From this porch to your farthest:
Feminism, Nature and Language in the Poetry of Barbara Guest

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Abstract

This thesis surveys Barbara Guest's feminism, language, and representations of nature in her work from the 1960s to her millennial poems. It pays particular attention to Guest's deliberate co-location of women, and nature and the domestic home, as a means of realising those spaces as sites of female liberation, authority and autonomy. This work considers how, in positively co-locating women in nature and the domestic home, Guest manifests a feminism that is not seeking to assume the dominant masculine position, but one that endeavours to realise liberation in the spaces women already inhabit. The thesis aligns with Irigaray's feminism in its desire to refute suggestions that the association of women and nature is essentialist, demonstrating that this intersection in Guest's formally innovative poetry is a significant location of her feminism. In its analysis of Guest's means of realising a female speaking subject, this thesis also describes Guest's work as exemplifying *écriture féminine*, through her representations of the drive rhythms of the body and nature, expanding Cixous premise and describing the relationship between nature and the female body. Guest's expression of the Kristevan semiotic, abject and intertextuality, draws the work of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray together and renders Guest's work a point of transformation and subversion, in terms of gender politics, and the representation and realisation, of a female speaking subject. The thesis describes how the process of symbiosis, and the realisation of ecotone spaces are fundamental to Guest's realisation of a female speaking subject. Through the process of symbiosis, Guest realises ecotone spaces between disparate entities or liminal positions; city and country, land and sea, male and female. The ecotone spaces that Guest manifests in her poetry facilitate the production of new, alternate meanings and it is through them that Guest represents a female speaking subject that recognises the other as fundamental to the self and realises feminist artistic practices that do not simply react to, and against, male dominance.

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Introduction.

Survival and revolution: women, nature and language

> … poetic language practices within and against the social order: [It is] the ultimate means of its transformation or subversion, the precondition for its survival and revolution.
>
> *Revolution in Poetic Language* [1]

Through the latter parts of the twentieth, and now in the early twenty-first century, the relevance of language in the discussion and understanding of our relationship with nature is increasingly being recognised. Poetic language, seen both in poetry itself and in prose, 'with its subtleties and metaphor, its poetic capacities, comes much closer to expressing our complicated relationship with Nature than the quantitative abstractions of science'.[2] The many different layers of communication at work within poetic language, and its revolutionary potential, were realised by Julia Kristeva in her work on the semiotic and along with the work of Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, forms the backbone of this study of the poetry of Barbara Guest. The work of these women has implications not only for the practice of poetry and contemporary nature writing, but also for a discussion of our wider social and cultural relations, in terms of gender, and in the relationships between the human, natural and built spaces, and the impacts that they have on our environment.

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 81.
[2] Paul Marsden. 'Sublime Expression'. *Resurgence* 249 (July/August 2008), p. 30.

I have chosen Barbara Guest as the focus for this work specifically because, whilst her poetry is full of images of nature, the weather, the landscape and the sea, she is not considered to be a nature poet. Presumably, this is because she does not write what is commonly thought of as eco- or environmental poetry; a poetry that rails against the hole in the ozone layer, against the deforestation in the Amazon basin, against species decline or some other vital and often very distant cause, and nor does she write pretty, homely nature poetry about birds, spring flowers, fields of corn or forests. Instead, Guest's poetry bridges the gap we have created between nature and culture, between it and us, here and there. It recognises nature as an intrinsic part of the fabric of our everyday lives and as something that is inseparable from us, that which is part of the subject, rather than object to it. Guest is not observing nature just as her surroundings, as something to be looked out on or for getting back to, she is of it and in it and, at the same time, it is of, and in her. Guest's poetry has nature at its heart and it is intrinsic to her wider dialogue with contemporary society and its cultures. Perhaps then, no one has noticed the nature in her work; maybe because it is so much a part of it and her, no one can see it because it is not in its usual place – other and over there, or perhaps many people just find her work too hard and would turn away rather than look.

Whilst the focus of much of Guest's poetry is the cultural and social make up of late twentieth century America, nature is always immediately adjacent to it. Guest's co-location of nature and culture mirrors the place of nature in her own life, and in ours, and she uses it as a lens, as a means to show us the world as it is; intersecting, fluid, ever changing, defiant of categorization and full of possibilities. Her poetry seeks out and exposes the failings of the 'man-made' and created life of contemporary America and it is for this reason that I have chosen to focus my analysis on poems that might be seen as recognisably situated in contemporary America at the expense of the historical influences in her work or those poems located in, or bearing the most noticeable influence of, the time Guest spent in Europe. Identifying issues both social and personal, at each turn, Guest is weaving nature into this social and domestic narrative so that it is seamlessly a part of it, inseparable from it and almost unrecognisable within it. Guest's considerable oeuvre spans not only the personal and domestic, as it deals with gardens and potted plants, lost lovers and plastic flamingos, but also the epic and national as it tackles war, rides big ocean waves and moves mountains.

Moving against the post-war consumerism of the 1950s, Guest's early work is written at a time of an increased environmental awareness that is, in part, a reaction against the industrialisation of America. She is starting to write at the same time as Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us* and *Silent Spring* were published in 1950 and 1962 respectively, and alongside the rise of the Women's Movement. There is a quiet ecofeminism to Guest's work as she holds a mirror up to society and shows us how our treatment of our own selves is reflected in out attitudes and treatment of our various environments. Whilst Guest's poems are extremely eloquent markers of contemporary environmental attitude, they do not tackle environmental issues such as pesticide use, the explosion at Three Mile Island, the hole in the ozone layer or climate change and habitat loss. I do not think for a minute that this is because Guest is not interested in these issues, it is simply not the focus of her work, but Guest's poetics should be viewed as 'actively investigat[ing] enduring assumptions about what nature has been, might be, or will be',[3] and thus subscribing to a tenet of ecopoetry. Guest's poetry, with its focus on language, sound and structure, quietly describes the everyday relationships between the human and nature as part of a wider dialogue on gender and culture. It is this quiet, very local, awareness of nature that makes a consideration of Guest as nature or ecopoet, long over due. Guest's whole body of work can be viewed within a cannon of American ecopoetry and its concern with our inherent interdependence with nature sits within a tradition of nature writing that extends back through Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Austin, Leopold,[4] and Dickinson. Latterly, the work of poets such as Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams, both of whom were influences on Guest, is being recognised for its environmental emphasis through their exploration of local places and their close attention to both nature and culture.[5] With this in mind, Guest's poetry can be 'situated in a long tradition of lyrical descriptions and celebration of the natural worlds as well as a tradition of poetic critiques of modern society that highlight its alienation from nature, its scientific and instrumental rationalism, its capitalist drive to commodification and its large scale and anonymous institutions'.[6] The influences on Guest's poetry are wide ranging. Peter Gizi describes Guest's work as 'bespeak[ing] a long engagement with literary and artistic traditions', and noting the influence of the

[3] Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne eds, *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field.* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2018), p. 2.
[4] Roland Green and Stephen Cushman, *The Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 437.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

imagism of H.D. and high modern of Dada and surrealism[7]. Whilst Guest cites Chaucer as 'a complete inspiration',[8] there is also evidence of the influence of Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, W.H. Auden and Sylvia Plath in her work as well as that of art, music, myth, philosophy, and history. Guest read widely and thought deeply, adsorbing influences and images, and reimagining and reinterpreting them, without being beholden to any.

But what do the terms nature and the environment mean here? For Guest at least, these terms are extremely fluid and the boundaries between them indistinct. In his book *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Timothy Morton discusses the need to erase the notion of nature as a specific concept, as some *thing* that is 'over there', as other, if meaningful ecology is to be practiced. For Morton, '"nature" is an arbitrary rhetorical construct, empty of independent, genuine existence behind or beyond the texts we create about it'[9] and whilst I would agree with the notion of a nature independent from the human as a construct, I can't help thinking that, at least on some levels, it is one we need. Starting with the industrial revolution and compounded by the technological advances of the latter half of the twentieth century, we have swapped our original agrarian existence for a life that, for many, is lived almost entirely in front of a computer screen and which is almost wholly removed from what is going on beyond it. For a generation of parents and children that think that carrots come from the supermarket and that it is ok for cheese to be almost indistinguishable from the plastic it is wrapped in, the concept of 'nature' is an important one. If nature is other, an object, it is something that can be engaged with and something that might just make them leave off the TV and go out, get their hands dirty, and start to care about something other than the speed of their broadband connection. Nature as other can pull at the heartstrings and talk sense to our senseless world. This nature-as-other should, however, only be a stepping-stone to the unified ecology that Morton expounds. It is this unified perspective that makes Guest's work so important, as instead of overtly describing and engaging with nature in her work or jumping up and down, waving her arms about and saying 'Hey! Look here! You kill that tree and your kill me!" she is instead, very quietly, showing us how

[7] Peter Gizzi in Barbara Guest, *The Collected Poems of Barbara Guest*. Ed. Hadley Halden Guest. (Midtown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), p. xix.
[8] Barbara Guest, Interview with Mark Hillringhouse. *The American Poetry Review* 21.4 (July/August 1992), p. 25.
[9] Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 21-22.

we are all rotting down to compost together. For Guest, there is no human-self-subject that is separate from the nature-object; the two are wholly linked.

