (see chapters one and two). Yet, just as Solnit’s relation to the city (discussed in chapter three) was vexed yet ultimately useful, the way she relates to the road is more complex, and encompasses both an enjoyment of and resistance to its cultural mythos.

In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit moves between Yosemite National Park and the Nevada Test Site over a period of several years. While the text splits these narratives neatly into two sections, in reality Solnit spent a lot of time on the road between them. Her account of driving within *Savage Dreams* is thus one of the features that draws the two places together. The road acts as a symbol of the kinds of connections Solnit draws and relies upon herself; it is a marker of the inextricable links to be found in these land(scape)s wrought by separations engineered by capitalist patriarchy. Solnit writes:

Of all the cardinal sins against the environment, driving long distances is the most seductive, the one that brings us back to otherwise inaccessible places, whatever the terms. ... Roads are the architecture of our restlessness, of those who wish neither to stay in their built

⁸ Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 1.

⁹ Ibid.

places nor wander in the untouched ones, but to keep moving between them. A road promises something else to us, though the promise is better fulfilled by travelling than arriving (*SD*, 365).

While acknowledging the detrimental environmental impact of long distance driving, Solnit is nevertheless taken in by the prospect of the road. It is “seductive,” a place of “privacy and peace,” a location of introspection and calm in seemingly hostile desert or urban environments. While Solnit sees driving as liberating and exhilarating, Jean Baudrillard considers driving to be a “spectacular form of amnesia. Everything is to be discovered, everything to be obliterated.”¹⁰ In this sense, the road represents a place in which the trope of adventure and discovery lingers, but which also alters the land beyond recognition; the features of land(scape) are “obliterated” by speed, as driving overwrites and thus ‘forgets’ histories of the land(scape) prior to the car’s ubiquity (reflecting an attitude towards landscape that sees it as “terra nullius,” a nobody’s land with no history and no claim to it). As a way to engender connection to land(scape), then, driving seems to be limited at best. Similarly, the road’s purported ‘freedoms’ apply only to a small number of people – the same groups that benefit from technoscientific dominance in the desert (see chapter two) and an aestheticised, detached view of wilderness (see chapter one). To be, for example, a woman or a person of colour on the road is to travel not with a beatnik freedom, but with a constant look over the shoulder.¹¹ As ideologically resonant, the road thus owes its existence to dualistic thinking that separated nature from culture; the road reflects a ‘conquering’

¹⁰ Jean Baudrillard, *America*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2010), 10.

¹¹ See Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Deborah Clarke, *Driving Women: Fiction and Automobile Culture in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) for accounts of how race and gender affect the purported ‘freedom’ of the road.

of sorts. Solnit's exultant account of driving in *Savage Dreams* thus contradicts the more radical impulses within her work, as she seemingly ignores both the cultural and ecological problems built into America's car culture.

However, to denigrate Solnit for driving across the American West would be to echo the strategies used to undermine environmental activists by picking on their actions as individuals. As Amitav Ghosh writes, "the individual conscience is now increasingly seen as the battleground of choice for a conflict that is self-evidently a problem of the global commons, requiring collective action."¹² He then argues, "the scale of climate change is such that individual choices will make little difference unless certain collective decisions are taken and acted upon."¹³ Dismissing a person's environmental virtues on the basis that they still need to drive a car effectively neutralises any good they may have done, yet if no one had driven to the Nevada Test Site to campaign against nuclear testing, there would have been no antinuclear protest. While of course driving is not an environmentally ethical activity, to denigrate Solnit for her reliance on, even love of, driving is to ignore the fact that she lives in a nation, on a planet, shaped by capitalist systems that make huge amounts of people reliant on the fossil fuel industry. As Ghosh says, until this system is successfully dismantled, people will continue to rely on fossil fuels.

Solnit's ecofeminism, which is engaged in dismantling this system, forges connections across a land(scape) marred by the legacies of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism, as we have seen. It follows, then, that while Solnit's driving is not ecologically neutral, it is a necessary means to an important end – it takes her to "otherwise inaccessible places" like the Dann ranch and the Nevada Test Site. Solnit

¹² Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 132.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 133.

knows she is not a perfect environmentalist, but she is as good as she can be while still engaging in meaningful, connective acts in the American West. If Solnit's ecofeminism is about building and empowering a community, the very creation of that community often relies on people's ability to travel. In this sense, Solnit takes a myth predicated on the 'isms of domination' against which she works, and transforms it into a method of ecofeminist connection that allows for further engagement in environmental justice movements.

Like the deserts, wildernesses, and urban environments I have discussed, the road in Solnit's work at least offers a malleable space in which Solnit is able to locate and enact ethics of care and connection that make up the ecofeminist principles of her writing. The road, after all, is designed to connect place to place, and throughout Solnit's work the road acts as a location for the wandering that facilitates the development of her writing self – which, in turn, facilitates both the activism and attendant narratives that produce and drive her texts. That is, the road becomes a facilitator of connection as a place that literally connects locations throughout Solnit's work. By engaging in a complex, even contradictory, inclusion of the road across her writing, Solnit nods towards the complexities with which we all – consciously or not – interact with the land, with the planet, in our own lives. Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva state, “the ecofeminist perspective, as expressed by women activists, recognizes no such division [between nature and culture]. Culture is very much a part of their struggle for subsistence and life.”¹⁴ Similarly, Stacy Alaimo sees one of ecofeminism's key aims as “breaking down the nature/culture divide, thus

¹⁴ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism*, Critique Influence Change Edition (London: Zed Books, 2014), 13.

undermining systems of domination.”¹⁵ As a subversive cultural act which sometimes, ironically, promotes or allows for a connection to ‘nature,’ it follows that there may be a place for the car in ecofeminism. And, if driving as a subversive cultural act in Solnit’s work may serve to undermine or dismantle the very dominances on which car culture’s existence is predicated, the road may serve as an activist tool insofar as it provides the means both for connective ecofeminist actions (such as the protests in Nevada discussed in chapter two, and Solnit’s embodied wildness discussed in chapter one), and as a site and source of that connection, too.

There are many points across Solnit’s work in which the car is central; the drives through the night to the Peace Camp in *Savage Dreams*; when Solnit’s mother loses her car during the early stages of Alzheimer’s in *The Faraway Nearby*; and the drive Solnit takes with a dying aunt in *A Field Guide*. Each of these moments speaks differently to America’s car culture, yet each gives a sense of the underlying importance of automobile travel in Solnit’s life and work, and the way it facilitates the connections so central to ecofeminist ethics. Paradoxically, working from within the idea of the car as a symbol of mobility becomes a way to consider the connections Solnit seeks to maintain across her work. The most straightforward example of this is Solnit’s account of her drive towards the Peace Camp in *Savage Dreams*. She writes:

About half a mile down the road to Highway 95, I found my little brother and eight of his friends piling into a station wagon, and when they urged me to join them, I crammed in. They were on their way down 95 to blockade the workers coming from Las Vegas to Mercury, the industrial town within the Test Site. They were merry inside the car, burbling inconsequentialities, joking, drinking out of water bottles, bota bags, and canteens, clad in Levis, flannel shirts, T-shirts

¹⁵ Stacy Alaimo, “Cyborg and Ecofeminist Interventions: Challenges for an Environmental Feminism,” *Feminist Studies* 20, no. 1 (1994): 150, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178438>.

advertising other actions and causes, in army surplus, bandanas, shawls, ethnic oddments, tights and thermals (*SD*, 8).

This passage describes an archetypal ‘road trip,’ a group of young people travelling together across the American West. They are all on their way to blockade the Nevada Test Site, to engage in environmental, antinuclear activism, and this point marks the start of Solnit’s involvement with protest at the site. The interior of the car itself suggests an instance of activist unity or connection. Solnit “cram[s]” herself into the group already assembled; she joins them and enters a community. The car at this point not only allows this group to travel to the test site in order to protest, but it also facilitates the community of protestors itself; the car and the road become a setting for and a participant in this moment of activist connection. By listing the clothes and the water containers passed around the car, Solnit crams images into this passage like the people in the car – she creates a sense of fullness, a cramped description of a cramped vehicle.

There is an energy to this passage, too, a speed and a sense of purpose. Tiles and Oberdiek write, “even if automobiles don’t save time getting us to town or across town, they do, generally, get us across country with astonishing speed. We relish this ‘time saved.’ Even this is misleading, however. For time spent driving long distances is time spent *not* doing something else.”¹⁶ The “something else” that needs to happen in this moment is the creation of activist communities, and it *is* happening on the site of the road. The car is allowing for something to happen alongside the movement it facilitates. As they drive, this group’s principles converge. They form a unit based on the principles of civil disobedience and their shared antinuclear cause, and thus begin to enact the connections with which Solnit’s work is so concerned (*SD*, 9). In this way,

¹⁶ Tiles and Oberdiek, *Living in a Technological Culture*, 136–37.

Solnit transforms the road myth by signalling and participating in resistance to the very forces responsible for the creation of car culture in the first place.

A Field Guide tells a similarly subversive story. Solnit takes an aunt dying of lung cancer out for a drive that turns out to be her last. Solnit writes, “she directed me to drive a way I hadn’t driven before as she spoke of many things, of how much she loved this place, of how she regretted that she wouldn’t live to see me buy land, of her children, of my family, this other branch of a small tree, of my future.”¹⁷ Recalling this drive, and her aunt’s death a few days later, Solnit remarks, “I had driven my aunt to her death” (*FG*, 61). The road thus opens the way for Solnit’s aunt’s death, but, more than that, it opens the way for a final expression of life; she speaks of “many things,” she sets her affairs in order, and Solnit reads this drive towards death as a kind of swan song. Like the apricots in *The Faraway Nearby*, this moment of illness, so close to death, slips into natural imagery, as Solnit recalls driving through the forest near her aunt’s house, and invokes a woodland metaphor when considering herself to be part of a “branch of a small tree” in her aunt’s forest life. Though the women drive, this moment is emplaced; Solnit’s aunt talks not of travel or of being far away, but of home, of this place that she loves, of how Solnit too should settle, should “buy land.” In the winding, bending shape of this conversation – in its movement around the corners of family life, home, and time – the car acts not only as a setting for this final conversation, but as the facilitator of it.

As part of the narrative of freedom the car implies and inspires, Solnit’s aunt’s ability to free herself up for this conversation seems built into the bending roads on which they drive. Speed is also important; the rapid movement of the car mirrors the

¹⁷ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 61. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, abbreviated to *FG*.

rapid movement of Solnit's aunt towards death – we are told that “the next day she sank into delirium, and she died at home four days after that trip” (*FG*, 61). While Solnit's aunt's death happens with speed, her memory is not obliterated by it; after all, she ends up in the book. The car acts as a locus of memory, of human-human connection, perhaps even of ecofeminist sisterhood, as Solnit shares these final moments with a woman whose “proudest accomplishment had been a precedent-setting lawsuit twenty years before to defend this community's watershed against logging” (*FG*, 60). The car, in this way, facilitates a literal ecofeminist connection, despite its complicity in the destructive powers against which ecofeminist principles work, and Solnit recognises its connective potential by showing its role in a literal female-driven narrative of environmentalism.

Driving also plays a role in *The Faraway Nearby*. Recounting the list of incidents from the early stages of her mother's Alzheimer's, Solnit includes the story of how “she lost her car, and I went over and drove her around until we found it; we crossed our fingers until she lost her driver's license for good.”¹⁸ Here, transformed from the promise of mobility into a confusing and dangerous liability, Solnit's mother's car is unable to fulfil its promise of freedom and individualism; the car, removed from its ‘value,’ which relies on speed and convenience, renders the road's mobility off limits. When she is no longer able to drive at all, Solnit's mother is profoundly detached from the community, and is “lonely” as a result (*FN*, 9). The car that was once a portal to a social life, to independent living, is removed, and Solnit shows how Western culture is heavily reliant on car travel. She implies what Paterson describes as the way “urban space in particular has been systematically reconstructed

¹⁸ Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (London: Granta, 2014), 6. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, abbreviated to *FN*.

to make allowance for the space required to move people about in cars.”¹⁹ Solnit’s mother is removed from the flow of her (sub)urban life, and, as cars are embroiled in the economics of these spaces, Solnit’s mother is removed from the capital flow of the city, too. As discussed in chapter three, the urban environment systematically excludes those not contributing to the city’s economy, and car culture is directly related to this economic flow.

This is reminiscent of Baudrillard’s reading of the “Right Lane Must Exit” signs that proliferate along America’s highways: “‘must exit’: you are being sentenced. You are a player being exiled from the only – useless and glorious – form of collective existence.”²⁰ Solnit’s mother is forced off the highway into a life of isolation, pushed beyond the “collective existence” of America’s capitalist car culture. In this way, Solnit’s mother’s story demonstrates Amy L. Best’s claim that “paradoxically, the car is both a symbol of freedom, progress, and prosperity *and* a harbinger of the perils of rapid industrialization and the wreckage foisted on humanity by corporate capitalism.”²¹ Solnit’s mother’s car, which used to signal the positive freedoms associated with driving, morphs into an object that reminds Solnit of the ruthlessness of the capitalist system in which her mother lives, and is no longer able to successfully function. She is “sentenced” to be removed from the communal space of the highway. In *The Faraway Nearby*, then, car travel functions as a connective force, but in the negative; without it, Solnit’s mother is unable to connect to her community. Importantly, there is nothing noble or liberating about the loss of the car in this text. Its loss is not framed as an environmental good, but rather serves to show

¹⁹ Paterson, “Car Culture and Global Environmental Politics,” 260.

²⁰ Baudrillard, *America*, 56.

²¹ Amy L. Best, *Fast Cars, Cool Rides: The Accelerating World of Youth and Their Cars* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 5 (italics in the original).

how entangled car travel is with daily life for millions of people across the world, thus drawing attention to the pervasive systems of domination against which Solnit's ecofeminism works.