In the twenty-first century, 'nature' and 'the environment' are increasingly loaded terms. We are regularly told of the healing affects of nature and how 'getting out into nature' is good for us which, whilst excellent advice, further entrenches nature as something intrinsically separate and other from us, as a commodity and some 'thing' we 'need' without really approaching the why of that necessity. With increasing number of the global population, particularly in the global north, living in cities, nature has become 'a charged ideological fantasy that is not *only* ideological, but a structural reality nine-tenths buried in the unconscious of society'.[10] The nature we imagine is then the nature that enacts upon us, it is outside, out of town, over there, and other, until that is, we are hit with an apocalyptic hurricane driven by the rising sea temperatures that are a legacy of our carbon hungry contemporary life-styles. For the global north at least, Jedediah Purdy suggests that the Anthropocene might find its 'most radical expression in our acknowledgement that the familiar divide between people and the natural world is no longer useful or accurate', and that because 'we shape everything, from the upper atmosphere to the deep seas, there is no more nature that stands apart from human beings'.[11] Whilst this is undoubtedly true, it is an acknowledgement almost too vast to comprehend. Nature is potentially too big a concept for us to grasp and instead it becomes the 'transcendental term in a material mask that stands at the end of a potentially infinite series of other terms that collapse into it'[12] so that there is no 'nature', only a series of component parts; fish, birds, acorns, cats, tennis shoes, snow, …. and a deconstruction of nature into its component parts might well be our saviour. It is far easier to comprehend and then clear a stretch of local beach of plastic and appreciate the fresher air of a recently pedestrianised town centre than it is to try and get one's head around what peak oil or 2^{o}C of global warming might actually look and feel like. Nature is then best understood in its component parts rather than as the sum of them and it is these component parts that Guest's poetry engages with and draws out attention too. When used as an all-encompassing noun, the notion of nature also precludes our recognising nature as a 'set of processes, relationships, and non-things, that is,

[10] Joshua Corey and G.C. Waldrep eds, *The Arcadia Project: North American Postmodern Pastoral.* (Boise, Idaho: Ahsahta Press, 2012). p. xix
[11] Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene.* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 2 – 3.
[12] Morton, p.14.

where there is no object we can point to'[13] such as photosynthesis, the symbiotic relationship that is lichen, and the wind. Guest's innovative poetry considers these processes as well as the component parts of nature so must meaningfully be counted as exemplar of the 'experimental poetries – objectivism, composition by field, projective verse, and other modernism-influenced venerations of form – [that] anticipated postmodern environmental consciousness and registered poetry's sense of the material interconnection of all life'[14] as she describes and explores the connections between the human and the more-than-human, between us and nature.

The intrinsic linking of nature and the self is evident in Guest's poems in her use of imagery, language and form. In her poetry, people and things are not 'like' the wind, the waves, birds, clouds or air; they *are* the wind, the waves, the birds, clouds and air. Trees emerge from the buildings as she walks through the streets of New York, the rain is a lens to a another way of seeing, a vase of flowers links past and present, the wild garden calls to the hidden self and the waves the California surfers ride wash the world clean. In all its guises, Guest's nature comes with a small 'n' that describes similarity, rather than the big 'N' of otherness. This is the nature found in Guest's poems; it is the everyday, the urban, the domestic nature of the garden and a vase of flowers and, it is the vast and uninhibited, wild nature that is the ocean, the sky and the prairies and plains of the American interior that makes the human small in comparison. Because of Guest's 'arms wide' approach to nature, this study uses the term nature in its broadest sense and it refers to all aspects of the ecology that are not human-made, manufactured or built. Perhaps unusually though, it also includes in its definition the human created spaces of the garden, both public and private, as well as cut flowers, potted plants, and the city's trees. This humanised nature is important in the city and suburban space and can often be a very profound point of rebellion, a point that is often seen in Guest's work. The inclusion of the domestic space and the natural within it in this study is of particular interest as it provides a point of comparison between Guest's environmental view and that of many male writers. Broadly speaking, contemporary male writers ignored the role of domestic nature in their writing of the environment. Particularly in the prose work of writers such as Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey and Henry David Thoreau, whilst their work, like Guest's, is very site specific and does include the impact of post-war industrialisation on the 'rural homestead', the scale is vast, frequently un- or only very

[13] James Sherry, 'Human Views of Nature', in *)((ECO(LANG)(UAGE(READER))* ed Brenda Iijima (New York: Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs and Nightboat Books, 2010), p. 168.
[14] Hume and Osborne, p. 4.

sparsely populated and remote and impersonal. The wide, wild nature in their work then seems very other and elsewhere to the average city or suburb dweller. For many, this sort of nature was also a place of escape from society where a man could find himself once more in a kind of 'transcendental pastoralism' rising above the monstrosity of the newly industrialised everyday and finding solace in a simple, natural existence.[15] For writers like Leopold and Abbey, the environment is something very large, and whilst it is certainly something we are in and that is fundamentally important to our being, that we are a very small part of it reduces both human agency and urgency, making its (our) problems far too big for many of us to engage with on any meaningful level. Guest is very much domiciled in both town and country and writes her nature from, and of, the urban and domestic spaces as much as she writes from and of the top of mountains. This makes the nature in her work much more accessible and much more 'real' as we can look out of our own windows, and see it in our gardens, or in the trees of the city; it is the view from the workroom window that 'gets into the poetry'.[16]

Barbara Guest as nature poet.

As probably the least known among the Poets of the New York School, Guest was a close contemporary of its more public personalities; Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and James Schuyler. The placing of aspects of nature in direct dialogue with the urban environment is a common theme in the work of this group, but Guest's work goes one step further than that of the majority of her contemporaries, James Schuyler perhaps being the exception. Images of nature form the nucleus of her work, with every other image, sound and word pattern circling around it. Sara Lundquist writes that Guest 'is one of our most sensitive and valuable nature poets', one in whose work we see, 'the human meaning in weather, nature, and landscape',[17] and almost without exception, each poem has in it a recognisable image and interaction with the natural world. These images range from images of wild nature; a mountain, the sea, the sky, to images of domestic nature; the garden,

[15] Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 242. Marx refers specifically to Thoreau's *Walden* citing it as a report on transcendental pastoralism and likening it to an American fable where the hero withdraws from society in favor of nature.
[16] Guest and Hillringhouse, p. 25.
[17] Sarah Lundquist, 'Implacable Poet, Purple Birds: The Work of Barbara Guest'. *American Women Poets in the Twenty-First Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*. Ed. Claudia Rankine and Juliana Spahr. (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), p. 195.

a vase of flowers, a picture of plants or fruit; and, especially in her early work, images of the nature and the city set in dialogue with one another. But where Lundquist finds Guest is using her poetry to render the human meaning in weather, nature, and landscape, I find that she is not using it as a metaphor or as a lens through which we might see ourselves more clearly, she is instead, acknowledging it in its proper place – as a part of her self, of ourselves, of us. Guest's poetics moves away from a 'traditional nature poetry [where] the human subject [is] meditating upon a natural object-landscape-animal that is supposed to function as a kind of doorway into meaning of the human subject's life'.[18] Guest's poetry recognises this as an appropriation of more-than-human nature and instead she mediates *with* it. Lundquist goes on to say that Guest 'respect[s] in language the non-linguistic world, the thing *as well* as its effect' (emphasis in the original)[19] and it is this recognisable engagement with language that makes Guest's work so open to close analysis. For Guest, nature is fundamental to the production of her work, citing it as 'a quick entry into lyricism because (…) it is so eloquent'.[20] It is this conjunction of language, poetry, nature, and the speaking subject that makes her work so exciting and such a fertile ground for an analysis through the theories of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous.

Finding particularly that Guest's natural imagery gives her poetry its 'mystifying beauty and power'[21] Timothy Gray describes Guest as 'a pioneer of avant-garde pastoral verse'.[22] Whilst perhaps a contradiction in terms, Gray's notion of an avant-garde pastoral is compelling and is a particularly fitting descriptor for at least some of Guest's work. In her engagement with both form and language, Guest's work can certainly be considered avant-garde, but the conjunction with the pastoral can be seen as problematic. Gray's earlier notion of an urban pastoral[23] provides a basis for the term as applied to Guest. Whilst Gray agrees that a key theme in the pastoral is the creation of an imaginative space that is often marked by a freedom of the self and of its expression, and by a sense of play,[24] he then goes on to describe the late twentieth century city as just such a space. Gray states that the pastoral space 'is a

[18] Marcella Durand, 'The Ecology of Poetry', in *)((ECO(LANG)(UAGE(READER))* ed Brenda Iijima (New York: Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs and Nightboat Books, 2010), p. 116.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Barbara Guest, *Forces of Imagination: Writing on Writing.* (Berkley: Kelsey St. Press, 2003), p. 92.
[21] Timothy Gray, *Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School.* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2010), p. 72.
[22] Ibid. p. 70.
[23] Timothy Gray, 'Semiotic Shepherds: Gary Snyder, Frank O'Hara and the Embodiment of an Urban Pastoral'. *Contemporary Literature* 39.4 (Winter 1998), pp. 523-559.
[24] Ibid. pp. 523-524.

site of refuge, disguise, play and rearrangement […] marked by a profound sense of ambiguity and indeterminacy' and that 'it is the semiotic vibrancy, this 'placelessness,' that the pastoral wants to nurture rather than (re)place'. [25] The city space offers these same opportunities and so, in one deft leap, the pastoral is up, over the haha and heading downtown on the subway. For Gray, the city space is 'one of the best sites for the pastoral, since it contains a wealth of offerings available for those who want to change their roles, abandon a fixed identity, or other wise disguise themselves'.[26] By acknowledging this point of negotiation in both the traditional pastoral space and in the city, Gray provides the necessary staging post between nature and the (re)identification of the self across an extremely wide body of work that spans an array of genres. Guest certainly engages with the city space as a means of (re)negotiating the self but, she is also engaging with nature, both in and outside of the city space and so, Guest's poetry can be considered 'pastoral' using many different points of definition.