As the contradictory examples from *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* suggest, Solnit's relationship with the car is complex. On the one hand, she recognises the car's ability to provide us with connective experiences, with memories, with 'vehicles' for expression. On the other, Solnit recognises the unavoidable reliance we place on the car – a reliance that has been bolstered by capitalism. Solnit shows how this reliance results in community breakdown as more and more of the population reaches old age, and contracts illnesses that render them unable to drive. Thus, for all its connective value, there is still a lack present in the road myth in Solnit's work. It does not, cannot, align entirely with her environmental principles. Similarly, while it is a place of paradoxical feminist unity, particularly in the account of the drive with her aunt in *A Field Guide*, as part of the systems responsible for continued both environmental degradation and social exclusion the car cannot fully enact ecofeminist connection. It also cannot facilitate the kinds of relationships to place discussed in previous chapters, relationships that rely on emplacement, embodiment, a sense of being 'situated' or a 'part of' place. Solnit concedes in *Savage Dreams* that driving is merely a way of "“filling in the map,” since it isn't a way to know any place, only a way to see how the terrain metamorphoses between known places" (*SD*, 371). Travelling between known places by car obliterates the unknown land(scape)s in between. Thus while Solnit acknowledges that there is an appeal to, even a use for, driving through land(scape)s – and while the car does present partial opportunity for ecofeminist connection within Solnit's work – a way to relate to the land (and those

living in it) in a more embodied and affective sense, one that will enact care as well as connection, may instead be found by stepping *out* of the car.

Walking the Road

Matthew H. Pangborn writes, “walking engages us in the recovery of our bodies and of the place we dynamically inhabit, literally ‘grounding’ us.”²² This grounding acts in direct opposition to the obliterating speed of the car. Bodies and cars simply move through the world differently. Similarly, roads and paths enforce different interactions with place: roads are imposed onto the landscape, while paths move with or in the land. Paths, those trodden by walkers’ feet, are carved into the earth; they move with it. Because paths, particularly the oldest ones, are carved over time, they must move around obstacles, and take the topography into account. In *The Old Ways*, Robert Macfarlane describes how “paths are the habits of a landscape. They are acts of consensual making. It’s hard to create a footpath on your own.”²³ Paths are about community, about a willing and collective act that traces a shared desire. They are connections through time as well as in space. They also resist the dominance implicit in road-travel. Robert Moor writes, “on a trail, to walk is to follow. Like prostration or apprenticeship, trail walking both requires and instils a certain humility.”²⁴ In opposition to the road, with its connotations of individual liberty and the conquering actions of exploration, the path or the trail marks a communal experience of motion, in which the walker is part of a whole, utilising, making and maintaining the line they

²² Matthew H. Pangborn, “Thoreau’s Wager and the Possibilities of Walking,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, no. 1 (June 2017): 139, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isw089>.

²³ Robert Macfarlane, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 17.

²⁴ Robert Moor, *On Trails: An Exploration* (London: Aurum Press, 2017), 10.

walk. Paths thus open up connective experiences closed off by driving. Macfarlane writes, “paths were figured as rifts within which time might exist as pure surface, prone to weird morphologies, uncanny origami.”²⁵ The strangeness of the converging histories on the path give them an “uncanny” sense, a weirdness in which one, in the present, is both suspended and complicit: people and place both make and are made by paths. To walk the path, then, is to both carve into and move with the land(scape), to make and become part of the world.

The humility of the trail prompts both a change of pace and a change in perspective. Daniel Weston writes, “if the road, as [Iain] Sinclair describes it ... ‘acts as a prophylactic between driver and landscape’ ... walking reinstates a fuller engagement in slowing the process down from passing *over* to passing *through*.”²⁶ In *Wanderlust*, Solnit considers walking pace to be the perfect speed at which to move through and connect with the world. She writes, “I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour” (W, 10). If walking keeps pace with thinking, driving obliterates not only our experience of the land(scape), but our experience of the self, of the thinking mind. In this sense, walking follows another line, a trail of thought, that is engaged not with the movement over the land, but in an *inhabitation* of (an experience of) it. Ingold writes,

for the wayfarer whose line goes out for a walk, speed is not an issue. It makes no more sense to ask about the speed of wayfaring than it does to ask about the speed of life. What matters is not how fast one moves, in terms of the ratio of distance to elapsed time, but that this movement should be in phase with, or attuned to, the movements of other phenomena of the inhabited world.²⁷

²⁵ Macfarlane, *The Old Ways*, 22.

²⁶ Daniel Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes: The Poetics of Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 103.

²⁷ Ingold, *Lines*, 104–5.

If the wayfarer's "line" goes out for a walk, it is because it involves exactly the kind of embodied experience of the road missing from driving. Connecting the mind to the feet, to the body, Solnit once again collapses the Cartesian dualisms that so impeded the narratives of recovery discussed in chapter three. Instead, Solnit creates a connective, embodied account of walking, or wayfaring, by refusing to concern herself with the obliterating, disintegrating quality of speed. Ingold asserts that "the wayfarer is continually on the move. More strictly, [they are their] movement."²⁸ This embodied, intrinsic account of walking works in direct opposition to the distancing function of driving. That is, walking, with its slow pace and its bodily activity, allows the road to reach its potential as a site and tool of connective, ethical engagements with land(scape), entirely because it forces Solnit – and reminds us – to slow down in a world that moves at ever increasing speed.²⁹ In opposition to the relentless speed and 'progress' wrought by capitalism, then, walking becomes another way for Solnit to work against an 'ism of domination' responsible for reducing, even eradicating, relationships to the earth.

Wanderlust asks us to reinstate walking in our daily lives, to remember the purposes walking serves and to find our way back to our body, to our own two feet. Recounting the multifarious history of walking, from the evolution of human bipedalism to the treadmills that gather dust in the garages of suburban America,

²⁸ Ibid., 78.

²⁹ This idea of slowing down has been taken up by 'slow living' movements such as Slow Food. These movements, as Wendy Parkins writes, promote "'slow' practices [which] construct 'slow subjects' who invest the everyday with meaning and value as they seek to differentiate themselves from the dominant culture of speed." The slowness of walking has similarly been taken up as a tool of resistance to the speed of driving, and, as Solnit suggests, represents an alternative way of relating to the/our environment. "Out of Time: Fast Subjects and Slow Living," *Time and Society* 13, no. 2–3 (2004): 364, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X04045662>.

Solnit touches upon the way walking as political protest has been a point of human-human and human-land connection throughout time. She considers how walking, as an act of civil disobedience, changes an individual activity into a collective one. She explains, “walking together has been a rite, tool and reinforcement of the civil society that can stand up to violence, to fear, and to repression” (W, xii). Walking is an act of community, of resistance, and of connective, collective motion. It is ecofeminist in its potential to resist the dominance of speed and the perceived necessity of power/progress responsible for the global climate crisis. Solnit later writes, “walking, which can be prayer, sex, communion with the land, or musing, becomes speech in these demonstrations and uprisings” (W, 217). This “speech” echoes Michel de Certeau’s characterisation of walking as a kind of bodily “speech act.” He explains walking’s threefold “enunciative” function:

It is a process of *appropriation* of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrian (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies *relations* among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic ‘contracts’ in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an ‘allocution,’ ‘posits another opposite’ the speaker and puts contracts between interlocutors into action).³⁰

Walking, for de Certeau and, it seems, for Solnit, involves/incites an active engagement with and creation of space. Walking in a certain way to act out space *changes that space*. As speech, walking ‘re-iterates’ places on new terms. Thus, if Solnit reads others’ travels on foot as insurrectionary and empowered to change, it follows that her own walks within these texts are gesturing towards and engendering

³⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Stephen Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 97–98 (italics in the original).

a new kind of space, a new way of relating to the world as a result of the enunciative quality of both her movement through the world, and her writing about it.

In *Wanderlust*'s final pages, Solnit describes travelling to Las Vegas, concluding a walk that traces "the longest distance between two points" (W, 277). Las Vegas is a stopover city; Solnit remarks, "it is one of the world's most visited cities, but few will notice the actual city. In, for example, Barcelona or Katmandu, tourists come to see the locals in their natural habitat, but in Vegas the locals appear largely as employees and entertainers in the anywhere-but-here habitat built for tourists" (W, 281). Vegas is deliberately built not to look like Vegas, it is "anywhere-but-here," a vibrant combination of recognisable 'elsewheres.' The appeal of this out-of-place place (or, perhaps, what Marc Augé calls a "non-place," cultivated for "leisure" and there to be "passed through") is the collision of kitschy tourist attractions, not a sense of locality.³¹ By walking through it, Solnit hopes to reinstate, re-locate, a sense of emplacement by tracing a connecting/connective path. She writes, "I had wanted to walk from the Strip to the desert to connect the two, and I called the local cartographic company for recommendations about routes, since all my maps were long out of date. They told me that the city was growing so fast they put out a new map every month" (W, 280–81). The impossibility of "wayfaring" in this city is an immediate obstacle. Even when the city authority is able to recommend some of the routes to complete this connective walk, they turn out to travel through "alarming places for a solitary walker," tucked inside a threatening industrialised hinterland (W, 281). Vegas turns out not to be a place for walking, or for walkers.

³¹ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995), 94; 104.

Yet, as Solnit tells us, the Strip itself, running through the centre of the city, is a traditional boulevard, a place thronging with walkers ambling from one place to another, moving between casinos and hotels in the blazing heat. And while there are sanctions and restrictions placed on walkers – some of the hotels lease or own the sidewalk out front in order to prevent loiterers – Solnit sees this in a somewhat positive light: “all the efforts to control who strolls and how suggests that walking may in some way still be subversive” (*W*, 285).³² Pushing back against an increasingly regulated public space, Solnit understands that walking in a place like Vegas is part of the work of active participation in, and connection to, people and place, and a way of restating, or relearning, her relationship to both.

It is the people as much as the buildings that make Vegas a spectacle. Walking the Strip, Solnit observes a couple of newlyweds she spotted earlier in her walk and muses, “I wondered about them, about why they had chosen to spend the first hours of their honeymoon strolling the Strip, about what past they brought with them” (*W*, 286–87). As a wandering, wondering, observer, Solnit becomes a *flâneur*. In observing the tourists rather than engaging in acts of tourism herself, Solnit places herself outside of the exchange systems of Las Vegas – outside of the capitalist systems that, as discussed above, both built and supports the car industry. The *flâneur* observes and reflects upon, but does not join in with, the bustle of the city. Liedeke Plate refers to the *flâneur* ‘reading’ the streets, asserting, “the *flâneur* is the reader who takes the knowledge from writings of earlier *flâneurs* to the streets; and *flânerie* is an experience

³² Recognising the ideologies underpinning the private ownership of Las Vegas’ sidewalks, Solnit links this to the rights-of-way battles in the UK in the mid-twentieth century (*W*, 287). In a chapter on “Walking Clubs and Land Wars” Solnit details how the Ramblers’ Association has used “mass trespasses” to counter such privatisations, once again gesturing towards walking’s subversive, activist potential (*W*, 159–167).

of the urban environment that is mediated by literature.”³³ If Solnit ‘reads’ the Vegas roads, this reading ultimately takes her outside of the systems of the city in order to engage more closely with the land(scape), as though the city itself does not allow for the kind of embodied experience for which she is searching. As such, Solnit renegotiates the road-spaces of Las Vegas by decidedly *not* engaging with this urban, touristic ‘landscape.’

However, as a woman Solnit is unable to achieve the anonymity of the *flâneur*; women walking alone are visible in ways that men are not. Instead, then, she is a *flâneuse*, which Lauren Elkin defines as a woman walking in and observing the city, capturing the “sense of the city you can’t plot on a map ... an intense, embodied relationship to its atmosphere.”³⁴ While Elkin perhaps risks an essentialist connection of walking women to a more bodily relationship to their environment than their male counterparts, her term reminds us that women’s bodies are always marked as such when they are out in public. Solnit’s gender is thus part of the enunciative quality of her walking, as she reasserts the presence, or absence, of her gendered body and her right to wander, or not. In this sense, Solnit becomes a member of what Elkin terms, “a female *flânerie* – a *flâneuserie* – [which] not only changes the way we move through space, but intervenes in the organization of space itself. We claim our right to disturb the peace, to observe (or not observe), to occupy (or not occupy) and to organise (or disorganise) space on our own terms.”³⁵ Ultimately claiming her right to *not* engage with the road systems of Vegas by abandoning them to walk instead in Red

³³ Liedeke Plate, “Walking in Virginia Woolf’s Footsteps: Performing Cultural Memory,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (February 2006): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549406060810>.

³⁴ Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Vintage, 2017), 83.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

Rocks (discussed further below), Solnit subverts the capitalist expectations of the city by “not occupy[ing]” the space, not posing with her body outside tourist attractions or spending her money on leisure activities.

Walking away from Vegas in the final pages of *Wanderlust*, Solnit thus dispenses with the road altogether. The final account in *Wanderlust* of this desert walk distills Solnit’s findings and experiences into a metaphor that seems to transcend the problems she encounters on the pavement by lifting the walking feet off the ground altogether. That is, she refers to walking as a constellation:

Walking has been one of the constellations in the starry sky of human culture, a constellation whose three stars are the body, the imagination, and the wide open world, and though all three exist independently, it is the lines drawn between them – drawn by the act of walking for cultural purposes – that makes them a constellation. Constellations are not natural phenomena but cultural impositions; the lines drawn between stars are like paths worn by the imagination of those who have gone before. This constellation called walking has a history, the history trod out by all those poets and philosophers and insurrectionaries, by jaywalkers, streetwalkers, pilgrims, tourists, hikers, mountaineers, but whether it has a future depends on whether those connecting paths are traveled still (*W*, 290–91).