To miss the presence of nature in Guest's poetry is, almost, to have not read the poems at all. Critical essays that are focused on discussions of Guest as a feminist, on her relationship with painters and the processes of painting, or on the features of her poetic form, all note the presence of natural imagery in the work.[27] Guest's poetry is rich and varied but her, and our, relationship with nature is a key point of focus in it. Guest's New York was a vibrant place full of opportunity, personality and inspiration but she, like many of her contemporaries, consistently looked away from the city for a means of exploring the imagination and the potential for different states of being.[28] Ann Vickery writes that Guest 'felt that there was "an unconscious division" on her part between the country and the city', and quotes Guest as saying "I often write here [Long Island] and take work back to the city. Nature's so powerful and you either come under its rule or you are under the rule of mankind in the city".[29] These dualities of country and city, and humankind and nature, that Guest identifies are not, however, as clear-cut as this comment would lead us to believe. There is evidence throughout her work of the crossovers between them, and the images of nature in poems that are situated in the city space evidences this intertextuality and

[25] Ibid. p. 524.
[26] Ibid. p. 525.
[27] See for instance; Lynn Keller's 'Becoming "A Complete Travel Agency": Barbara Guest's Negotiations with the Fifties Feminine Mystique', and Rachel Blau DuPlessis' 'The Gendered Marvelous: Barbara Guest, Surrealism and Feminist Reception', as well as the feature editions of *Jacket* (10 and 36)
[28] Ann Vickery, 'A Mobile Fiction: Barbara Guest and Modern Pastoral', *TriQuaterly* 116 (2003), p. 251.
[29] Ibid.

symbiosis. It is certainly the case that Guest felt the draw of nature very strongly and she returned to the city in order to ground herself, taking the bus into New York once a week, saying that it was "extremely important because it breaks up the sequence of time and creates a tension between the city and the country".[30] This tension and dialogue between the two spaces is particularly evident in her early work. In Guest's work we see the energies of natural spaces and the tensions between them and the city as each vies for her attentions. Guests needs the wide, creative spaces of the country in order to conceive and realise her poetics, but she also needs the stimulus of the city to do the same:

> My typewriter here [in the Hamptons] is never [in] a good condition, quick to the pulse, its life has not been spent by the rapid city sidewalk but under the shadow of trees and low clouds.
> I know I write differently out here. My thoughts travel to me from mysterious nature, I am nourished by the weather and seed. Sometimes I believe that my poetry is a little too free as if it were running with the weather, with inhabitants of fields…[31]

Here, Guest is either a boundary between these two spaces or a meeting point for them; she is a place of symbiosis for the country and the city, for nature and culture. This liminal, symbiotic space is recognised in ecology as the ecotone; the border areas between two distinct habitats in which they merge and become an alternate, new place that is neither one thing nor the other.[32] The classic ecotone spaces of woodlands, costal strips and riverbanks, are 'those often indeterminate margins between land and water, [that] are often the richest point in any landscape for wildlife',[33] and these frequently appear in Guest's poetry. Ecotone strikes me as a particularly apt word for describing the positivity of the liminal, symbiotic spaces Guest's poetry manifests, particularly where theses spaces are bounded on both sides and the dual boundaries influence the space between them and create a new site of meaning. Guest's realisation and representation of ecotone spaces is a point of focus in this work as is the process by which that realisation and representation occurs; symbiosis. The process of symbiosis, where different organisms co-exist interdependently in nature, manifests in Guest's work as collaborations visual artist and in the broader intertextuailty in her work as she draws on myth, music, and philosophy. These symbioses manifest an ecotone in which alternate ways of being are realised and new artistic practices are formed. Also relevant to a discussion of

[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid. p. 252.
[32] Mark Cocker, *Claxton* (London: Vintage, 2015), pp. 38-39.
[33] Ibid.

Guest's work is Donna J. Haraway's notion of sympoiesis, a making- or becoming-with that describes inventive, complex, dynamic connections,[34] and that is redolent of Kristeva's intertextuality in that it is consequently generative of new denotative positionalities. Guest's work repeatedly exposes dynamic connections between women, nature and language, demanding that readers (re)evaluate their notions of those relationships, and of the relationships between them and wider culture. The images of threshold, boundary, meeting point, liminality, ecotone and symbiosis consistently reoccur in Guest's work and there is a particular reoccurrence of the intersection of nature and the culture, the created or built environment, and the sea and beach or shore spaces. The interaction between these spaces is extremely important to Guest and it is a relationship that is present, on some level, in all of her work. Guest's poetry seeks out these ecotone spaces, these places of symbiosis, and in placing the human in them, is able to describe a self that is of both nature and culture. The challenge for us as readers of Guest's work is often not in the recognition of the value of this symbiosis, but in her increasingly abstract presentation of it, as she challenges the boundaries of form, language, and the speaking subject in her work. The difficulty of Guest's verse may well have contributed to its lack of critical attention. Sara Lundquist finds that a number of persistent, but simplistic assumptions have been made about Guest's work, one of which being that it is 'difficult to the point of obduracy'.[35] Since the mid 1990s, however, there has been a small but steady stream of interest in her work. This criticism is insightful and actively encourages further scholarship across the wide range of themes. The special editions of *Jacket* in 1999, when Guest was awarded the Frost Medal, and again in 2008, have been complimented by regular critical commentary in *Jacket*, *How(ever), How2*, and *Women's Studies*, and in a special double edition of *Chicago Review* in 2008 which included critical discussion, uncollected work by Guest and three of her plays. This interest, however, comes at the end of a 60-year career, throughout much of which Guest's work was excluded from anthologies, critical studies and the classroom.

Making comment on the political, the social, the cultural and the personal in equal measure, Guest's work manifests a dialogue between the female speaking subject and nature in an attempt to imagine a unified female speaking subject derived of both nature and culture in her poetry. It is this dialogue that makes an analysis of her work

[34] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 58.
[35] Sarah Lundquist, 'Reverence and Resistance: Barbara Guest, Ekphrasis, and the Female Gaze'. *Contemporary Literature* 38,2 (Summer 1997), p. 262.

through that of Kristeva and Irigaray particularly relevant, as does her innovative formal practice. Sara Lundquist finds that, as 'a practitioner of "disjunctive" poetics which has often manifested itself in sever paratactical fragmentation', since her earliest poems in the 1960s 'Guest has exploited, for her own ends, much of the poetic experimentation that has contributed to difficult poetry of our century: the spareness and juxtapositional ambiguity of imagism, the allusive freedom of verbal collage, the arbitrary fictivness and metonymic oddity of dada and surrealism, [and] the broken "cubist' writing.'[36] Even at the most superficial level, Guest's desire to explore the process of poetry, her presentation of her work of the page and the linguistic choices she makes at the point of each enunciation, all engage with the work of Kristeva who seeks a development in the understanding of the process of poetry as a means of realising the speaking subject. Writing about these newly emerging theories in the early 1980s, Lyn Hejinian finds that 'the kinds of language that many of these writers advocate seem very close to, if not identical with, what I think of as characteristic of many contemporary avant-garde texts', going on to note their focus on 'syntactic disjunctures and realignments, on montage and pastiche as structural devices, in the fragmentation and explosion of subject, etc., as well as an antagonism to closed structures of meaning.'[37] All of these characteristics can be found in Guest's work and it is this, and the influence that Guest had on many writers of the late twentieth century avant-garde, that makes an analysis of her work in the light of these thinkers so appropriate. When the roles of gender and nature are investigated, further points of correlation are exposed and the opportunities for analysis, both in terms of the poetry and of the theories themselves, are evident. The proliferation of formal innovation in late twentieth- and early twenty-first century ecopoetry offers a further discursive lens through which to consider Guest's work and opens it up to ecofeminist analysis as well as broadening the scope of work that might be considered under the descriptors ecopoetry and ecofeminism.

Peter Gizzi's description of Guest's work as a 'natural progression of Imagism into literary abstract expressionism',[38] where 'her poems are not abstract, rather, they locate us always exactly where we are, at the edge of meaning in an already

[36] Ibid. p. 263n.
[37] Lyn Hejinian, 'The Rejection of Closure', in Paul Hoover ed, *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994). p. 657. Heijinian is specifically referring to those writers whose essays were published in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Amherst University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), which included writing by Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous among others.
[38] Peter Gizzi, p. xix.

impacted, developing world',[39] lends to this poetic investigation of the self as a point of intersection, liminality, and symbiosis, with the poem acting as the ecotone space. The liminal location of Guest's female speaking subject can also be said to be true of the nature in our contemporary world as it is always at the edge of meaning; identified through language but not wholly realised though it, and whilst creating and influencing language in turn. This placing of the speaking subject at the very edge of meaning offers the opportunity for multiple meanings and intertextuality to flourish, and for the process of the creation of language and meaning to be explored and so too, with nature. Whilst her 'placing of the poem at the horizon of our understanding'[40] makes the work challenging, it also makes it a portal into the process of the formation of language, of meaning and of the subject itself. By constantly representing nature at the same time as exploring language and subjectivity, the work is then also probing and exposing these processes a layer down; at the level of the primal, at the level of the layer that interacts with the natural world around us rather than that which interacts only in the social and the cultural. Whilst these layers cannot be separated, there is no 'us' without nature nor any culture without nature, we rarely see this interaction. In her work Guest digs down for it, seeking to expose it and bring up it to the surface of the text.

Gizzi also states that 'disturbing the conventional relations of subjects and objects, of reality and imagination, is one of Guest's signature gestures',[41] and Guest herself, describes the process of her poetry as being similar to that of the abstract expressionist painters who believed in 'letting the subject find itself'.[42] This liberation of the speaking subject to define its own relations necessitates the liberation of the process of language and the formation of meaning. To this end, the speaking subject must employ all of the various means at its disposal. In order to define these relationships anew, the speaking subject has to plumb the fundamental processes of language creation as a means of realising meaning and so must actively draw on the semiotic. Guest's poetry, with its innovative form and structure, its attention to shape and visual presentation of the text, and with its deconstruction of language, of word forms and punctuation, manipulates these means of meaning production and language creation and, in doing so, exposes the semiotic. Guest states that the primary task of poetry is 'to invoke the unseen, to unmask it'[43] and that 'the most

[39] Ibid. p. xvii.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid. p. xviii.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid. p. xvii.

important act of a poem is to reach further than the page'.[44] Her co-location of the speaking subject and nature does just that, invoking and unmasking that which is all around us but is usually unseen. Through this, Guest's poems reach far beyond the pages they are printed on, not least of all because of the visual presentation of the text on them, but because of the way in which Guest insists that the reader connects with the speaking subject and with nature and language.

Guest's insistence on the connection between the reader and the speaking subject and nature and language manifests both tension and plasticity in her poetry. In 'A Reason for Poetics', Guest writes of the 'pull [that] will build up a tension within a poem (…) arrang[ing] its dimensions' so that it 'stretches, looking outwardly and inwardly, thus obtaining a plasticity that the flat, the basic works – what we call the language of the poem – demands and, further, depends upon'.[45] This tension, the pull between inside and outside at the level of image, language and within the relationship between reader, writer and speaking subject, is fundamental to Guest's poetry. Formally, this desire to manifest these tensions emerges in the fragmentation of Guest's lines, in the visual presentation of her text, her unsettling of syntax, and in the specificity of the language that she uses. Whilst fragmentation may describe an incoherence that repels reader's attempts at understanding or empathy, in Guest's work it serves to draw the reader into the poem by creating spaces, so that she and they might, 'perform together on a high wire strung over a platform between their *separated selves*' (emphasis in the original).[46] Guest is not seeking to merge with the reader nor to disappear as the writer, but to create a new space in which both can be present; an ecotone. Guest's language becomes formal as '*A poem stretches when Pressure on a word causes the poem to stretch*' and she charges us to '*Go to the poem, observe, see if the word is consistent within the poem – never desert meaning for a word.* | *the special circumstances within which it makes sense* | *circumstances upon which it is used'*.[47] Guest's use of emphasis and fragmentation in this passage visually describes how 'tension relies on and *alters the plasticity of poetic language'* (emphasis in the original),[48] as it stretches her prose in order to open it up to a dialogue between space, language, reader and writer. Guest's poetics is then 'an associative art'[49] growing out of Surrealism and its refusal to see boundaries

[44] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 100.
[45] Ibid, pp. 20 – 22.
[46] Ibid, p. 79.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid, p. 51.

between the arts so that 'one could never again look at poetry as a locked kingdom. Poetry extended vertically, as well as horizontally. Never was it motionless within a linear structure'.[50] Guest's judicious adjustment of her verbal fragments draws attention to the spaces in between things and in between language and the relationships that can then be made manifest within them. In this way, Guest's poetic form is one of ecotone, one that creates a space in which aspects are in tension and are required to respond. This tension places the reader on their edge; it disquiets us. As Guest's work stretches and negotiates the landscapes of feminism, nature, language, art, history, myth and music, its associative-ness, its intertextuality, results in an ecopoetics that is 'a practice which creates an "edge" effect … where ecologies are in tension'.[51]

Is it a coincidence that Guest, someone who was so committed to exploring the boundaries of linguistic expression, should have found the liminal, ecotone spaces between the natural and the human so necessary for the realisation of this project? Not really. Particularly in relation to the interplay between the city space and the natural environment, but across all human relationships and interactions with nature, the dialogue between the community or individual and the space they inhabit is now well recognised as each informs the shape of the other, and we understand that space is both a social product and a shaping force on society.[52] The urban space of the city that is the muse for so much of Guest's early work was creating of, and created by, Guest and her fellow poets and artists and at the same time, so their challenging of the boundaries of art, literature and language were both creative of, and restricted by, those forms of expression. In the same way that Guest needs the human, city space to provide her with the political and cultural subject matter that her poetry will push against, she also needs the nature of the country and seaside spaces to realise the means of expression to do so. Language, like the city and nature, is both creating of and created by culture and so to expose those cultural creations, to expose their inadequacies and inequalities, one needs to look beyond the language it creates, for the means by which to do so.

[50] Ibid.
[51] Harriet Tarlo 'Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction in Context', in *How2*, 3. 2 (Summer 2008).
[52] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*. (London: Verso, 1989), p. 7.

> within this saturated if not already closed socio-symbolic order, poetry – more precisely, poetic language – reminds us of its eternal function: to introduce through the symbolic that which works on, moves through, and threatens it.
>
> *Revolution in Poetic Language*[53]

> Feminine strength is such that while running away with syntax (…) she goes to the impossible where she plays the other, for love, without dying of it.
>
> *The Newly Born Woman*[54]

> respect your private language.
>
> *Forces of Imagination*[55]

Throughout her work, Barbara Guest exposes instances of the semiotic, encouraging us to recognise that which language is built on, to respect our private languages, to see beyond the words on the page, down to the very page itself, and in doing so she then exposes the fundamental processes that create the speaking subject. Guest's poetry runs away with syntax as she seeks to represent the role of the other in the realisation of the speaking subject and in doing so, manifests the pressure of the semiotic on the symbolic, challenging traditions of form, structure and language. Guest's manifestation of the semiotic in particular relation to the realisation of a female speaking subject, and with its intrinsic links to nature, make for both an association with the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, and an exposure of the limits of their work. Whilst natural imagery is inherent in Cixous' work and Irigaray is now readily recognised as a ecofeminist, in neither their, nor Kristeva's work relating to the feminine and language, is the link to the drive economies of nature discussed. It is this gap that my analysis of Guest's work aims to fill. Whilst Guest does not admit to having read or been influenced by the work of these women, their theories sit alongside her work as a manifestation of their

[53] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 81.
[54] Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman.* Translated by Betsy Wing. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 96.
[55] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 78.

interrogation of poetic language. All agree that the poetic can function both aesthetically and politically and that its purpose is to undo dominant discourse,[56] liberating the speaking subject and providing new ways of seeing and speaking. Guest's poetry allows us to explore contemporary gender politics as she weaves them into her work with both subtlety and great precision. Her challenge to traditional modes of representation provides a further layer to this exploration, asking that we view poetry and its speaking subjects in new ways in which further destabilise and undo dominant modes of thinking and representation. Latterly, the role of the body in human relations with the more-than-human world has become a focus point as the impacts of our global climate crisis become increasingly apparent. The focus of these three theorists on the body in the production of language, particularly poetic language, has seen a renewed interest in their work in the fields of ecopoetics and ecocriticism, fields that are starting to recognise the essential nature of our materiality.

Kristeva's definition of the process of poetry as a signifying practice generated by a speaking subject who is enmeshed within a particular social and historical field,[57] is exemplified in Guest's innovative, intertextual poetry as she weaves history, contemporary gender politics and art throughout her verse. That the body of the speaking subject also generates poetry,[58] is also key to Kristeva's theorisation of the process and this is manifest in Guest's work through her use of the page, her visual presentation of the text and her expression of the semiotic. Kristeva defines 'literature' or the 'text' as 'a discourse which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body', but one that is 'a practice involving the sum of the unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction'.[59] This manifestation in Guest's poetics challenges social and cultural notions of gender, politics and the arts. For Kristeva, the poetic text expands far beyond the collection of signs, either spoken or laid out on a page. It is the sum of all of the processes, physical, mental and emotional, inherent in making language and set out in, and amongst, the marks of an enunciation, and Guest's work exemplifiers the totality of these processes. Guest's representation of the body and the physical in her poetry

[56] Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: Writing the Feminine.* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), p. 96.
[57] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 1.
[58] Ibid. p. 13.
[59] Ibid. p. 16.

allows a realisation of a female physicality which exemplifies Cixous' definition of *écriture feminine* and which parallels Kristeva's work.