The astral metaphor seems an unusual choice for a text so concerned with the earth, with the human, but the ways in which constellations in particular come to stand for Solnit’s relation to walking as a culturally inscribed act works to reveal the strangeness of walking itself. How we make meaning out of the experience of walking matters, and Solnit is focused on the ways in which walking causes and relates to our humanity as or via modes of cultural production. Walking is both part of and a marker of the identities Solnit lists, and the groups responsible for these kinds of activist or subversive walking do so to directly impact or counter the dominant culture. A jaywalker literally cuts across the road, across the dominant transport lines which, as

I have discussed, are encoded with capitalist logic. Ingold makes a distinction between the purposes of ‘lines’ of travel, arguing, “unlike wayfaring, ... transport is destination-oriented. It is not so much a development *along* a way of life as a carrying *across*, from location to location, of people and goods in such a way as to leave their basic natures unaffected.”³⁶ Walking, then, is wayfaring in opposition to driving’s transport, and the wayfaring possibilities opened up by different modes of walking speak back to the way, as Solnit suggests, walking may make the/a world. Linking different acts of walking that serve connecting cultural purposes via the constellations metaphor, Solnit abstracts walking from mere transport. After all, stars were, are, used for navigation, for wayfaring.

It is important that while Solnit does differentiate between forms of walking – the tourist is different from the pilgrim, the jaywalker from the philosopher – she does not hierarchise these practices. Rather, they form a kind of walking collective that resonates with, and bridge gaps between, various cultural experiences (remembering that even an experience of ‘nature’ is culturally mediated). This nonhierarchical collage effect is typical of Solnit’s work more widely, and relates to the connective ethics of her work I have identified throughout this thesis. As Wendy Harding notes of *Savage Dreams*,

[Solnit’s] progression through landscape and through text is processual rather than demonstrative, inquisitive rather than conclusive; she relies on chance adventures, transitional states, the serendipity of whim rather than the propriety of other people’s interpretations or her assumptions. She excludes no trail, but she also privileges none in particular.³⁷

³⁶ Ingold, *Lines*, 79 (italics in the original).

³⁷ Wendy Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness and the New American Literature of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2014), 158.

Wanderlust works in much the same way, following curiosity, tracing trails, but refusing to privilege any in particular; there is no ‘right’ way to walk, for Solnit, it is just important that we do.³⁸ Any and all walking contributes to its future, and putting one foot in front of another is all part of an ongoing project of connectivity that threads throughout Solnit’s work. Carolyn Merchant asserts, “environmental ethics are a link between theory and practice. They translate thought into actions, worldviews into movements.”³⁹ As part of her ecofeminist ethics, walking in Solnit’s work bridges the gap between thinking/writing/reading and doing; it is a tool for activism within the texts as well as in Solnit’s historical accounts. Solnit’s movement relates to movements. Her writing about walking through and within the land(scape) enacts an ethical connection to place that involves care and reciprocity. Referring to walking via a cosmic metaphor, Solnit taps into both the expansive and elusive nature of the connections she perceives and reacts to through walking. This expansiveness, this multiplicity, spans her work more generally; the texts, in their focus on walking, make up this constellation through their interlinked interest in what it means – to the self, to the community, to the world – to wander, and what paths may be followed through these varying, interlinking, associated walking experiences.

³⁸ Importantly, Solnit does not posit walking as the *only* way to engage meaningfully with the world. Rather, walking comes to represent for Solnit a way of achieving an embodied engagement with the world based on slowness and attentiveness, thereby engendering a connective relationship to the nonhuman world which we are unable to achieve when moving through it at speed. Thus, while walking as an activity privileges certain able bodies, the importance placed on emotional and conscious connections to the world suggests a more inclusive impulse behind Solnit’s focus on walking. For an account of the ableist bias in more traditional American wilderness narratives, which privilege the ‘fit’ body’s endurance, see Sarah Jaquette Ray’s essay “Risking Bodies in the Wild: The ‘Corporeal Unconscious’ of American Adventure Culture” in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, 29–72, ed. by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

³⁹ Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York; London: Routledge, 2005), 64.

Striking a Chord

Walking thus acts as a connective force beyond the pages of each separate text. O'Donnell considers walking to be an "important metaphor for [Solnit's] work because it links to both a sense of place and the mechanics of both the mind and the body."⁴⁰ Walking is an important metaphor *for* Solnit's work, but also *in* and *between* her works. Acts of 'trespassing' disciplinary boundaries happen within the texts, in the way *Savage Dreams* combines historical accounts and autobiographical tales, for example. It also happens between them, in, say, the lyrical accounts of the desert West seen in *A Field Guide* that speak back to or reframe the historical accounts of that same desert in *Savage Dreams*. Solnit's work wanders, and in wandering, it refuses categorisation, refuses to be put to a single aesthetic or activist use. In this way, these works are gesturing towards doing, but also thinking an engagement with the land, reflecting Timothy Morton's assertion that the issue now is not *that* humans are responsible for the climate crisis, but *how* we think about this crisis.⁴¹

In Solnit's accounts of walking, the convergence of thinking and doing lies in a continual focus on movement, which, as noted above, reflects activist movements. Weston writes, "in critical discourses, the representation of place (both visual and textual) is often associated with situated, if not always static, perspective; whereas the experience and practice of place is commonly associated with processes of moving through and consequently with a mobile perspective. Walking, I contend, collapses this critical dichotomy."⁴² Collapsing this dichotomy, or, perhaps, tracing a path between it, Solnit's work on walking reframes the site of the road/the path/the trail in terms of an engagement with the land that rejects the obliterating speed of driving, and

⁴⁰ O'Donnell, "Walking, Writing and Dreaming," 941.

⁴¹ Timothy Morton, *Being Ecological* (London: Pelican, 2018), 205.

⁴² Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes*, 101.

gestures instead towards an embodied, affective, cognitive experience of connection and connectivity that, in turn, demonstrates the ecofeminist impulse towards connection that engenders environmental awareness and action. After all, as Morton argues, “if we could not merely figure out but actually *experience* the fact that we are embedded in our world, then we would be less likely to destroy it.”⁴³ Solnit’s walking narratives, her wandering texts, suggest, provoke, and enact ways of experiencing these connections, rather than merely describing them for her reader.

These connective experiences require a refusal to separate mind, body, and world. Collapsing the Cartesian mind/body separation in her discussion of illness in *The Faraway Nearby*, Solnit shows how a somatic experience of the world is undeniably bound to the ways we might think about that experience (see chapter three). Through the image of walking, she pushes this connection further, explicitly relating the mind-body connection to the world in which that body/mind exists. In *Wanderlust*, Solnit writes, “walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them” (*W*, 5). Solnit describes the unities of walking in terms of chords and conversation; sonically, it seems, is how walking is understood as an experience that unifies our understanding of self and world. The musical metaphor through which Solnit proffers this idea recurs throughout her work. In *Savage Dreams*, for instance, Solnit writes of the way walking “is the only way to measure the rhythm of the body against the rhythm of the land” (*SD*, 61). She describes how “walking in its rhythm and naturalness is the closest of all the acts we choose to

⁴³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 64.

the acts we don't; to breathing and the beating of our hearts. Of all the things we learn, it is the most natural, like birds learning to fly, and of all of them the act that becomes most unconscious" (*SD*, 61). Just as, in *Wanderlust*, Solnit describes the way walking allows for an inhabitation of the world without being made "busy" by it, walking in *Savage Dreams* is a way to inhabit or interact with the 'naturalness' of being human. It is bodily in both instances, which pertains once again to the bodily relations to place that threads throughout Solnit's work (see chapter one).

Figuring this unified/unifying walking through musical metaphor(s), Solnit gestures towards a simultaneous universality and individuality in walking echoed in the ways we relate to and experience music. Kathleen Dean Moore explains that humans experience music in a unique way, with our whole brain:

There is no place in the brain especially for music, scientists have discovered, the way there is a special place for smell or sight. The aquamarine light of music floods through the brain, pooling in all the places where we feel, understand, remember, prefer, perceive, analyse, hope, and fear.⁴⁴

The physical chords music strikes in the brain make it a unified and simultaneous experience, and walking is a similar activity in terms of the body. We experience walking as a full-body activity; the feet striking the ground, the arms swinging, the core holding us up as we turn, lungs breathing, sweat gathering, eyes seeing. Skin feeling heat or rain or wind, ears pricked for sound. The "rhythm" of walking is in its unconscious activity, in the footsteps and movement of the body, but the chord it strikes is somehow exterior, a moment of unity between individual, people, nonhumans, and place. As a moment indicating a unified mind and body that interacts

⁴⁴ Kathleen Dean Moore, *The Pine Island Paradox: Making Connections in a Disconnected World* (Minneapolis: Milkweed, 2005), 245.

wholly with the world around it without being overtaken, walking is an example of what David Seaman calls our “taken-for-granted immersion-in-world.”⁴⁵

Solnit mobilises this taken-for-granted interaction with the world both stylistically and narratologically. She makes it visible, drawing our attention to both the mechanics and the meditations of walking in order to gesture towards its importance. And by revealing both the mechanics and the meditations – by thinking through its unconscious rhythms and its relational chords – Solnit brings to the fore the same sense of ‘balance’ she uses to decry the mind/body separation in *The Faraway Nearby* (see chapter three), and which allows her to enact similar principles of care. Throughout her work, walking is about connecting, joining together the rhythms of the body and the chords of the mind, and the world – and (re)making that world. For Solnit, in walking we recognise the places through which we move but retain a sense of self, of mind and body, within them; neither makes us “busy.” Movement – the rhythms of walking and the connection enacted between the mind, body, and world via walking – is thus what engenders the connections for which Solnit has been searching throughout her work.

In order to illustrate the way the “chord” functions as a form of wandering in Solnit’s many accounts of walking, I want to revisit a passage discussed in chapter one, in which Solnit walks along the Merced River in Yosemite National Park. There, I was interested in the passage for its focus on water, on history, and on connection, but here I want to focus solely on the fact that Solnit walks. Harding notes that “the numerous depictions of the western scenery that [Solnit] gives in [*Savage Dreams*]

⁴⁵ David Seaman, “Situated Cognition and the Phenomenology of Place: Lifeworld, Environmental Embodiment, and Immersion-in-World,” *Cognitive Processing* 16 (2015): S390, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10339-015-0678-9>.

render it from the perspective of a body in motion.”⁴⁶ This bodily motion is key to the rhythms and harmonies of walking, and this passage illustrates the bodily immediacy of walking by unfolding the land(scape) at a steady pace, and engaging with the pace and sounds of movement in both the content and the style of her description. Solnit writes:

Late one September afternoon, I walked along the Merced. As I followed the river west through the valley, toward sunset, something surprised me every few minutes. The river bent, the valley turned a little more due west and a last ray of sun stretched toward me, a stand of trees gave way to a meadow, a space between the trees opened up a view of a sheer wall or the deep V of the west end turning rosy. The river is a gentle, neglected, beautiful thing, widening into broad mirror, spilling over shallow falls and singing to itself, breaking into halves to encircle an island, writhing, turning, harbouring beautiful groves of broadleaved trees, ripping the soil from under them to expose the great knots of roots like hundred-fingered hands all bare and knobbly knuckled as they clutch the earth, throwing up sand bars and long reaches of polished boulders, gentle backwaters, stands of marsh grass, ducks, a school of large fish hovering motionless in a pool in perfect formation like a fleet of submarines, developing shadowy depths, swimming holes, washing up whitened tree trunks in places it’s hard to believe the spring rush must reach, turning in winter into a long skein of icy lace and open pools. No one walks the river but a few fly fishermen (*SD*, 248).

There is an underlying rhythm to this passage that follows not the twists and turns of the river, but Solnit’s steps alongside it. While the lists of adjectives and nouns, as discussed in chapter one, evoke the path of the river through the land, the longer clauses, and the commas between them, mark the steps Solnit is taking as she describes the scene. She turns from the sunset to the trees, which become a meadow as she continues her journey on foot. Though describing the scenes that unfold before her,

⁴⁶ Harding, *The Myth of Emptiness*, 166.

Solnit seems to resist pausing to reflect on her experiences, instead merely describing them as they occur; she is engaged in what Heidegger refers to as being-in-the-world.⁴⁷ This phenomenological sense of experience, in which she brings very little with her to her apprehension of the river, and resists leaving a trail of conclusions in her wake – the trees become a meadow, we are not told how or why – gives a sense of forward motion that does not allow us to linger on the whys and wherefores of this land(scape). Thus, while so much of Solnit’s description of the Yosemite area is entirely about stopping to consider what is below the surface, here walking calls for an active, mobile perception of the land that begins from within the body, within the self. Attending to the land in this way, Solnit posits an affective connection that keeps stride with her body as it moves alongside the water.

In its focus on unity, which works in opposition to the disintegrating, obliterating speed of driving (itself a product of the ‘isms of domination’ against which Solnit’s connective narratives work), this walking passage sounds the three notes of the chord; mind, body, and world. The body propels Solnit’s account. It is the subject, and walking opens and closes the description. Like any experience anyone can have of the world, it begins and ends with the bodies to which we are confined. The mind, then, facilitates travel outside of this. Solnit describes what she sees, but also what she feels about what she sees: she is surprised by the appearance of the meadow, and tells us so. The terms used to describe the river are not factual, they are emotive; the river is “gentle, neglected, beautiful.” In three different senses the river is an affective and affected entity within the land. Which leads to the third note, the world. Walking is the medium through which Solnit experiences and relates to this place, it is the

⁴⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 63.

metronomic drive of the description underneath the melody of the river. Solnit turns corners when the river bends, pauses where it holds its breath before cascading down. And in the anthropomorphic description of the river (discussed further in chapter one), she ‘embodies’ the river, too, drawing an explicit connection between human and nonhuman bodies located in the same place.

It is no coincidence, then, that the river is a “broad mirror,” as Solnit sees the way her mind and body connect to it, are reflected by and reflect it as part of the world around her. Merchant reminds us that “a view of nature as a process, one that is more powerful and longer lasting than human societies and human beings, is a sufficient basis for an ethic of earthcare.”⁴⁸ Situating herself in this moment, representing herself as a part of the chord of the land(scape) as she walks through it, Solnit cares for – she attends to – the processes of the river, and understands her body in relation to it. Heidegger refers to the “phenomenon of ‘taking care’ of things” as a kind of attending-to, an experiential attention to our being-in-the-world which avoids the “interpretational tendencies crowding and accompanying us.”⁴⁹ This mode of caretaking, which relates not to a sense of caring for so much as it relates to caring about or being in some way careful of the world through which we move, marks a duality in Solnit’s ethics of care. In short, it is through walking that Solnit becomes present in and attentive to the processes of the natural world, and in becoming attentive to them, she enacts the ethics of care so important to her overarching ecofeminism. Thus, through walking she alters her own relationship to the place in which she travels and, in turn, ‘makes’ it through the wandering narrative she tells.

And Solnit is not “made busy by” this experience; she is not “crowd[ed]” by

⁴⁸ Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (New York: Routledge, 1996), xxii.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 67.

it. The chord holds in balance her own walking, her introspective mind, and the rushing river. She is able to describe both – all – at once by holding in harmony the elements of her experience, but not forcing the connections between the notes. These multiplicitous descriptions even happen on the site of the same word. Take “neglected”: the river itself is physically neglected, sitting outside of the usual tourist traps in the Yosemite area, and visited by no one but fishermen. “Neglected” also holds an emotional charge that comes directly from Solnit’s subjective experience; to others, the river is not neglected, it just ‘is,’ if they register it at all. Within this word, too, reside human anxieties about abandonment, about the degeneration we ourselves experience at the hands of neglect. And so the river reflects back to us our own fears, while also remaining in itself the object of neglect.

To think about how this all works together, then, is to return to the experiential impact of walking itself. Experiencing, but dwelling on or getting distracted by these multifarious impressions of place, relies upon the pace with which Solnit moves through the land. Driving alongside this river would erase this interconnected/interconnective experience. To move alongside water at speed would make for an exciting experience of the twists and turns, but miss the gentleness, the neglected beauty of a place that can only be truly ‘attended to’ by a slower, more contemplative approach to it. Similarly, driving would eliminate the details Solnit is able to recount; the ducks and fish, the roots of trees, all would be obliterated by the blurring speed of the passing car. Walking, as a slower way of moving through the world, carves a different kind of road, a trail on which two feet hold in balance a sensory, embodied account of/in place that understands the connectivity inherent in walking and calls for an immediacy in our environmental perception. It also calls for a surrender, for a new way of apprehending, or thinking about, the environment that

does not ask us to control, to discover or to obliterate, but merely asks us to notice, to observe and inhabit, to listen. For Weston, “the constant and reciprocal interaction of representation and experience suggest place not only as location, but also as process.”⁵⁰ In Solnit’s work, walking enacts this process, and begins to bring place into partnership with its human inhabitants/visitors, echoing the care- and connection-driven partnership ethic which Merchant sees as key to an ecofeminist relationship with place.⁵¹ Pausing and attending to the land(scape) creates space for this connective relationship; walking, as a way of striking a bodily/affective/communal chord, becomes an activist tool for relearning her/our relationship to the planet.

To Scale

As the scale of our transport gets larger, we become less and less interested in the local, in what Ingold refers to as “inhabitant” knowledge, an emplaced and actively situated relationship with our locale.⁵² Solnit sees walking as an opportunity to redress the balance, and engage in a more locally-minded experience of place. In an account of climbing Mount Whitney in *A Field Guide*, Solnit advocates losing oneself in the land(scape) as a way of beginning this experience. It is a kind of surrendering to scale that facilitates an experience of wildness based not on control or dominance but trust and connection:

Mountaineering is always spoken of as though summiting is conquest, but as you get higher, the world gets bigger, and you feel smaller in proportion to it, overwhelmed and liberated by how much space is around you, how much room to wander, how much unknown. All day you have been toiling uphill looking into the slope, on trail, switchback, in pine groves and above them, and the view behind you has gradually

⁵⁰ Weston, *Contemporary Literary Landscapes*, 15.

⁵¹ Merchant, *Earthcare*, xix.

⁵² Ingold, *Lines*, 106.

enlarged to the north, the south, the east. Sometimes birds, trees, the rocks underfoot draw your attention to the nearby, sometimes you are looking straight into the steepness ahead, but a turn or a pause lets you see the vastness in those three directions again, an infinite cloak of air wrapped around your back as you proceed. Finally, about thirteen thousand feet above the sea, you reach not the summit, which isn't so dramatic a change, but the crest. Whitney is only the highest point of a long ridge. As you step up to the ridgeline the world to the west suddenly appears before you, a colossal expanse even more wild and remote than the east, a surprise, a gift, a revelation. The world doubles in size (*FG*, 151–52).

While “you” is one of Solnit’s favoured modes of address across the texts discussed in this chapter, here she pushes the second person to inhabit an extended passage that strikes a similar chord of mind, body, and world to *Savage Dreams*’ river walk. In this account, the diminishing scale of the body only works when held alongside the expansive scale of the land(scape), and it is the rhythm of walking that facilitates the shift – in the passage and in the experience – between these two things, the see-saw of size that passes from the body to the world as the mind itself struggles to comprehend the things it sees and feels. Bodily scale is disrupted to extremes, as the land(scape) warps and expands the closer the walker travels not to the top, but to the edges. Ben Jacks notes that “the bodily experience of walking and the pace of engagement with the world opens the space to recognize its beauty and distress.”⁵³ The multiplicity of Solnit’s experience of this land(scape) prompts an engagement with the land’s own complexity. The walker is both “overwhelmed” and “liberated” by the disruption of scale; it is, simultaneously, a positive and a negative experience. The human – Solnit, you, me, us – in this passage is forced to face the land anew when confronted both with its overwhelming scale, and a calmer, gradual, perhaps imperceptible alteration

⁵³ Ben Jacks, “Reimagining Walking: Four Practices,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 57, no. 3 (2004): 9, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1425774>.

in the way the body, the human, relates to this wild place. In this sense, the ways of approaching ‘nature’ as an aesthetic experience (discussed further in chapter one) come up against a bodily, phenomenological apprehension of land(scape), forging a new experience of the environment facilitated by the motion of the walking self.

Once again, the pace at which this multifarious experience occurs is paramount. It takes “all day” for the experience to unfold. More than that, it takes hard work, a steep uphill climb that leaves little room for taking in the surroundings and moving at the same time; the goal of mountaineering is the summit, it is to arrive (much like driving). Yet Solnit recognises the joy of travelling, the joy of following the path, of occupying the line between A and B. Being in and above pine groves, looking ahead at the trail, the birds, rocks and trees that “draw your attention to the nearby,” forces a focus not on the goal of arrival, but on the slow, steady act of placing one foot in front of another; of walking the trail. Again, walking pushes not for an end result, but a gradual, incremental and accumulative experience of place. The walking or wandering in this passage happens both physically and figuratively, in the land and within the self, within the mind’s perception of this experience. After all, the “gift” of reaching the crest is not the crest itself, but the steps it has taken to arrive there. Relinquishing the speed that obliterates these land(scape)s, Solnit uses the second person perspective to ask us to inhabit, via text, the three miles per hour pace of wayfaring in a localised land(scape) we are usually asked to view from above or afar.

Rhythm plays a similar role in this passage to the river walk in *Savage Dreams*, this time inviting the reader, too, into a stylistically rendered account of walking. The commas between clauses are breaths and steps, a synchronised walking that propels us – as the “you” – through the passage. We as readers are asked to be wayfarers ourselves, to read the pauses in the lines of the text, and understand the steady

movement forward. Read aloud, this passage presents moments of metronomic regularity; “as you get **higher**, the world gets **bigger**, and you feel **smaller**,” and, later, “looking **straight** into the **steepness ahead**,” each stressed syllable (bold) marking a step, each phrase recounting a moment of forward motion. In contrast, “a *pause* lets you *see* the *vastness* in those *three* directions *again*, an *infinite cloak* of *air* wrapped around your back as you *proceed*” offers elongated vowel sounds (italics) that stretch the moment of the text, of the pause, drawing in and holding the air and the image before the steps start up once more and we reach towards the crest. This poetic, or musical, rendering of the experience of the walking body employs what de Certeau calls “a rhetoric of walking,” pursuing stylistic wandering as well as tracing narrative paths.⁵⁴ The rhythms, pauses, and paces of walking are built into language itself, and it is this stylistic wandering even at the level of word choice that reveals walking to be so intrinsic not just to Solnit’s subject, but to her story-telling, and, subsequently, to her activist world-making.

For Hayden Lorimer and John Wylie, “whenever and wherever you walk, this commanding thesis of integration – of an existential continuum of mind, body and world – dis-integrates with almost every step, every dis-location that is, by which you seem to be less the flowing of sentences of the landscape and more its jarring punctuation, all commas, colons, and question marks.”⁵⁵ Lorimer and Wylie’s analysis suggests an unravelling of the self in walking that does not entirely reflect Solnit’s experience of connection, yet their invocation of punctuation as a kind of culmination of the walking experience speaks to the jarring, staccato climax of Solnit’s mountain climb. As the passage moves towards its close, the commas are more frequent, there

⁵⁴ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 100.

⁵⁵ Hayden Lorimer and John Wylie, “LOOP (a Geography),” *Performance Research* 15, no. 4 (December 2010): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2010.539872>.

is a shortness of breath as the steep incline finally levels out to reveal the “gift” of the plateau. Just as the “you” is important here in terms of engaging a reader beyond merely asking them, us, to appreciate an image of the land(scape), the embedded rhythm of this section serves to carry us along, up and out to the crest, and asks us to pause at all the right moments, to reflect alongside Solnit on the connective impact of walking as it relates to the ethical impetus of this account. Reaching the plateau rather than the summit is, again, part of refusing dominant understandings of land(scape) – just as Solnit refuses to engage in tourist activities in Yosemite (see chapter one) and Las Vegas (see above), here she refuses to engage in an act of summiting that speaks directly to a white, male history of ‘conquering’ the land(scape).⁵⁶ Moreover, this passage indicates that Solnit’s wandering appears not only in her writing’s recurring accounts of walking, nor in the paths that may be drawn between texts, but can be found at the level of the sentence, of language. In the details of Solnit’s work, in the small acts of noticing and attending-to, the nuances of the relationship between style and content become another part of the connective impulse across Solnit’s writing. Thus, walking as writing becomes part of the connective activism of her work, as she formally enacts ecofeminist principles via narratives and rhetorics of walking.

Walking is, as Deirdre Heddon and Cathy Turner put it, “a way of taking issue with constraints – with cultural assumptions about who can walk where, in what way, and with what value.”⁵⁷ While, as they concede, these constraints are never entirely absent (indeed, the Las Vegas through which Solnit attempts to walk in *Wanderlust* is

⁵⁶ See *Savage Dreams* for an account of the summiting and naming of Mount Whitney. Solnit explains that Josiah Whitney moved his own name from one mountain to another upon realising that the second was taller, an action that speaks directly to a patriarchal, colonial attitude to conquering, owning, and subduing the land (315).

⁵⁷ Deirdre Heddon and Cathy Turner, “Walking Women: Shifting the Tales and Scales of Mobility,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 2 (May 2010): 236, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10486801.2012.666741>.

a prime example of these constraints), Heddon and Turner's assertions nonetheless speak to the importance of walking as an act of 'making present,' of inhabiting, bodily, a place or a movement that is in some way unusual. When Solnit walks the Merced River, it is subversive because none but "a few fly fishermen" do so – as a woman walking in that land(scape), her wandering and loitering are politicised by the very presence of her moving female body. Climbing mountains and walking along the roads in Las Vegas have similar radical imperatives, and simply being in a place is a political act across Solnit's work that reinstates a bodily presence in land(scape)s that have been characterised by the dominant culture's "myth of emptiness" (see chapters one and two).

The desert, as Solnit demonstrates in *Savage Dreams*, is an area still characterised by the myth of emptiness. In *Wanderlust*, Solnit's walk outside of Las Vegas counters this myth. She and her friend Pat take a walk in Red Rocks, moving outside Las Vegas and thus beyond the systems of urban wandering that are so limiting. As night falls, they remark upon their shadows and, wondering how far they stretch, Pat begins to walk Solnit's shadow and count his steps:

I stood alone, my shadow like a long road Pat travelled. He seemed, in that pellucid air, not to grow distant, but only to grow smaller. When I could frame him between my thumb and forefinger held close together and his own shadow stretched almost to the mountains, he had reached the shadow of my head – but as he arrived, the sun suddenly dropped below the horizon. With that, the world changed: the plain lost its gilding, the mountains became a deeper blue, and our sharp shadows grew blurry. I called for him to stop at the now-vague shadow of my head, and when I had myself covered the distance between us, he told me he'd gone a hundred paces – 250 or 300 feet – but what constituted my shadow had become harder and harder to distinguish as he went. We walked back to the van as night approached, the experiment concluded (W, 31).

Standing alone in the vast Nevada desert, Solnit experiences another version of the warped bodily scale mountaineering invokes in *A Field Guide*. Here, a simultaneous smallness and largeness characterises her body in the desert space, which is itself vast in its expanse and small, or sparse, in terms of vegetation. Human presence looms large in this passage, as the shadows expand, literally ‘covering ground’ as Solnit and Pat walk. This moment seems to speak to a domineering human presence overlaying the land(scape), particularly considering Solnit describes her own shadow as a “road.” This perhaps echoes the road systems overlaying the desert earth which, again, speak to centuries of dominance in this place. Yet it is important to note that the roads in this passage are just shadows; the bodies themselves grow “small,” not even distant, just diminished in the vastness of the desert itself. The doubleness of this bodily shift, the shadow growing larger as the body grows smaller, thus pertains to the notion that as humans ‘conquer’ more and more of the natural world, their position in it becomes, ironically, more and more precarious, their chances of thriving smaller and smaller.

Perhaps, then, that the earth, even the universe, proves the undoing of the great “experiment” in this passage is also telling. Nearing the end of his pacing, Pat finds himself unable to locate the shadow of Solnit’s head, as it merges with the environment around it. While this acts as an example of human-land connection, in that the boundaries between human and nonhuman are eradicated by the desert space and the sunset, there is an equal, and far more sinister sense in which we can no longer tell *where* our impact falls, and must assume it to be diffuse throughout the planet as a whole. This is the negative side of an experience of interconnection, whereby our effect on the land is ever-present and unavoidable. A troubling thought, but one confirmed by the reality of the land(scape) Solnit and Pat stand in; they are not too far

from the Nevada Test Site, and the ground likely contains fallout from above ground nuclear tests, as Solnit notes in *Savage Dreams* (see chapter two).