Écriture feminine, whilst perhaps most readily associated with or ascribed to Cixous, is not solely of her making and there are significant cross overs between her work and that of Irigaray and Kristeva. Often paired down to a theory of women's writing, in *écriture feminine,* Cixous offers an alternative to the dominate symbolic discourse that is liberating and seeks to facilitate a greater depth of recognition in the development of a dialogue that is inclusive of both the self and the other. Couched in the body, Cixous calls women back to writing, to 'put herself into the text',[60] demanding that women 'break out of the snare of silence' by writing 'from and towards women'.[61] *Écriture feminine* finds it locus in the drives and pulsions of the (female) body and a refusal to split apart from the figure of the (m)other, a figure that can meaningfully be read as nature. Crucially, it is a subject position that refuses to appropriate or annihilate the other and their difference in order to construct itself[62] and so seeks to reject or undo the binaries seen as inherent in phallocentric culture. Whilst Cixous states that 'it is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing', saying that it can never be 'theorised, enclosed, coded',[63] the notion of an *écriture feminine* offers a means of (re)uniting the body with the world and the word, regardless of its gender. There is an inherent multiplicity to *écriture feminine* as it requires the physical body be bought into concert with the act of writing; that the intellectualise self be (re)united with its physicality. This realisation of multiplicity in the creation of the speaking self that Cixous seeks, and that Guest is able to manifest, also realises Irigaray's notions of inclusivity as key to the realisation of a language that enables the realisation and articulation of different relationships between the self and the other, and that enable the realisation and articulation of alternate experiences and selves. The body is integral to Irigaray's theories as a means by which women might speak, and by which a feminine language might be realised. These three theorists are all firm in their belief in the revolutionary nature of this type of writing and the inclusion of the physical in their analysis, both in terms of the physical self and the physicality of the text. This makes their work particularly relevant to an analysis of Guest, as not only does it have us look at the words she

[60] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen in *Signs* Vol 1, no 4 (Summer 1976), p. 875.
[61] Ibid, p. 881.
[62] Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader.* Ed Susan Sellers. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. xxix.
[63] Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 883.

choses, describing as it does a writing that is directed by the signifying function rather than the omnipotent subject,[64] but also at the way it is laid out on the page and at the spaces in between them. Intertextuality, as the passage from one sign system to another that results in new meaning, is an important process for Kristeva and through it, the various influences of place, culture and other artistic forms such as painting and music, on Guest's work can more fully be realised.

Identifying the role of the natural environment in the drive economy of the body and so recognising its importance in poetics, only requires a short step on from the theories of the drive economy of the body and its role in signification that Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray describe. Icelandic author Sijón describes Cixous' 'Laugh of the Medusa' as a 'reminder of our ability to recreate our language and ways of thinking by finding them new wellsprings inside ourselves, in places not found on the maps of those banes of our existence: patriarchy and capitalism',[65] using it to facilitate his writing and thinking on the intersection of science and literature in the era of climate change. Mary Phillips draws on Cixous' work in order to challenge the power dynamics ascribed to the (female) body and to manifest an active engagement in eco-activism through the recognition of physical experiences, encouraging us to experience the 'more-than-rational' and challenge binary and boundary thinking.[66] This drawing of language back into the body and (re)establishing it as the root of communication is key in the theories of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous and whilst they speak in terms of writing from a female, feminine or bisexual body, the examples in their own work are found in the writing of male authors, describing both the restriction in women's writing and the liberation that might be offered. The role of the body in these theories has lead in the past to charges of essentialism for all three women that are now increasingly countered by the recognition of the material impact of our environment on the body and the recognition of our need to find new ways of talking about it. Perspectives in ecofeminism offer a recognition of the plurality and intersectionality of issues, attending to such crossings as 'sexual and environmental justice', promoting 'women's active roles in environmental, social and interspecies justice issues' as well as asking questions around 'gendered bodies, postcolonial feminist concerns, feminist re-workings of affect theory, posthumanist analysis of

[64] Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, p. 3.
[65] Sijón, 'On the Organic Diversity o*é* Literature: Notes from My Little Astrophysical Observatory' in Ed John Freeman, *Tales of Two Planets: Stories of Climate Change and Inequality in a Divided World*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2020), p. 263.
[66] Mary Phillips, 'Developing Ecofeminist Corporeality: Writing the Body as Activist Poetics', in Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens eds, *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*. (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 62, 66, 67.

power, gender, and ecology and green queer theories'.[67] This widening of the scope of ecofeminism has lead to a 'de-essentialising' of nature and an understanding and (re)establishment of the role of the body in human relationships both with each other and more-than-human nature. As such, contemporary feminist ecocriticism has opened up 'new ethical pathways to contest the sexist, racist, speciesist, ecophobic, classist, nationalist, and homophobic discourses of "nature" which have served to perpetuate gender dualities and body boundaries', with the de-essentalising of nature showing 'how these approaches have been instrumental in the formation of master narratives of domination'.[68] The recognition of the corporeal in wider ecocriticism then counters the charges of essentialism levelled at thinkers such as Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva as it seeks to place the body (all bodies) back in touch with the environments that they inhabit. When such bodies are recognised as intrinsically connected with their environments, gender and social binaries begin to falter and those not previously acknowledged are exposed. Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray's theories of a poetic language that originates in the body 'inclines language to its most agile and expressive potential, [where] it can be effective as a means to create and articulate alternative strategies for living'.[69] This articulation of alternative strategies then results in a 'cognition and language [that] involves the body's participation, the very body subjected to an increasingly hazardous set of environmental circumstances'[70] and as Kate Soper said, 'its not language that has a hole in it's ozone layer'.[71] When poetry is viewed as a 'social document that expresses relationships within ecosystems', through the process of that poetry, the participating body 'recalibrates the social [and] how we function dynamically in space, in time, with each other'[72] and that ozone hole is no longer at a distance of language but at its proximity.

With an emphasis on materiality, contemporary eco-feminist writing works to unpick binary framings that generate problems of biological and gender reductionism, showing essentialism to be dependant on, and productive of, reductive identifications rather than ethical relations.[73] Harriet Tarlo writes that 'we cannot avoid the

[67] Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok and Serpil Opperman eds, *International Perspectives on Feminist Ecocriticism.* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 1
[68] Ibid, p. 2.
[69] Iijima, p. 288.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Kate Soper, *What is Nature?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) p. 151.
[72] Iijima, p. 276.
[73] Donna J. Haraway, 'Otherworldly Conversations, Terran Topics, Local Terms', in Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman eds, *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 179.

relevance of the physical body to eco-poetics concerns', noting that to do so 'reinforces one of a set of dualism which allow us to distinguish ourselves as cultural beings from our own bodies and from nature'.[74] This emphasis on the lived materiality of the body in ecopoetics undoes binary thinking by placing the speaking body in its environment and it is at this intersection that Guest, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray meet. Each of the theorists finds that the role of the body in the production of poetic language is significant, particularly in relation to the social forces that they see acting upon it. Kristeva finds that, in the process of significance, 'biological urges are socially controlled, directed and organised'.[75] In turn, Cixous finds that, the way in which society has used sexual difference leaves women closer to what she describes as a 'feminine economy'.[76] For Cixous this economy is not based on a given gender, but on a way of seeing, of writing, and of being; it is based in the liberated space of being the Other, different and separate, and because of this, is open to all. For the most part Cixous describes this economy in terms of women and their role in it, but her early literary analysis, like Kristeva's, focuses on the work of male writers; Mallarmé, Joyce and Genet with only her later work focusing on the work of Clarice Lispector. This shift offers us an interesting contrast to Kristeva who does not find the same liberations in texts by women, findings that speak to Joan Retallack's insightful pronouncement that 'the feminine has never been exclusively embodied or exercised in female writing. It is, of course, entirely a question of power',[77] a power usually wielded by the coterie of the male avant-garde. Irigaray's diverse body of work interrogates phallocentric language and insists that a feminine economy cannot represent itself within it, as it cannot assume the role of the subject.[78] This inability of the feminine economy to signify within the dominant system requires that it realise an alternate means, one that is inclusive of difference within the creation of a subject. The alternate system that Irigaray envisions, is based on the representations of body drives and emotions in a discourse, and she particularly identifies the role of the poet in the realisation of this project because of the express purpose of their words is to change or touch those who receive them.[79] In Guest's work we most often see the body drives represented in a rejection of punctuation and the resulting troubling of syntax:

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[74] Tarlo, 'Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction in Context'.
[75] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 17.
[76] Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reade*r, p. xxix.
[77] Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 137
[78] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble.* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 18.
[79] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader.* Ed Margaret Whitford. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 168.