Yet, despite the sinister threat of nuclear fallout, the air is “pellucid,” the view is clear. The clarity of the air is important not only because it allows Solnit to look to where she is going, towards Pat disappearing, but because it alters the very way she sees; Pat becomes small, not distant, as though the land(scape) has become two dimensional and he is shrinking. Though Solnit is gesturing towards her interest in perspective, this moment is less to do with vanishing points than it is with scale, as Pat’s body does not travel to the point of the V in the road that is Solnit’s shadow, but decreases in height and width, becoming instead diminished and perhaps diffuse in the trail-less desert. It is significant, then, that the shadow of Solnit’s body disappears before Pat can reach the head. After all, the shadow is a “road,” and roads are the archetypal explanatory image of the vanishing point, two straight lines tapering into a point in the distance. Before Pat can be swallowed up by this point, the road itself disappears, and the desert thus requires a different interaction. They literally ‘step off the beaten track.’ And if, for de Certeau, “walking affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects, etc., the trajections it ‘speaks,’” the traces left by Solnit and Pat’s walk mark a wandering explicitly engaged in challenging the various ‘isms of domination’ that have shaped this land(scape) into the ‘hostile’ environment through which Solnit walks.⁵⁸

Thus, Solnit completely, radically shifts her understanding and experience of desert space. When the shadow disappears, so too goes the “gilding” sunlight. So, too, the mountains change colour, change their resonance. Walking into nothing, following no path, instead making their own, Solnit and Pat engage in a radicalised version of

⁵⁸ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 99.

walking that requires them to rely entirely on sensory perception, to engage entirely in a bodily, elusory encounter with desert space. Their walk is both transgressive and digressive, moving away from the known path as both an action against the confining asphalt road network of the Vegas area, and as a way of moving beyond the known experiences of walking. In this morphing, spreading, wandering account of a desert walk that follows no established path, walking becomes an act of activist connection as Solnit renders, through material and ethereal metaphor, a new way of walking into and connecting through land that moves beyond a known or knowable experience of it. Doing so, she rethinks, or relearns, her relationship to place via a surrendering, connective account that we, in turn, can read into or next to accounts from *Savage Dreams* and *A Field Guide* that speak to the same desert land(scape) or the same disrupting, interrupting bodily scale. Walking is thus connective, associative, both within and across Solnit's narratives and promotes connective practices beyond the covers of each text, thus gesturing towards the activist potential of rethinking the world on wandering and ecofeminist terms.

Walking After Midnight

The "rhetoric of walking" in Solnit's work speaks to a perambulatory style that embeds in the material of the text the same emphasis on both motion and pause that the narrative content expresses. As evidenced in the various accounts of walking discussed above, Solnit builds this narrative wandering into the depiction of her wandering experiences. When read across the various texts, this rhetoric of walking acts as a stylistic connection that unites Solnit's work, even when each text's aims may seem distinct. In the preface to the twentieth anniversary edition of *Savage Dreams*, Solnit describes the way her time at the Nevada Test Site, and her time

writing the book about it, prompted the development of this distinctive style. With “permission to wander,” Solnit’s texts move through, between, and around genre conventions to present texts simultaneously engaged in representing ‘fact,’ in recounting autobiographical narrative, in philosophising, and in acting in the interests of people and the planet (*SD*, xx). Meandering, that is, moving through subjects, digressing, pausing, and abandoning, are hallmarks of the stylistic choices that allow for a more holistic representation of the world-as-Solnit-sees-it, or of Solnit’s being-in-the-world based on lateral, often surprising associations. As discussed in chapter three, associative writing is one of Solnit’s activist tools that incites connective thinking in opposition to the disconnect created by various ‘isms of domination.’ It asks us, as readers, to think laterally, to recognise the surprising connections between people, places, and events that arise across her texts (for instance, the connections made between the apricots and Solnit’s body in *The Faraway Nearby*, or the link between Yosemite’s history of indigenous dispossession and the Dann sisters’ struggle against grazing permits in Nevada in *Savage Dreams*). In turn, these associations promote a new vision of planetary connection, by invoking symbiotic narratives that are themselves actively working to promote emplacement and appreciation in and for the places they recount. By wandering in her writing, Solnit asks us as readers to engage in this wandering, too. We are asked to inhabit the paths, to trace and consequently enact these connections.

Chambers uses the term “loiterature” to describe texts engaged in this meandering, associative meaning-making. He explains, “loiterature distracts attention from what it’s up to, and in that it’s a bit like the street conjuror whose patter diverts us from what’s really going on.”⁵⁹ He writes of texts that “resist contextualization,”

⁵⁹ Chambers, *Loiterature*, 9.

that are “sites of endless *intersection*, and consequently their narrator’s attention is always divided between one thing and some other thing, always ready and willing to be distracted.”⁶⁰ While Solnit’s work never digresses to the point of no return, nor does it intentionally distract us from its activist work, there is a sense in which the “loiterly” nature of Solnit’s wandering style asks us as readers to engage in our own acts of digressive thinking. Moreover, as discussed in chapter three, Solnit’s (interest in) activism is not always obvious or stated explicitly in the narrative. Chambers notes the free and freeing qualities of loiterature, explaining that, “as opposed to the heady satisfactions of method, system, argument, and intelligibility, it offers the pleasures of errancy: that sometimes delightful and surprisingly refreshing sense of getting lost.”⁶¹ Solnit is explicitly engaged in this idea in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*, in which both the content and the form reflect a preoccupation with the joys and opportunities latent in being, getting, feeling lost. She writes, “I love going out of my way, beyond what I know, and finding my way back a few extra miles, by another trail,” a sentiment that may also be applied to her writing style, which frequently travels down new trails (*FG*, 12). In loiterly writing, Chambers argues, the potential lies in the tangents and asides, in the patter, in what is happening within, beneath, alongside, and through the narrative.

Solnit’s works trace “the line ... ‘that goes out for a walk,’” a looping, meandering trail of thought and association.⁶² Solnit goes “a few extra miles” beyond or around her topics, as we have seen here and in chapter three: she circles, refracts through, and connects back to various topics. Walking, it seems, engenders this flow and flux. As Christopher Tilley argues, “just as the writing of a text is dependent on

⁶⁰ Ibid. (italics in the original).

⁶¹ Ibid., 31–32.

⁶² Ingold, *Lines*, 78.

previous texts (it has the characteristic of intertextuality), the creation or maintenance of a path is dependent on a previous networking of movements in particular, and reiterated directions through landscape: it works in relation to a previous set of precedents.”⁶³ Considering Solnit’s texts as paths themselves makes it possible to trace the associations she makes with other cultural forms. And, as music has been such a useful metaphorical tool in Solnit’s walking narratives already discussed in this chapter, it makes sense to digress at this point to consider the ways music acts as a kind of intertext in Solnit’s work as something that is both about wandering and facilitates her stylistic wandering.

The country artist Patsy Cline appears in three out of the four texts discussed here, and two of them mention her 1957 hit “Walkin’ After Midnight.” In *Wanderlust*, “Walking After Midnight” is the title of the chapter on “women, sex, and public space,” and Solnit alludes to the song without comment (W, 232). “Walking after Midnight” in *Wanderlust* is about the dangers women still face walking alone in city spaces – all the time, but especially at night. Walking is both subversive and dangerous. Within the song, it is an act of desperation. Here are some of the lyrics:

I go out walkin'
After midnight
Out in the moonlight
Just like we used to do
I'm always walkin'
After midnight
Searchin' for you.

I walk for miles
Along the highway
Well that's just my way

⁶³ Christopher Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 30.

Of sayin' I love you.
I'm always walkin'
After midnight
Searchin' for you.

I stop to see a weepin' willow
Cryin' on his pillow
Maybe he's cryin' for me.
And as the skies turn gloomy
Night winds whisper to me
I'm lonesome as I can be.⁶⁴

The song's protagonist figures herself as doubly outside; she is both a woman walking alone after midnight, and a human existing outside of human-human connections, without the 'protection' of the (implied) heterosexual romantic relationship. That Cline is walking "just like we used to do" elicits an attempt to retain or regain this connection, but the connection is only maintained within the song through the refracted connections Cline makes with the 'nature' of the night: the "weepin' willow," "night winds," and "gloomy skies" are who/what she converses with as she walks. Like Solnit's walk in Las Vegas at the end of *Wanderlust*, Cline's song points to a walking woman who is neither completely within nor outside the social functions of walking, and instead exists in a social and spatiotemporal in-between, an in-between that, because of her gender, may turn sinister. Cline's song reflects on the precariousness of the lone female walker, and by invoking the song in the title of a chapter in *Wanderlust*, Solnit speaks both to the ways the possibility for liberation and introspection in walking are hemmed in by the patriarchal world in which one unavoidably walks.

This song also appears in *A Field Guide*. Focusing on country music's

⁶⁴ Patsy Cline, Alan Block and Don Hecht, *Walkin' After Midnight*, Decca Records, 9-30221, 1957.

penchant for tragedy, Solnit wonders about the characters in the songs that are “a kind of southern gothic” in their disastrous, often murderous and gruesome, narratives (*FG*, 114). “Walkin’ After Midnight,” she writes,

is unsettlingly peculiar ... [Cline] walks – in the words of Don Hecht and Alan Block – along the highway in the middle of the night to say that she loves the ‘you’ of the song, not a very domesticated or reasonable or even straightforward way of saying anything, and the obliqueness of the means is in direct proportion to the impossibility of really saying it to the unnamed, irrecoverable beloved (*FG*, 115).

Solnit gestures towards the subversive potential of Cline’s walking. Undomesticated, and far from simple, walking after midnight expresses something inexpressible in language; a complex and paradoxical desire to, at once, connect with the environment of the walk (the willow, the winds), and to regain the connection lost before the song’s beginning. Like music itself – and here we are back to the music of walking, as country music is, after all, built up of chords and rhythm – walking is expressing something unspeakable in the vernacular of the everyday. Cline expresses her longing not only through the lyrics, but through the minor chords and the steady, yearning rhythm of what is both a short and repetitive song.

Thus, although it is about isolation, Cline’s song – and Solnit’s account of it – reaches beyond the isolated “I.” Solnit reads the “you” of the song as unidentified and ambiguous. Perhaps, then, this “you” is something of a universal. The “you” is a feature of lyrics generally, but there is a particular function of the “you” in country, in blues, in songs that tell stories, that works antithetically to the lyric “I.” In these terms, the bluesy “you” functions like the “you” in the passage on mountaineering in *A Field Guide* discussed above; it involves, even implicates, us as readers and listeners in the text, in the walking, in the song. Cline is addressing both us and not us, just as Solnit

invites us to join but also to witness her climb up to the crest of the mountain. The “you” is itself precarious, then, balanced uneasily between passive and active involvement in the subversive walking of both the song and the text. In another sense, the “you” is about community. It enacts a direct connection between Solnit and her reader by positioning them – us – in conversation. This, in turn, has an effect on the activist motivations of her writing, as Solnit will often employ the “you” to speak to, enlist, her readers in acting on the principles outlined within the text(s).

In understanding the cultural reference point Solnit gestures towards by including Cline’s words, we walk with both women, too. The very recognisability of this song – in both the sense of its melody and of its character as a country song, which can be determined from the lyrics, the rhythm, the key, and even the name of the artist – situates another experience of connection within a walking narrative. Nancy K. Miller describes how “another’s text can give you back your life. Memoir reading works like a kind of interactive remembering – where the screen prompts the construction of memory itself.”⁶⁵ Here music, like memoir, is a source of “interactive remembering,” in which Solnit thinks back to the resonances of the song and, in turn, provokes the reader’s memories of the song, of country music, of music in general. This, in turn, is a formal feature of the writing they, we, are reading. The associative quality of Solnit’s writing thus extends outwards, as her wandering work is starting to re-tread, to embed its connective, collective ecofeminist principles beyond the writing itself.

⁶⁵ Nancy K. Miller, *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 7.

On the Road Again

Yet the context of Solnit's interest in music in *A Field Guide* is not walking. Rather, it takes us back to driving. Cline's song is somewhat anomalous: country music is more often about or linked to driving. In *A Field Guide*, Solnit writes of listening to mixtapes while taking long drives; while there is a music *to* walking, it seems there is a music *for* driving (*FG*, 113). It is thus necessary to return to the presence of the road in Solnit's work in order to reflect further on the subversive possibilities of/in driving. The roads Solnit recalls in *A Field Guide* are the ones she drives in every text discussed here, and Cline makes an appearance on these highways at the end of *Savage Dreams*. Solnit recalls stopping with her friends at a roadside bar "where a half dozen people were lolling and racks of antlers punctuated the upper atmosphere, [and where they] put on Roseanne Cash's 'Tennessee Flat Top Box' and Patsy Cline's 'Blue Moon of Kentucky' and had a Bud apiece" (*SD*, 359). Solnit herself becomes part of a country song in this section; the bar, the beers, the antlers, the jukebox are country tropes as much as the map, the car, and the gas station are tropes of the road trip. The predictability of this scene is as reassuring as the songs themselves, and there is a sense in which, in allowing this scene to be a culminating moment of the text as a whole, Solnit falls prey to the seduction of the road she identifies earlier in the text. In fact, *Savage Dreams* ends with Solnit climbing into a car with three other women and driving back to San Francisco, perhaps listening to these songs along the way.

For a text so invested in walking, it seems odd that Solnit finishes *Savage Dreams* with a narrative of driving. Yet if, as evidenced in the Patsy Cline references in *Wanderlust* and *A Field Guide*, women in country music have a subversive edge, then perhaps women driving the road demonstrate a similar subversive potential. Perhaps Solnit, driving away from the Nevada Test Site as part of a network of activist

women (which contrasts to the group of men with whom she arrives at the test site, in which she is an extra to the group rather than an intrinsic part of it), is engaged in an initial subversion, a first step that allows her to reach the locations for subversive walking that engender the ecofeminist activism of her texts. And perhaps by invoking the women of country music to help her, Solnit speaks to a tradition of women walking *and* women driving that is somewhat underexplored. After all, as Deborah Clarke asserts, “both women and cars are objects of cultural scrutiny. The association of women and cars is an integral element of car culture.”⁶⁶ Highlighting the link between cars and women that is based on capitalist-patriarchy and its focus on power, order, and domination, Clarke’s point gestures back towards the histories of oppression and exploitation that are the very ‘isms of domination’ against which ecofeminism works. Thus, much like she rejects narratives of technoscientific erasure in the Nevada desert, or the sanitised emptiness of national parks, Solnit refuses to uphold the dominant cultural resonances of car culture by embedding her accounts of driving in female-centred, subversive accounts of music. In this way, what seems to be a digression in Solnit’s work, and, indeed, in this chapter, is actually an intrinsic part of the rhetoric of walking Solnit employs that extends, even enacts, the connective ethics of her work beyond the narratives of walking, into narratives that wander.

The Blues (of Distance)

Music thus acts as a tool for exploring affective and experiential relations to place as a cultural mode akin to both walking and writing, despite its affiliation with driving. In *A Field Guide*, Solnit writes, “*Blue* was the title I gave a compilation tape I made a dozen years ago, and some of the songs were about sadness, some about the sky, some

⁶⁶ Clarke, *Driving Women*, 2.

about both. Every once in a while I made a collection like that, mostly to be listened to on long road trips” (*FG*, 113). There is an implicit engagement here with moments of introspection and vulnerability inspired or accompanied by music. Yi-Fu Tuan explains that “music is for most people a stronger emotional experience than looking at pictures or scenery. Why is this? Partly, perhaps, because we cannot close our ears as we can our eyes. We feel more vulnerable to sound.”⁶⁷ As differently ‘resonant’ to images, music speaks back to Solnit’s refusal to consider the land(scape)s through which she drives as disconnected or distanced from her, despite the fact that she is driving in a car that physically separates her body from the land. Perhaps, then, music – as engaged in forming a similar affective bond to that incited by locating the body in the land(scape) – represents a way of connecting self to world. After all, these songs, which are sometimes about driving, also become metonyms for the driving experience, as Solnit connects some of her feelings and her memories to the melodies that accompanied her movement through the land(scape). About both “sadness” and “the sky,” the tape is both a part of and a record of the emotional resonances of the places through which Solnit moves.

Stephen Benson notes that “we listen to music without thinking, and yet asked to explain the sounds themselves – to describe what we hear – many of us flounder. We pass thereby from the felt immediacy of the musical experience to the seeming inadequacy of our ability to put that experience into words.”⁶⁸ The inexpressible quality of (our experience of) music is part of the appeal for Solnit. As a holding place for emotive and inexpressible impressions, music captures the (e)motion of place,

⁶⁷ Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 8.

⁶⁸ Stephen Benson, *Literary Music: Writing Music in Contemporary Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 1.

becoming a kind of topophilic memory. Tuan writes, “*topophilia* is the affective bond between people and place or setting.”⁶⁹ He goes on to describe the way topophilia is “diffuse as a concept, vivid and concrete as personal experience,” and there is a sense in which this affective bond is made if not concrete then at least locatable by the memories and associations of music.⁷⁰ If music is a topophilic evocation of the affective, inexpressible ways in which we relate to place, it is because music itself is, as Benson puts it, “a matter of idiosyncratic encounters.”⁷¹ Echoing the associative links of Solnit’s writing, the ways we experience music – in the whole brain, with a whole range of emotions – speaks to the tangles of paths and traces both described in and created by Solnit’s work as a whole. Music relies on its situation within place and time, but speaks outwards to spaces and times before and beyond it.

Music, then, is like the paths drawn, discussed, and traced throughout this chapter. It is a carving through, a moving with experience. It becomes the line Solnit treads as she describes the lands through which she travels. She writes:

The songs that worked their way into my blood were like short stories compressed into a few stanzas and a refrain; they always spanned and layered time. The music was haunted, was about distant memory, was about the dead and gone or at the very least aimed at a beloved far beyond earshot. Like writing, the music was solitary, talking to itself in that solitude of composition and contemplation, in the free flow of time that is before, after, between, but somehow never quite the now of a thriving romance, and perhaps this was also the time of my long summer drives, of driving six hundred, a thousand miles in a day, of unrolling again and again like movies, like stories small children demand for reassurance, the sequences of Highway 40 through Arizona and New Mexico, 80 and 50 through Nevada and Utah, of 58 and 285 through the California desert, of many secondary highways and other roads, roads whose mesas and diners were always the same and whose light and clouds and weather never were (*FG*, 114).

⁶⁹ Tuan, *Topophilia*, 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Benson, *Literary Music*, 11.

Music works its way *into* the body, running in Solnit's bloodstream; the clichéd way in which Solnit invokes this image speaks to the way we come communally to understand experiences like music and place. We speak in cliché: the music is part of us, it's in our blood, we have roots in this place. The two are connected via modes of expression, and if the music works its way into the body, place works its way into the music. Within the songs' "freeflow of time" there exists myriad places and histories – just like those existing within the layers of the land(scape) at, say, the Nevada Test Site (see chapter two). This passage reads like we, too, are driving through the places Solnit lists, listening to the songs she evokes. The winding sentences bend around their topics, as Solnit travels through, in one long sentence at the end, meditations on writing, solitude, time, romance, childhood, stories, and the highway system and land(scape) of the American West. The route numbers flick past and the passage reads as though those land(scape)s slide past the surface of the car window. Like the passages on mountain-climbing and river walking, this passage contains a rhyming, repetitive melody, in its continual use of "like," of "again," of connecting words that speak to one more turn, one more bend in the road, one more song.

Joining acts of listening and travelling, Solnit works towards a symbiotic narrative in which the music both acts as a vessel for and part of the experience of motion. Music thus functions as a metaphor. Roland Barthes writes, "perhaps a thing is valid only by its metaphoric power; perhaps that is the value of music, then: to be a good metaphor."⁷² He describes the way music is "a *quality of language*," something which, at once, means and does not mean, is a non-meaning and outside of meaning.⁷³

⁷² Roland Barthes, "Music, Voice, Language," in *Music, Words and Voice: A Reader*, ed. Martin Clayton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 84.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 83 (*italics in the original*).

It is what is both “expressed” and what is “implicit in the text.”⁷⁴ For Barthes, music functions on the fringes of expressible meaning and value, just as Solnit’s affective and bodily experiences of place are expressed in the walking rhythms and wandering melodies of her writing that access a ‘something’ about that place. Perhaps, then, music is what is ‘carried over’ by the metaphor. Denis Donoghue identifies the metaphor as a “vehicle,” a metaphor in itself that de Certeau unpacks in *The Practice of Everyday Life*.⁷⁵ He explains,

in modern Athens, the vehicles of mass transportation are called *metaphorai*. To go to work or come home, one takes a ‘metaphor’ – bus or a train. Stories could also take this noble name: every day, they traverse and organize places; they select and link together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories.⁷⁶

The spatial trajectories of metaphor allow us to think through the ways we organise our experiences of the world. Metaphors open paths otherwise closed; they allow for incongruous associations that speak to experiences in ways no other linguistic expression can. Thus, music functions as a vessel for inexpressible experience. We turn to music in situations that are beyond conventional linguistic expression. We choose songs for our funerals, dance to songs that express love at weddings, retreat into music for catharsis, for relaxation, for distraction. Music functions not as an expression of the inexpressible, but as a stand in for that expression. Like metaphor.

In *Image, Music, Text*, Barthes proposes a “little parlour game: talk about a piece of music without using a single adjective.”⁷⁷ This is, he argues, impossible,

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Denis Donoghue, *Metaphor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 91.

⁷⁶ de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 115.

⁷⁷ Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1987), 179.

because, as Benson notes (above), our description of music can never truly state what it *is*, and must instead always gesture in some way towards how we relate to it. We use music to reflect or to change how we feel, but, in turn, music makes us feel things. It is as physiological and unconscious as it is cognitive. Again, there is some similarity to metaphor in this. Incongruous metaphors still make sense. If the metaphor is odd, an unorthodox choice, we still derive meaning from its strangeness. We understand it somehow outside of the usual rules of expression, of understanding, of the relations of language. For Horner and Zlosnik, “metaphor is itself seen as the crossing of boundaries, as a transgressive act.”⁷⁸ Imbricated in another spatial metaphor, metaphor is tangled in the spatial organisation of the trajectories it seeks to open up, yet this is perhaps part of the appeal. Like walking, metaphor is applicable to a variety of, sometimes simultaneous, meanings. Its function as an ambiguous tool serves a similarly expansive function to the model of walking, and the road, I am reading in this chapter. Metaphor allows us to express things that are otherwise inexpressible, they provide us with a stop-gap for that which otherwise evades us, just as Solnit’s walking reacquaints her with a land(scape) from which she is otherwise barred by things like the dominant cultural understanding of wilderness as “untrammelled” (see chapter one), the toxicity of the desert (see chapter two), or the physical and societal barriers to walking (as in Las Vegas, above).

Like metaphor, then, music allows us a partial or figurative expression of the inexpressible. And *as* metaphor itself, music also functions as a stand-in. In *A Field Guide*, the second iteration of the chapter “The Blue of Distance” is a discussion of music – of country and western, of sad songs and minor keys, of the origins and future

⁷⁸ Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, *Landscapes of Desire: Metaphors in Modern Women’s Fiction* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 5.

of blues music. Music becomes a stand-in for, or a part of, Solnit's discussion of the intangible "blue of distance" in both its figurative and literal sense. Music is a way of relating to the inexplicable nature of our humanness, of our relations to one another, of the planet. Of her mixtape entitled "*Blue*," Solnit writes, "most of the music had some relationship to the blues, as if the music was going back to its origins in longing and the blue of distance" (*FG*, 113). The tape's title relates the genre to the land(scape) in which she is listening to it – after all, Solnit spends the first "Blue of Distance" trying, literally, to walk into the distant blue of the topography of the desert West (see chapter one). Moreover, the genre itself is a metaphor; blue, as a colour, functions to tell us about the blues' minor scales, the emphasis on the sad, desperate, tragic. Blue is melancholy, and the metaphoric resonance of colour precedes our understanding of "blues" music.

So music relies on metaphor before it even sounds its first note. Metaphor's resonance is built into the way we, as a culture, describe music – how we delineate, how we relate to, and how we utilise different songs, genres, voices, keys. In turn, music becomes a metaphor with which we express other things. In the case of Solnit's work, musical metaphors are not only built into the text, but allow for a discussion of those texts. Rhythm, rhyme, repetition, harmony, melody, chord, and rhapsody are all terms I have used throughout this thesis to describe her writing. In the case of *A Field Guide*, the text as a whole is arranged like a song, with verses – "Open Door," "Daisy Chains," "Abandon," "Two Arrowheads," and "One-Story House" – interspersed with a chorus – "The Blue of Distance." Blue – as a colour, as a metaphor – is the refrain of the text, the hook of Solnit's meditative narrative, the place to which she always returns. Structuring her work in this way, Solnit utilises the inexpressible quality of music; by returning, structurally, to the blue that holds her text together, she enacts

formally, rather than narratively, the emotive or affective resonances of the colour, the minor key, of her work. Blue thus “carries over” the emotional stakes of Solnit’s writing: it works as an undercurrent, a bass-line, to the wandering narratives that stroll across the top. If music’s usefulness lies in its metaphoric power, the blues in Solnit’s work becomes a way of formally engaging with the inexpressible, inexplicable affective quality of her relation to the world. To call back to Rachel Carson’s assertion that “it is not half so important to *know* as to *feel*” (which was integral to my discussion of the affective resonance of place and colour in chapter one), within Solnit’s work here and as a whole, form and content work in tandem to make us feel as well as, or even instead of, understand, just as music functions as a metaphor or mode of expression for inexpressible thoughts/feelings/experiences.⁷⁹

Solnit’s musical style thus enacts formally the kinds of connective and attentive resonances she describes throughout the texts. O’Donnell identifies a musicality in Solnit’s style, claiming, “multiple, layered accounts create a set of choral effects rather than producing the simple direct argument of a line of melody.”⁸⁰ In the harmony of the river walk, in her engagement with the rhythms of mountaineering, through her consideration of the resonances of music in cultural understandings of the road, Solnit’s work takes into account the layers of effects/affect via a musicality that is engaged in compiling and combining stylistic and narrative registers to draw together not an argument, but an impression, a “chord.” It is important to remember, after all, that the ecofeminist ethics I am identifying in Solnit’s works are not spoken overtly. These texts are not engaged in putting forth an argument for ecofeminism. Rather, they represent an ecofeminist engagement with humans, nonhumans, place,

⁷⁹ Rachel Carson, *The Sense of Wonder: A Celebration of Nature for Parents and Children* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1998), 49 (italics in the original).

⁸⁰ O’Donnell, “Walking, Writing and Dreaming,” 950.

and narrative itself that rests upon the key principles of care and connection. Motion is the ultimate symbol of this engagement, in the ways both walking and – though more complicated – driving stand in for a mobile, mobilised, understanding of the importance of maintaining and nurturing our link with place.