> You float now tideless, secure in the rhythm
> of stuffing and tying, edging and interlining,
> bordered and hemmed; no longer unacquainted
> you inhabit the house with its smooth tasks
> sorted in scrap bags like kitchen nooks
> the smelly cookery of cave where apples
> ripen and vats flow domestic yet with schemes
> of poetry sewed to educate the apron dawn. (*Collected Poems* 191)

The minimal punctuation in this passage from the sequence *Quilts* facilitates multiple readings, each of which is underpinned by a different drive rhythm. The almost stream-of-consciousness flow to the latter half of this section, where the parts of domestic environment are listed as if sorted into the scrap bag, replicates the multiplicity and immediacy of the domestic space of the home, and the need for women to juggle multiple demands within it. The rhythm of the tides, the rhythm of menstruation, is now passed, but those of the seasonal domestic remain in the ripening apples and in the 'apron dawn', both the early rising of the woman of the house and the new wife who has to learn the rhythm of her new family, that is taught by the poetry that is sewed into the quilt. The women in Guest's poem are domestic in their habitat, but they are no less able, important or educated because of it. Guest empowers the domestic space and the women within it by replicating the multiplicity of their lives in it through her replication of the drive economy of the female body. Guest's feminism seeks to realise female liberation in the spaces already inhabited by women rather than mimic or take on the dominant masculine position and the importance of family and home in Guest's life should not be underestimated. In interview, Hadley Guest comments that Guest 'valued very highly the role of being a wife and mother',[80] even whilst she refused the conventional definitions of their scope. With this in mind, all of Guest's writing on the domestic spaces should be read through the lens of the positivity with which she saw her role in the home and family. One should, however, perhaps do so with a certain wry smile as one also remembers that Guest lived in considerable financial security, was able to send her children away to school, and rented spaces away from the home in order to write. Guest describes her self as 'fortunate to have had somebody to be there with the children in the apartment', noting that she didn't want anything around her when she wrote as it 'bought congestion' and in that in the process of separating oneself in

[80] Hadley Guest. 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest', Berkeley, July 17, 2007. PennSound

order to write 'you cease to be a good mother'.[81] These luxuries of situation were available to few other women writers at the time and contrast with the experiences of other female poets associated with the New York School such as Bernadette Mayer and Alice Notley. Mayer and Notley both write of women's dailiness and the quotidian but in very different ways to Guest, presenting instead what might be described as a formally innovative confessional poetics that is rooted in, and identifiable as, a representation of their own lived experiences. Like Cixous, Irigaray sees writing as a site of liberation as it there that women's voices can speak through, and around, the structures of the dominant discourse, disturbing its syntax with their own and 'speaking (as) woman'.[82] Guest's poetry speaks through and around the structures of dominant discourse and in doing so, achieves a liberated female speaking subject.

Whilst the theories of Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray speak critically to contemporary patriarchal dominance, a dominance that Guest also speaks to in her work, they do not take into account the push of nature, of the wider environment, on the speaking body and the self, nor that that relationship, that push, works both ways. Guest, Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray all came to writing at a time of increased environmental awareness, a time when our impact on the environment was being realised and also, the impact that that had on us in turn. If the historical dominance and control of women by men echoes male dominance and control of nature, it is only a short step further to include the drives of the wider, natural environment in an analysis. Guest's work particularly lends itself to this analysis due to the extreme proximity of nature and women in her work. The controls on language which Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray all identify as being set in place in our infancy, and which are then constantly reinforced, are the social controls that are placed on the female body and behaviours and on nature through the social and cultural regulations and restriction of the natural environment, and it is these controls that Guest's work identifies. Whilst the social and cultural structures that regulate these physical aspects of the self and the environment are not exclusive in their regulation of the female body, they are particularly regulatory of it, and this regulatory framework can also be seen to impact the wider environment. This study seeks to describe and discuss Kristeva, Cixous' and Irigaray's theories of the role and processes by which the drives and gestures of the body are evidenced in poetic language and what this might mean in terms of representations of a gendered self, and representations of relationships with nature

[81] Barbara Guest. 'Barbara Guest and Kathleen Fraser in Conversation with Elizabeth Frost and Cynthia Hogue', *Jacket* 25 (February 2004).
[82] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 119.

and the natural environment. To this end, Guest's poetics, with its focuses on the exploration of feminism, form and language that are bound tightly to her relationship with the natural, is an extremely rich source.

We recognise that there is a repeat, but by very varied, linking of the female or feminine with nature across world cultures. In western cultures this link has tended toward the negative as the connotation is that, as culture develops and is intellectualised, nature is seen as being in opposition to it, and as emotional and of the body as opposed to being of the intelligent mind. This splitting, inherent in the creation of the subject and self and in our modern separation from nature, is important in Guest's work as we see her push against these separations, instead seeking to create symbiosis. Kristeva's notion of the abject offers us a useful position from which to explore these separations and Guest's attempts at unity. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as a duality of the self that both compels and repels the subject and that disrupts its unity and as something that is 'quite close', but that 'cannot be assimilated'.[83] She finds that we are constantly forced to negotiate this duality to a varying degree in order to achieve subjectivity and that the female body, mainly as a product of the process of physical unity and then splitting through childbirth, is a particular site of abjection. Women's abjection is layered, and they must negotiate multiple restrictions on their bodies and their selves. The regulation of the drive economy of the female body, and its physical, and in particular, social and cultural regulation, is key in the creation and maintenance of the abject. Guest's poetry manifests these regulations and attempts to subvert them in order to manifest a speaking subject. Her representation of nature, not as object but as an intrinsic part of her own, female, speaking subject, describes the abject as inherent in the construction of the modern self and offers an alternate way of being and seeing.

Neither Cixous nor Irigaray recognise the abject, the self, and the female body in this same way, nor name it as such. Both do, however, recognise and embrace the female body as a means of re-establishing relationships with the pre-symbolic and of reimagining the relationship between the self and the other, particularly in relation to the role of the mother and through the process of childbirth. Cixous finds that there is no split between the self and the other in the female body, nor in the process of *écriture feminine*. She sees that when the processes of splitting are removed,

[83] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), p 1.

difference does not lead to marginalisation, but to a multiplicity. This rejection of the notion of the splitting of the self and other in the female body offers us an interesting way of (re)approaching the association of women and nature which has a continued, and cross-cultural, relationship. Guest's unification of nature and the self through image, language and form in her poetry, explores this multiplicity and as it embraces a unified self and other, as a means of creating the speaking subject, she explores the process of symbiosis as a way of manifesting a meaningful identity in an ecotone space. Irigaray's on-going investigation of the role of the mother figure in her work makes a clear association between the treatment of women by men, and the treatment of nature by men. Irigaray finds that the separation from the mother and from nature are inherent in the construction of masculine identity,[84] and suggests that it is through the re-establishment of the nature in the role of nurturing mother, that the degradation of both women and nature will be halted. Whilst this re-establishment of the mother figure has positive ramifications for women, in that it is through the female that a (re)unification with the nature can be achieved and environmental degradation halted, this model still works within the existing binary notions of duality rather than creating a new way of being and of symbiosis. When considered in light of Kristeva's notion of the abject, this repeat association of nature and the female body can be seen to reinforce the separation between the binaries of the nature/feminine and the culture/masculine spaces as it suggests an immature or malformed self that is not fully realised or autonomous. The lack of an alternative space in this model where symbiosis can occur does nothing to unpick the binary and so only sustains it.

Guest's project of symbiosis between the nature and culture, seeks a unification of the speaking subject and the other; an overcoming of the abjection that is inherent within us and which offers a new way of being, that transcends the both nature and culture, in order to embrace both and create a new mode of being. The abject nature of the female body and nature further develops the inherent cultural links between women and nature and renders them both very particular sites of regulation. With this in mind, when the female body and/or nature are realised in poetic language, it is then a liberation. In this situation, poetic language 'practices within and against the social order' and becomes the 'ultimate means of [social] transformation and subversion [and], the precondition for its survival and revolution'.[85] This has positive ramifications for the linking of women and nature and Guest's repeat use of positive

[84] Verene Andermatt Conley, *Ecopolitics: The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought.* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 137.
[85] Kristeva, *Revolution In Poetic Language*, p. 81.

images of women and nature, seeks to refute the negativity usually associated with it. Cixous and Irigaray's positing of *écriture feminine*[86] as a means of achieving the (re)unification of the self and the other, offers a means by which the abject can be nullified and renders the resulting duality, a site of positivity and liberation. With this in mind, if the reality of our physical selves can be recognised though the means of poetic language, it is reasonable to suggest then that the reality of nature can also be recognised and realised in the same way. Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray all see that, as the poetic text is inseparable from the body, it is also inseparable from the political and social. Through this inseparability, the poetic text becomes a site of multiple meanings and of multiple liberations. This project of release, however, is still subject to the repression that is inherent in the cultural production of the sign itself and then to our inability to truly signify, that which is almost wholly semiotic, without the dread tinge of psychosis. These contradictions aside, poetic language is a means by which transformation and subversion is practiced within and against the social order and so is also the precondition for its survival and revolution.[87] With this in mind, environmental, eco- or nature poetry is a key site of social and ecological revolution but perhaps more importantly, so is poetry where the focus is not on an ecological theme, but where local ecology is adjunct or peripheral to the textual focus. These sideways looks at an ecology, the throw-away lines that comment on, or mark a geographical situation or the weather or the shape of the text echoing the shape of a landmass, all engage in this process of subversion and revolution, working their way into the readers consciousness by the drawing of quiet attention to themselves through the act of recognising their presence in a text. This is the nature that is represented in Guest's poetry.