The “choral effects” of Solnit’s work are thus illustrated not only by thinking through the ways each text builds its layers of lyricism and emplacement, but also in thinking through how the texts work together in harmony. For O’Donnell, part of this harmony relies on the “range of open-ended associative strategies” at play in Solnit’s work.⁸¹ Throughout Solnit’s writing, walking in particular relies on strategies of association. Thus far, I have traced the associations between the road, driving, car culture, walking, the earth, music, and metaphor. I have considered the stylistic and narrative function of “wandering” and worked through the ways this associative strategy exemplifies Solnit’s engagement with ecofeminist principles. The road, as a place, as a facilitator of walking, as an idea, as a metaphor, works to pull together not only the geographies of Solnit’s works, but also their ideologies, and their activist potential is only fully realised in its meandering focus (can there be such a thing?) on the collaging or collecting of events and experiences. Whether walking or driving it, the road thus works as another act of metaphor in and beyond Solnit’s work, another point at which her principles are enacted stylistically rather than, or as well as, narratively to invoke an affective resonance in line with her political motivations. Music, as a metaphor and a path, has connected Solnit’s texts in an example of the collective potential of her writing, and the road is another example of this connective metaphor. Appearing in various guises across the texts, this wandering metaphor/place/image/quality speaks to the unified ecofeminist ethic of Solnit’s work

⁸¹ Ibid., 937.

by iterating in each instance a slightly different but similarly resonant example of Solnit's work against 'isms of domination.'

Walking the Metaphor

Metaphor, then, is the tool connecting Solnit's wandering, moving works. As the text perhaps least engaged with physical walking, *The Faraway Nearby* nevertheless evokes momentum in its metaphors, moving as it does around and between images to evoke a kind of collage of meaning and effect/affect; its digressive, associative narrative employs a loiterly approach. This text's emotional resonance centres on narratives of illness rendered, as discussed in chapter three, through various associated and associative metaphors. The night before her surgery, Solnit writes:

Sam and I went to Ocean Beach late at night. On the firm wet sand at low tide your footprints register clearly before the waves come and devour all trace of passage. I like to see the long line we each leave behind, and I sometimes imagine my whole life that way, as though each step was a stitch, as though I was a needle leaving a trail of thread that sewed together the world as I went by, crisscrossing others' paths (FN, 130).

In this passage, walking becomes footprints, becomes water, becomes stitches, becomes narrative. Weaving her way through the narrative of a night time beach walk, Solnit wanders through metaphors like adjoining rooms, each one not so much collapsing as merging or turning into the next. Solnit creates trails with her metaphors: the stitches she imagines collate her experience, unify her story, whereas the footprints she leaves are transient, erasable, a mark of the fleeting impression we perhaps leave on the trails we walk. Incomplete, necessary, elusive, the meandering line of Solnit's steps/stitches/stories speaks to the ways walking – as metaphor, as style – works not to draw a line under her experiences, nor to draw a line under her narratives, but to

open both up, to invite us in, to engage us in the ecofeminist ethics of her writing by inviting us to walk/read alongside her through these connective, associative images.

As discussed in chapter three, the labyrinth in *The Faraway Nearby* functions as an extended, connective metaphor. Importantly, walking is the labyrinth's purpose; as an introspective tool the labyrinth connects feet and mind and world in/through/by meditative wanderings. And Solnit opens up even this metaphor:

In this folding up of great distance into small space, the labyrinth resembles two other manmade things: a spool of thread and the words and lines and pages of a book. Imagine all the sentences in this book as a single thread around the spool that is a book. Imagine that they could be unwound; that you could walk the line they make, or are walking it. Reading is also traveling, the eyes running along the length of an idea, which can be folded up into the compressed space of a book and unfolded within your imagination and your understanding (*FN*, 188–89).

Like the sand above, the labyrinth here becomes other things, it becomes threads and pages which themselves morph into reading, into imagining, into understanding. Michelle Dicoski writes about Solnit's "list-like metaphors," considering the ways she layers or parallels multiple metaphors, which creates the choral effect O'Donnell identifies.⁸² Dicoski writes, "this parallelism is common in Solnit's writing, and when used to list distinct metaphors, it gives the text a sense of restlessness and motion."⁸³ By layering or "parallel[ing]" metaphors, Solnit gestures towards the expansive possibilities within and beyond her writing. Stacking, piling, travelling through various metaphors is Solnit's way of rethinking the world around her and, in turn, of asking us to do the same. The passage above directly invites the reader to

⁸² Michelle Dicoski, "Wild Associations: Rebecca Solnit, Maggie Nelson and the Lyric Essay," *TEXT* 39 (2017): 2, <http://www.textjournal.com.au/speciss/issue39/Dicoski.pdf>.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 4.

participate in the metaphor. We “imagine” that we are walking the word-paths of the text, and in imagining, we reach a kind of “understanding” similar to the “feeling” knowledge Carson privileges, and which is given by music.

Again, then, Solnit opens her narrative out to the reader, gesturing towards the imaginative possibilities of reading and writing that reflect back the imaginative possibilities of walking. As we read Solnit’s text we “are walking” it, becoming engaged in a kind of walking-reading praxis. If reading (or walking) the text (or the labyrinth) leads to an “unfold[ing] within your imagination and your understanding,” Solnit’s wandering style speaks to the activist potential, even imperative, of her work. Implicating the reader in this walking practice at both the level of narrative, here, and in a kind of rhythmic call to walk more, walk further, walk with purpose seen elsewhere in her work, Solnit engenders a connective, connected network of wandering texts that both call for and enact ecofeminist principles. Every text is engaged in a coming together, in drawing and maintaining connections. In drawing/walking/driving/writing together these narratives both within and between these texts, Solnit’s wandering achieves a kind of accumulative unity that proves her texts – which, at first, seem disparate, sprawling, far-reaching and difficult to group – to be engaged, stylistically, narratologically, emotively, in forging the kinds of connections paramount to an inclusive, future-looking and hopeful ecofeminist ethic.

Conclusion: Mobilise

This chapter’s epigraph asserts that walking is an action that may “make” the world. As a metaphor, a style, and an action in Solnit’s work, walking is certainly a central feature of the worlds she writes. More than this, though, walking extends beyond singular texts as an image and tool of connection that reaches between the books and

out to the reader. I have argued that Solnit's wandering style facilitates these connections, and that her musical style and content inspires an affective connection to the places in her texts, and between the reader and the texts themselves. Elizabeth Ammons reminds us that

liberal activist texts have transformative power. They play a profound role in the fight for human justice and planetary healing that so many of us recognize as the urgent struggle of our own time. Words on the page reach more than just our minds. They call up our feelings. They call out to our spirits. They can move us to act.⁸⁴

This transformative power is key. Solnit's writing on walking calls up our feelings. As a musical and affective stylistic model, wandering works to connect, beneath and beyond the narrative content of Solnit's texts, the multiplicitous nature of motion itself that stretches even beyond each text's final page. In this way, Solnit's writing – which I have argued utilises motion as part of its activist endeavour, and relates this to protest movements – is also *moving*. By both recounting and calling up emotions, Solnit's work gestures towards the ways our experience of the environment relies upon emotional bonds with it. As such, her writing becomes ecofeminist insofar as the 'isms of domination' against which ecofeminism works are about eradicating these positive connections; as I have discussed, driving reduces tactile relationships to land and walking in an urban environment can be dangerous, particularly for women. Capitalism and patriarchy both reduce relations to environment, and Solnit's moving work seeks to rectify this.

In O'Donnell's terms, Solnit's wandering style is not "an abstract postmodern technique. It is a realisation that things change as we walk, things change as we protest,

⁸⁴ Elizabeth Ammons, *Brave New Words: How Literature Will Save the Planet* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2010), 172.

resist, things change in and through the process of writing and reading.”⁸⁵ *Savage Dreams*, *Wanderlust*, *A Field Guide*, and *The Faraway Nearby* are activist texts not only because they recount political activism, but because they walk. In their wandering style, and in our ability as readers to wander between them, to draw connections, these texts open up and reshape the worlds they write. Donna Haraway asserts that in an era of climate crisis “we need stories (and theories) that are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising old and new connections.”⁸⁶ The lines drawn between the texts in this chapter gather up the complexities and, I hope, reflect the connective possibilities of Solnit’s activist writing. Yet their edges remain open. None of the texts end with endings. The final line of *Wanderlust*, already discussed above, reads, “this constellation called walking has a history, the history trod out by all those poets and philosophers and insurrectionaries, by jaywalkers, streetwalkers, pilgrims, tourists, hikers, mountaineers, but whether it has a future depends on whether those connecting paths are traveled still” (*W*, 291). The tentative ending here shows Solnit thinking beyond the end of the book, and out into the world about which she is writing. The onus is placed on people beyond the book to maintain these connections and a cultural walking practice. In *Savage Dreams*, Solnit’s final lines (discussed in chapter two) see her driving away from the Nevada Test Site, away from the Columbus Day action of 1992. She writes, “we left for San Francisco late that day, Dianne, Rachel, a woman from Seattle, and I. This time I was just going back, because I was already home” (*SD*, 385). Within this community of driving women, Solnit locates another moment of connection, she enacts another moment of forward-looking hope, as she situates her

⁸⁵ O’Donnell, “Walking, Writing and Dreaming,” 944.

⁸⁶ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 101.

sense of home in this vexed and neglected land, implicitly stating that this is not the end of her time in the desert West. Driving away from it, she refuses to let the speed of the car obliterate her embodied and connective experience of this land(scape); it remains her home, even as she drives “back” to San Francisco. She will return to the desert at another time, in another book, and the end of this story, too, is open.

The ending of *The Faraway Nearby* (discussed further in chapter three) features a solitary walk in which Solnit submerges her whole body in a river. It is an act of introspection, of cleansing and clarity. Solnit writes, “I walked into the river up to my neck and walked out on the other side of the raft, cooler” (*FN*, 254). The incompleteness of this ending, the sense in which something has been left out, that we are waiting for something *more* also speaks to the motion of Solnit’s writing, as she seems to gesture not back to the events she has narrated throughout the text, but to something beyond the final page. Walking enacts a futurity, of sorts, and at the end of this text, when Solnit has recovered from her own illness and is managing her mother’s; walking is just as much a beginning as an ending, a way forward as well as a reflective tool. And even the final page of *A Field Guide* (discussed further in chapter one), which is more an account of a pause than a walk, reflects a similar kind of open-endedness. Solnit writes, “the end of the world was wind-scoured but peaceful, black cormorants and red starfish on wave-washed dark rocks below a sandy bluff, and beyond them all the sea spreading far and then farther” (*FG*, 206). Here, too, Solnit propels the resonance of her text beyond the final line, the “far and then farther” implying an infinite stretch of sea as the eye looks to the horizon and the mind thinks even beyond that. In each and every one of these endings there is an investment not only in motion, but in the connection it implies. Whether walking or driving, paths/roads/trails connect people across time, they connect place to place, and people

to them, they connect emotion to bodies, they connect narratives to futures and they connect Solnit's work to the earth. Literal, figurative, and emotive paths stretch out from the ends of Solnit's texts, and gesture towards futures in which the relationships to the planet Solnit outlines in her ecofeminist writing are realised. The roads within and between these texts, and the various ways in which Solnit 'walks' them, engage ultimately in remaking the worlds – the places, people, experiences – she both describes and inhabits.

Conclusion

The Unknown

“The apocalypse is always easier to imagine than the strange circuitous routes to what actually comes next.”¹

Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark* (2004)

Despite a rather apocalyptic opening, in which I asked what the point might be of writing and thinking in an era of climate crisis, this thesis has traced various, circuitous routes through Solnit’s work to suggest that writing and thinking about the climate crisis is precisely the action needed to confront such a complex and difficult future. From the connective potential of wildness, through the multifaceted relationships between people and place in the toxic desert, and the expansive uses and implications of care, to the wandering narratives of each book discussed here, I have examined the ways Solnit’s writing engages in and demonstrates ways of rethinking our relationship to the earth in an era of climate crisis. Using an ecofeminist framework, I have emphasised the importance Solnit places on both environmental care and environmental connection throughout her work, even when her subject seems to bear little or no relevance to ecological thinking. I have unpacked the ways these ethics of care and connection are tied to an ecofeminist rejection of ‘isms of domination,’ and shown how Solnit’s works do not merely document examples of this rejection, but are integral to the act of resistance itself. In this way, I have argued that Solnit’s writing might provide ways of thinking and living ecologically that move beyond

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 21.

conventional ways of ‘doing’ environmentalism, by taking issues of environmental justice and expanding them to consider the importance of things like familial care, associative or lateral thinking, and accepting our own epistemological limits.

It is these limits in particular that I want to take up as a means of concluding my circuitous readings of Solnit’s book-length works. These limits take us back to chapter one, in which I used Timothy Gilmore’s definition of “wildness” as a concept that encourages us to accept our own “epistemological limitations” within complex and shifting ecological systems, but they extend, too, throughout subsequent chapters.² These limits appear in Solnit’s conflicting feelings over the Nevada desert dust in chapter two. They underlie the critical impasse Solnit builds into the apricot metaphor in *The Faraway Nearby*, which comes to characterise the experiences of care discussed in chapter three. And they are positively celebrated in chapter four’s reading of wandering as a style, as a way to connect on the site of both the body and the text to intellectually ungraspable experiences. Moreover, these limits are at the very core of thinking about climate crisis. As Timothy Morton puts it, “holding our mind open for the absolutely unknown that is to come” is the main task for ecocritics – indeed, for humanity – going forward.³ It seems frightening, accepting that there is so much we don’t know, can’t predict, about the future. Yet, as Solnit states in *Hope in the Dark*, the apocalyptic thinking that characterises much of the conversation about climate crisis is much easier to fall back on than actually confronting the dizzying, unknowable and radically different long-future that will actually occur.

After all, climate crisis will not end everything. Rather, as Naomi Klein says,

² Timothy Gilmore, “After the Apocalypse: Wildness as Preservative in a Time of Ecological Crisis,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 24, no. 3 (2017): 390, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isx033>.

³ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 205.

it *changes* everything. It will radically alter all forms of life on earth. And, consequently, it necessitates a change in the ways we live, act, and think. Klein explains that “the challenge ... is not simply that we need to spend a lot of money and change a lot of policies; it’s that we need to think differently, radically differently, for those changes to be remotely possible.”⁴ Writing and reading are an integral part of this change. Throughout this thesis, I have argued that Solnit’s work demonstrates and enacts various ways of relearning our relationship to an increasingly complex, even hostile, toxic, or unpredictable, earth. I want to end by returning once more to *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* in order to consider the ways this relearnt relationship may ultimately be a radical acceptance of the unknown, the unknowable, as an experience and a narrative technique that disrupts apocalyptic thinking. If, as Timothy Clark asserts, “environmental thinking would be stronger if it explored more directly and aggressively the drastic nature of the cultural break that recognizing [the delusional, anthropocentric nature of current environmental representation] may entail,” Solnit’s interest in the unknown, spread throughout her work but crystalised in *A Field Guide*, might answer the call to accept our own epistemological limits, recognise representational limitations, and imagine futures more complex and far-reaching than planetary apocalypse.⁵

Getting Lost in the Dark

The first chapter of *A Field Guide* offers a neat microcosm of the book as a whole, spanning subjects such as walking, family, storytelling, American wildernesses, and

⁴ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (London: Penguin, 2015), 23.

⁵ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 191.

communities of women. Indeed, it spans many of the subjects considered in this thesis, and is therefore a useful place at which to end. The chapter offers an extended meditation on the unknown, on what it means to get lost and the ways in which the state of being or feeling lost may offer up possibilities beyond perceived limits in thinking. Echoing many of the associative strategies discussed in chapters three and four, *A Field Guide*'s first chapter, "Open Door," wanders through adjoining narratives, moving from the Passover tradition of leaving the door open for Elijah, into the inability to predict the "unforeseen."⁶ It moves from the Norse root of the word "lost" (*los*, meaning the disbanding of an army), through to an account of a Rocky Mountains search and rescue team (6–7; 8–12). Solnit considers narratives of Westward expansion and exploration, and recounts the various stories and passages gifted to her by friends during a difficult time (13–14; 16). She discusses the dying Wintu language that uses cardinal directions over left and right, a language in which "the self only exists in reference to the rest of the world, no you without the mountains, without sun, without sky," and moves from this into accounts of her own wandering, her own lostness (17). The chapter touches upon species extinction, Greek philosophy, and maps, and circles back to the open door. "The important thing is not that Elijah might show up someday," Solnit states (24). "The important thing is that the doors are left open to the dark every year" (24). The first chapter of *A Field Guide* is an open door, and it opens doors. It moves through its subjects with a frenetic joy, a piecing together of all the different unknowns and unknowables that characterise 'the human condition.' Rather than seeking to eradicate this unknowability, Solnit opens herself up to it, relinquishing the desire to know, to order, and to control that characterises

⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2006), 5. Further references to this edition given in text.

many of the iterations of dominance discussed throughout this thesis. Rather than closing down the unknown – imagining an apocalypse – Solnit opens herself up to multifarious, hazy possibilities.

“Open Door” thus exemplifies some of the stylistic strategies discussed in chapters three and four, moving through images/topics/anecdotes that are often only tenuously, delicately tied together. The way Solnit moves between each of the narratives laid out above gestures towards a mind left open to these associations, an acceptance of the circuitousness of its own thinking. In the middle of her account about the Wintu language, Solnit writes, “one day I went to meet friends at a performance in a city park, but when I could not find them in the crowd, I wandered into a used bookstore and found an old book. In it, Jaime de Angulo, the wild Spanish storyteller-anthropologist who eighty years ago spent considerable time among these people, wrote...” (18–19). Tracing the associations, the chance encounters and unpredictable steps that contributed to her interest in California’s indigenous populations, Solnit leaves open the connections underneath each account, revealing and celebrating their strangeness rather than editing them out. Doing so, Solnit demonstrates the importance of this openness, this acceptance of wandering, digressing, circling. Things, places, thoughts have a way of connecting up and these connections – part of the connective impulse I have argued is so important to Solnit’s ecofeminist ethics – make overt the experience of interconnection and reciprocity missing from a dominant cultural understanding of relationships between humans and their environments. In this way, laying bare the connective strategies of her own research, Solnit demonstrates an ethic of connection that permeates her thinking as well as her doing, her learning as well as her knowledge.

Throughout her meditations on what it might mean to be lost, Solnit

emphasises the importance of allowing for this unknown, this disorientation. She asserts, “not to know how to get lost brings you to destruction” (14). To read this onto Solnit’s broader concern with climate crisis, not to accept the murkiness of our own future is to deny ourselves that future. In a sense, then, Solnit’s defence of the importance of getting/being lost is a version of “staying with the trouble,” another theme running throughout this thesis. Donna Haraway, as I have said, asserts that staying with the trouble “requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”⁷ She advocates for an embodied, conscious presence in the present. It is a strategy I identified in Solnit’s rejection of nostalgic interactions with wilderness in chapter one, and in Solnit’s connections with and on the site of the toxic desert discussed in chapter two. Staying with the trouble, then, marks another way of rethinking, relearning our relationships to the earth, by accepting our own embeddedness in the planet and its systems, and celebrating their ongoing or “unfinished” character. Getting lost is a version of this, a way of connecting with and across environments, narratives, and communities in ways that accept our own partial understanding. Staying with the trouble is thus another way Solnit resists and undermines pervasive ‘isms of domination.’ Solnit’s associative path through “Open Door” attests to the fact that connective thinking can open up new ways of being in the world that resist a dominant cultural impulse to know, to predict, to delineate, and instead accept the contingency, the messiness, of our relations to people, to nonhumans, and to place. In this way we are Haraway’s “mortal critters,” aware of our own muddled, precarious positions

⁷ Donna Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

within such systems.

Instead of retreating into despair at this thought, though, Solnit suggests hope. Kathleen Dean Moore asserts that hope is “radical imagining, a courageous affirmation of what a person values.”⁸ The unknown, the unknowable, is brimming with possibility, with courage, and with imagination. The surrender implicit in the term lost’s etymology, its disbanded armies, suggests not defeat, but something new, a kind of peace. Lost, Solnit discovers, is “mostly a state of mind, and this applies as much to all the metaphysical and metaphorical states of being lost as to blundering around in the backcountry” (14). As a result of her wandering research, Solnit begins to rethink her own relationship to the unknown, to the future, to her own epistemological limits, and this turns out to be a freeing state of mind in which to observe and pursue new possibilities, rather than a state that denotes their absence.

The unknown thus reflects the “dark” in which Solnit locates the mobilising possibilities of hope. *Hope in the Dark* opens,

On January 18, 1915, six months into the First World War, as all Europe was convulsed by killing and dying, Virginia Woolf wrote in her journal, ‘The future is dark, which is on the whole, the best thing the future can be, I think.’ Dark, she seems to say, as in inscrutable, not as in terrible. We often mistake one for the other. Or we transform the future’s unknowability into something certain, the fulfilment of all our dread, the place beyond which there is no way forward. But again and again, far stranger things happen than the end of the world.⁹

The darkness Solnit reads here is not one of doom, but one of possibility, mobilised by hope’s radical imagination. Approaching an unknowable future is the key epistemological crisis of climate change, yet perhaps it, too, may engender possibility

⁸ Kathleen Dean Moore, *Great Tide Rising: Toward Clarity and Moral Courage in a time of Planetary Change* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2016), 314.

⁹ Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 1.

rather than paralysis. Climate crisis is urgent, it is pressing and terrible and utterly unknown to us, despite all of the science. Its status as a “hyperobject” makes climate crisis impossible to grasp in its entirety, impossible to contend with or predict.¹⁰ It is the ultimate darkness Solnit identifies. Yet Solnit’s commitment to the unknown, to our own epistemological limits, gestures not to the terrible apocalyptic gloom that so often characterises this realisation. Instead, she suggests going further, moving closer towards what Morton terms “dark ecology,” a way of moving through the despair, a tunnelling through to the other, dark, side in which we can “find the joy without pushing away the depression, for depression is accurate.”¹¹ This is not a retreat into despair without hope. Rather, it is a way out of despair, as Morton argues: “let’s not stay frozen in horror. ... Solutions like geoengineering are ways of not going further, but of being trapped in horror or tragedy. Let’s make it down into the sadness and proceed further down from there.”¹² The dark possibilities of hope lie further down. And this darkness, the unknown, unseen, unpredictable, necessitates care and attention. It requires renewed connection and a reassessment, a relearning of our place in the world. Solnit asserts that “hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed.”¹³ The future requires action, and that action is based on confronting, and staying with, the realities of the present. As Solnit writes, “wars will break out, the planet will heat up, species will die out, but how many, how hot, and what survives depends on whether we act.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 20.

¹¹ Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 117.

¹² *Ibid.*, 119.

¹³ Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

It Matters What Matters We Use to Think Other Matters With

Hope in the Dark is a text about and for activism, and has been called a “‘feel-good’ book for exhausted campaigners” that cheerily recounts histories of activism and reminds campaigners to celebrate the small victories.¹⁵ *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* has not been considered on the same terms, and has instead been praised for its lyrical qualities, its breadth, and its sophisticated style.¹⁶ Yet Solnit wrote both at the same time, and observes that “both books were about coming to terms with uncertainty.”¹⁷ These texts share an ethical impulse to approach and accept various unknowns. While *Hope in the Dark* holds its activist imperatives on the surface, *A Field Guide* hides its activist roots under its lyrical prose, its wandering and expansive narratives. But it still engenders a kind of activism. As I have argued throughout this thesis, Solnit’s lyrical book-length works are moving. They suggest new ways of approaching and thinking about our relationships to the earth based not on facts or historical accounts, but in their ability to call up feelings which, subsequently, change the way we think. It is in the work that seems to go beyond or outside of activist narratives, that seems to move away from accounts of environmental interaction, that Solnit most powerfully engages with the possibilities in the unknown, in the beyond, in the trouble. It is for this reason that *A Field Guide* is the text that recurs throughout this thesis, and why *Hope in the Dark* has not been a primary text. It is for this reason, too, that chapters three and four digress freely from their own ‘locations’ in order to address the expansive care- and

¹⁵ Caroline Lucas, ‘Review: Hope in the Dark by Rebecca Solnit,’ *The Guardian*, July 2, 2005 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/jul/02/highereducation.globalisation> accessed 24 September 2019.

¹⁶ Siân B. Griffiths, “Review of *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* by Rebecca Solnit,” *The Georgia Review* 60 no. 1 (2006): 256–7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41402727>.

¹⁷ Rebecca Solnit, “Interview with Rebecca Solnit,” Interview by Tess Thackara, *The White Review*, November 2013, <http://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-rebecca-solnit/>, accessed 24 September 2019.

connection-driven ethics of Solnit's work. And it is why I am emphasising the critical importance of Solnit's longer works in an era of climate crisis.

Since the publication of *Men Explain Things to Me* in 2012, Solnit's shorter writings have been growing in popularity. In the last three years, she has released three new essay collections.¹⁸ She has released her first children's book, and continues to be published regularly in newspapers and online.¹⁹ In a time of accelerated communication and rapid news cycles, Solnit's shorter writing has gained traction among a young generation of feminists and activists. This is not to be denigrated – her work reaching new and expanding audiences is a useful and powerful thing. Yet these shorter essays lack the stylistic sophistication of her longer works, and I want to close by making a case for remembering and revisiting *Savage Dreams*, *Wanderlust*, *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* even while Solnit's essays receive more and more attention.²⁰ The ecofeminist ethics of care and connection that run through and between these texts are more vital than ever as we become increasingly aware of the impacts and dangers of climate change. Moreover, if the future depends on relearning our relationships to our environments, the affective and epistemological content of these texts engenders a more radical relationship between the human and nonhuman world that counters the dominant and destructive forces of capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, science, and the military, as we have seen. All of which is to say that the

¹⁸ *The Mother of All Questions* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), *Call Them by Their True Names* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), and *Whose Story is This? Old Conflicts, New Chapters* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019) contain essays that reflect upon the current global political climate.

¹⁹ Solnit's children's book is a feminist fairy tale entitled *Cinderella Liberator* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019).

²⁰ *Call Them by Their True Names* (2018) was longlisted for the National Book Award, and won the Kirkus Prize for essays and anthologies. Solnit has also been awarded the 2019 Windam-Campbell Prize for nonfiction. See Michael Schaub, "Rebecca Solnit, Young Jean Lee among winners of \$165,000 Windham-Campbell literary awards," *LA Times*, March 13, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/books/la-et-jc-windham-campbell-prize-rebecca-solnit-20190313-story.html>, accessed 24 September 2019.

way these texts work matters as much as their content, as their connective and care-driven styles provide templates for radical new ways of thinking about our place within the earth's systems.

As Haraway puts it, "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories."²¹ It is not only important which stories get told – though increasing the narrative representation of marginalised groups is vital to working against 'isms of domination' – but *how* those stories are told. The tools used to tell narratives of environmentalism are as important as the narratives themselves, as they provide examples of how to rethink the relationships upon which our very existence depends. This all sounds rather grand, but climate crisis requires grand thinking. It requires radical and broad narratives that nevertheless take into account the nuances and differences in experiences. Solnit's longer texts work on macro and micro levels. They encompass the planetary scale of nuclear technology, and the story of one Mormon rancher's brother. They consider the vast history of human bipedalism, and the bodily experience of walking up a mountain. They contain, at once, apricots, the metaphor of apricots, and the idea of the metaphor of an apricot. They are expansive without being reductive, and suggest ways of thinking and writing about the world that may, in turn, make that world.

Savage Dreams, *Wanderlust*, *A Field Guide* and *The Faraway Nearby* are not straightforward environmental texts. Rather than limiting their potential for ecofeminist work, this is their strength. If it matters what stories make worlds, then Solnit's stories suggest worlds that retain and encompass myriad connections, worlds

²¹ Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble*, 12.

focused on community, care, and acceptance, but which also contend with difficulties, impasses, oddness and terror. And if it matters what worlds make stories, the world Solnit documents in her texts is not one of apocalyptic gloom, or denial-driven nostalgia. The world Solnit documents is already one of connection and community, a world thinking ecologically beneath or in the face of the dominant culture's desire to separate, disconnect, dissect. As radically connective, then, Solnit's ecofeminist ethics are worth revisiting, worth recalling, as we move into an uncertain era of climate crisis and begin – urgently, purposefully, and willingly – to relearn our relationships to the earth.

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