Guest's multifaceted representations of nature and the self in her work along with those of gender and contemporary culture, politics and society, all point towards the multiple pressures at work in the speaking subject. Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray all identify these pressures and see them acting on the process of language both at the point of the semiotic and the symbolic. Across the whole body of her work, Guest represents the interaction between the semiotic and the symbolic, expressing the pressure of the semiotic on the symbolic through the varied visual presentations of

[86] Although Irigaray does not expressly use the term *écriture feminine*, her theoretical position is close to that of Cixous in this regard that in the context of this thesis, the term *écriture feminine* should be understood to include the theoretical positions of both women unless expressly stated. This inherent commonality is noted by both Toril Moi and by Ann Rosalind Jones.

[87] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 81. and Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 879.

her texts. Guest places the words on the page in such a way that it is not only the word, the sign itself, that communicates, but the shape and sound of it, and its shape and sound in relation to the rest of the text. Guest's scattered, abstracted texts can be seen as representative of the processes of thoughts and the rhythms and drives of her body, as her words slash across the page, are pushed and pulled into corners, growing and shrinking as the statement dictates. Guest is very aware of the push of the semiotic and of the drives that it represents, although she does not name them as such, acknowledges their pressure, and actively encourages it, describing it as a 'tension' and a 'plasticity'.[88] Guest's poetry has a visual immediacy and physicality of form that is not as readily present in traditional forms that rely on the words themselves, the symbolic, to provide their force of meaning. The play of rhyme and meter only hint at the drives of the body, the semiotic, that undulates beneath and around the words, their structure confining the glorious chaos of the physical body rather than releasing and realising it. Because of this presence of the body in Guest's poetry, the level of signification achieved in her poetry is arguably greater than that achieved by traditional forms of lyrical poetry. Whilst I am not seeking to suggest that traditional poetries are seeking a conscious engagement with the representation of the physicality of the self and so have failed in their project, I find that the expressiveness that is realised though the representation of the semiotic self in Guest's poetry, does lead to greater signification, going beyond the point of the signifier and, through the exposure of the semiotic, bringing the body into recognisable dialogue with the world around it. In Guest's work, we see this dialogue in poems such as 'Wave', where the shape of Guest's text echoes the shape of the waves as they wash up the beach and the long spaces, both in and between lines, echoes the long, languid breath of sleep, the lull in the wind that is felt at dusk and just before dawn, and the littoral space between high and low waters.

Poetic language like Guest's sees the semiotic made more visible and this affords greater insight into the workings of the drives of the subject, and of the social and cultural regulations acting on them. For Kristeva, whose focus was the works of Joyce, Mallarmé and Lautréamont, modernist poetry with its apparent rejection of logical construction, and its emphasis on breaks, ellipses, and abrupt shifts in tone and meter, is exactly the kind of writing that is able to 'break through the strict rational defences of social meaning'.[89] Many poets of the twentieth and twenty-first

[88] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 20.
[89] Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. (New York: Routledge, 1985), p. 11.

centuries, including Guest, cite Mallarmé as at least as a progenitor of their work, going on to push at the boundaries of the symbolic in order to expose the semiotic pulses that are at its foundation. This stripping away of the symbolic in Guest's poetry, brings a directness to the communication in these texts that moves beyond the descriptive written word and works instead, at the level of feeling and intuition. This is achieved through Guest's visual presentation of the text, her manipulation of language and her dedication to facilitating the rhythm and flow of the speaking subject in the work. This depth to the communication makes Guest's work particularly important when considering the role of nature in contemporary western culture. Susan Griffin agrees with Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray when she states that 'language is shaped by the human body'[90] suggesting a primacy to the body in the realisation of language but then goes one step further by stating that 'language arrives from and is part of nature'[91] which seeks to render every utterance a dialogue between nature and the speaking subject which is part of if. This recognition of the role of nature in the production of language is shared by Gary Snyder who states that 'languages are not the intellectual inventions of archaic school teachers' but finds instead that they 'are naturally evolved wild systems whose complexity eludes the descriptive attempts of the rational mind',[92] highlighting the organic nature of language and the difficulty of their rational theorisation. The relationship that is manifest between nature, the body and the text is interconnected and so, the object of that utterance becomes connected with the speaking body and the edges of the object and the speaking subject/self are blurred and they become unified. When the text is describing a relationship with nature or the environment, that bond between the speaking self and the represented object (re)establishes the relationship between that self and the natural object being enunciated, and the divide between the two evaporates, as in Guest's early poem 'Windy Afternoon' (*Collected Poems* 8). Here, Guest creates a fast alliance between nature and her writing self. Almost without punctuation, the poem flows between positions and the images in it merge, and are represented as a whole rather than as discrete entities or vignettes. The pairing of the poet and nature is key in this poem and images of their inseparability are consistent:

Woods, barren woods,

[90] Susan Griffin 'Ecofeminism and Meaning' in Ed Karen J. Warren. *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature.* (Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1997), p. 217.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Gary Snyder, *A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds.* (Washington: Counterpoint, 1995), p. 174.

as this typewriter without an object
or the words that from you
fall soundless

The sun lowering
and the bag of paper
on the stoney ledge
near the waterfall

The relationship between the poem's speaking subject, the poet, and nature is one of unity, of reciprocity in that they write, or create, each other, the typewriter without and object or other, and the words that fall soundlessly from the woods. As the poem develops, the urban space of the city, a space that was extremely important to Guest and the production of her work, is also drawn into this unity and a trinity of the rural, the urban and the poet is realised as the shape of birds in flight are likened to the shape of the city streets:

a low sighing that of wings

Describe that nude, audacious line
most lofty, practiced street
you are no longer thirsty
turn or go straight

The representation of the body drives in this work, through the muddling of syntax, punctuation and grammar, renders them personal to Guest and requires multiple readings. The reader must engage with the physicality of Guest as the poet and with their own body as their own drive economies inform their reading of the text. There is a very distinct, and perhaps unsettling, naturalness to Guest's poetry and it is realised in the way in which she encourages the drives of both herself and nature to push through the words and sit on her pages. In poems like this, Guest is doing as Irigaray asks when she calls to women to engage with the 'issues at stake which fall to them', issues that she specifically identifies as being related to the intersections of 'life and culture, and with the continuous passage of the natural into the cultural'.[93]

[93] Luce Irigaray, *je, tu, nous: Towards a Culture of Difference.* Translated by Alison Martin. (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 13.

Remodelling the symbolic.

Kristeva states that 'what remodels the symbolic is always the influx of the semiotic'[94] and that this is particularly evident in poetic language since, for there to be a transgression of the symbolic, there must be an interruption of the drives in the universal signifying order, that of "natural" language which binds together the social unit'.[95] Kristeva identifies the semiotic with nature, which is not social or culturally constructed, and as such, her work offers a means of understanding our representations of ourselves, and the natural world around us. By embracing the semiotic in our representations of nature, it is possible to move beyond the notion of nature as an other that must be written, and instead, textually realise the un-named spaces and silences of the natural world as they are – un-named silences. The problem with this is that, in our current state, we view *everything* through a cultural lens either as those who embrace a particular cultural position or as those who reject it. The primacy of the body drive in a work aside, all economies are regulated by culture, including the un-named spaces and silences of the natural. Guest's poetry acknowledges the influence of culture and seeks to set up a dialogue between it and these natural, un-named spaces both in the wider, natural environment and the self. Her representation of the body drives in her work and their association with nature, is both liberation and regulation as each then becomes subject to the regulation of the other. This reinforcing of regulation can be considered in relation to Kristeva's notion of jouissance. For Kristeva, jouissance is almost the ultimate drive; one that encompasses the totality of the instinctual drives and pulsions that make us human, one that is 'sexual, spiritual, physical, conceptual at one and the same time'.[96] Jouissance is an ecstatic, total joy but one that is without mysticism,[97] and one that is entirely rooted in the self as opposed to the other. This earthy, primal, bodily impulse is before and beyond language to define and name and is applied across her work to instances of pleasure and of pain and frequently, to those instances where the two are co-located such as childbirth. To this end, jouissance represents a duality as well as a totality. Kristeva sees that art, which always includes literature, drama, music and poetry as well as painting and sculpture, is the 'semiotisation of the symbolic' and 'represents the flow of jouissance into language'.[98] Kristeva describes art as the

[94] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 62.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Ed. Leon S Roudiez, Trans Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), p. 17.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 79.

only means by which jouissance can ingress the social and symbolic order and that it does so by 'changing vocabulary, syntax, the word itself, and releasing from beneath them the drives borne by vocalic or kinetic differences'.[99] Specifically she states that 'poetry shows us that language lends itself to the penetration of the socio-symbolic by jouissance', and that poetry is both, 'the prohibition of jouissance by language and the introduction of jouissance into and through language'.[100] Guest's poetry, which is rich in disruptions in syntax, plays with form, and challenge vocabularies to produce multiple meanings, evidences this jouissance and as it does so, unites the speaking self and nature through her inclusion of images of nature. For Cixous, however, jouissance is much more firmly allied to sexual pleasure and it is here that she locates sexual difference, removing the notions of anatomical difference and placing it then in a space where is it unknowable.[101] In placing jouissance outside of the sphere of the symbolic, making it indefinable and a physical but not gendered drive, both Kristeva and Cixous make it part of the drive economy of poetic language and give it a currency in the project of transformation and subversion that poetry is part of. For both women, jouissance is the means by which the signifying practices of a patriarchal culture and its oppression can be resisted and destabilised. To this end, Irigaray identifies female sexuality as a key site of difference for women, describing it as a means of explaining their problematic relationship with the masculinity of dominant signifying practices.[102] Irigaray describes male sexuality as always requiring the other and finds that this requirement is then assimilated into the production of language, 'man needs an instrument to touch himself with: a hand, a woman, or some substitute. This mechanism is sublated in language. Man produces language for self-arousal'.[103] Irigaray finds that women, however, are autonomous in their sexuality, 'When a woman touches herself (…) a whole touches itself because it is in-finite', an infinity or multiplicity which is related to the multiple erogenous sites of he female sexuality.[104] In this way, the penis which phallocentric discourse privileges, and the lack of which then renders women incomplete, is countered as Irigaray states that 'woman take pleasure precisely from this incompleteness of form which allows her organ to touch itself over an over again, indefinitely, by itself'.[105] Irigaray

[99] Ibid. pp. 79 – 80.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing*. (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 18.
[102] Ann Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body: Towards and Understanding of Écriture Feminine'. *Feminist Studies*. Vol 7, No 2 (Summer, 1981), p. 250.
[103] Luce Irigaray, *The Speculum of The Other Woman.* Translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 22.
[104] Ibid. p. 233.
[105]Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 26.

describes this fluidity and multiplicity of female sexuality as a liberation, not only in terms of the greater access to jouissance that it affords women, but in terms of the unity of the sexualised self that incudes, in phallocentric terms, both the self and the other that men need to achieve sexual unity. By a realisation of this jouissance through the replication of this unity in language, women can speak them selves to each other: 'One is never separable from the other. You/I: we are always several at once'.[106] Irigaray calls women to realise the jouissance of the sexualised female body, and the liberation in the release that that unified body offers from the demarcation of the self and the other.

In Guest's poetry, the pressure of jouissance on the symbolic renders a text different to those where it is not evidenced. By virtue of its inclusion, it marks the text as feminine as it works against the rule and regulations of conventional language. This in turn facilitates an engagement with gender politics. Not only is Guest writing as a woman, but the text itself is gendered by the inclusion of drives that are allied to a female drive economy. Guest's pairing of representations of female body and sexuality with aspects of nature, challenge accepted contemporary boundaries and definitions of women as homemakers and lacking in an autonomous sexuality, and of nature, and in this way, she is rewriting both. We have already seen how Guest's work includes the drives and pulsions of the body and how the poem includes gender politics in the example above from the sequence *Quilts*. Later in the poem, Guest arranges the names of the female quilters in a circle on the page, representing them as they are seated around the table working on the same piece. Guest describes the fluid and interconnected nature of the women's work, walk and talk by, without punctuation, linking it back to the opening line of the section where the song Fisherman's Glove fills a cornfield passed on the way, and Nellie describes how her brother 'used to sing it at home after supper when we | were full of home cooking and I was reading Longfellow'. The female space of this poem is fluid, and encompasses many states and places, flitting between them. It is also all encompassing in its domesticity. The poem, which will be analysed in detail in chapter two, is vast in its reach in terms of both geography and emotion, and with its focus on the female spaces of the domestic, is an important text for not only situating Guest in relation to contemporary gender politics, but in situating gender politics in relation to the poetics of the semiotic as described by Kristeva and Cixous, and in relation to the unification that Irigaray sees as specific to female jouissance.

[106] Ibid. p. 209.

As well as being a site of liberation, jouissance is, however, also a site of unrest, of negotiation and even, of out and out battle. I propose that one of the dualities of jouissance is that in its very primal and elemental nature, it becomes wholly susceptible to social and cultural regulation. Whilst jouissance is unregulated in the body space, in the social and cultural space it is wholly regulated and so is fragmented and becomes lost. In poetic language where the semiotic space is liberated, jouissance is able to remain complete and so is liberated. The usual regulation of jouissance by the symbolic is destabilised in poetic language through the proximity of the semiotic and enables such texts to become sites of liberation. In such texts, jouissance can then be seen to mediate culture and society as it pushes through the symbolic and insists on a renegotiation of the subject on the elemental level of the semiotic. In these texts, instances of jouissance represent both the point of recognition of the other and the point of its unification with self – a point of both separation and of unity. In Guest's work, we see this in the poem 'Green Awnings' (*Collected Poems* 34):

> She was sewing a white heron into her gown.
> Messages came each day from her father, but
> she ignored them, preferring to think of the pale
> autumn legs of her bird.
>
> She put water in a vase and wished for flowers
>
> It was half-past three, but the Latin sun
> stayed in the room. How she longed to bathe
> in the river. How piteous to be a prisoner
> when one was a young as she knew herself to be
> in her mirror. She was as earnest as her parents
> and nightly prepared her body. She was hopeful
> and prayed to the stars who liked her.
>
> She went to the window.

In the mid section of this poem, which is a retelling of the Hero and Leander story, Hero moves to and from the self/other of her parents and to the self/other of her own sexuality. The extra indentations and the set apart lines are suggestive of the push of the semiotic and of jouissance and in this poem the girl is both realising her self as other to her parents and also realising her self as a sexualised being. She feels the pull of sexual desire but as yet is has no focus, no specific other, and so she makes ready the vase and wishes for flowers to fill it. The strength of her emerging sexuality is as great as that of her parents desire of restrict it and the window becomes a

permeable boundary and thetic, as it is there that she can both see the other, and be seen by it. This image of the window, the permeable nature of the thetic, and its role in the creation of meaning, is a recurrent theme in Guest's work, appearing particularly in poems situated in the city space. The image of the heron both incorporates the girls name and represents sexual freedom, but it is sewn 'into' her gown, which then confines it. The image also carries connotations of watching, stillness and waiting, of the elemental sexual drive in stasis. Guest poetry has a gendered jouissance and describes its social regulation and the push of its physicality against that regulation.

Nature and the speaking subject.

Whilst Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray's theses consider only the drives of the physical body on the production of language, I would also like to consider the drives of the natural environment on language as they act through the physical body of the speaking subject. These are not the culturally determined responses one might feel in relation to the natural environment; to daffodils seen on a Grasmere hillside or to the sea seen from the end of the cob at Lyme Regis, but drives in ourselves that are initiated in, and of, the natural environment – the increase in energies with rising of the sap in spring, the slowing towards autumn that September brings and the instinct to put on fat stores for winter. With these environmental drives acting in addition to our own physicality, not only is the speaking subject subject to the action of a further set of drives and pulsions on it, but they are subject to social and cultural regulation and the restriction of the symbolic as it interacts with both. Whilst the opportunity for achieving liberation is increased by the action of environmental drives on the speaking subject, so too is the regulation placed on it. The alienation of the physical self from the natural environment is endemic in contemporary society and even for those of us who would be considered amongst the most environmentally aware, the air conditioned offices and cars that we spend so much of our time in, separate us from the real world of nature. It is widely recognised that on windy days, school children will exhibit a greater energy, will shout more loudly, will be less able to concentrate on tasks and be less biddable in the classroom, but the tendency is still to put this down to bad behaviour rather than to look to the environmental factors. This response to windy weather is linked to the instinct to flight or fight that is muddled by the reduction in our ability to locate predators that windy weather brings.

Cleary the number of prowling wild beasts in your everyday school are, thankfully, now very low and this instinct all but redundant, but the vestiges of it that remain should not be discounted out of hand – they are among the few genuine responses that we have to our environment at large and a reminder of our place in it.

In 'On the Way to Dumbarton Oaks' (*Collected Poems* 12), Guest very purposefully sets the elemental reality of nature in dialogue with culture, demanding that these the be considered in concert with, and as an interrogation of one another. The opening lines exuberantly describe weather patterns, but do so by naming their origins, names that are culturally created:

> The air! The colonial air! The walls, the brick,
> this November thunder! The clouds Atlanticing,
> Canadianing, Alaska snowclouds,
> tunnel and sleigh, urban and mountain routes!

In these lines, Guest is both conjuring up the cultural signification of the places that she names and the nature of their environments; it is not hard to think of Atlanticing clouds as huge, wet, rolling and billowing in from the sea, nor at the same time of the first settlers who crossed the Atlantic beneath them and by the same token Canadianing clouds must surely be cold, full of snow and of the raw, grisly wind of the mountains. By coupling imagery in this way, Guest calls on both the cultural drives of the places she names and on the natural environments of those places. These two forces can then be seen to work in tandem in the poem's speaking subject. This recognition of the mixing of the social and cultural drives working on the speaking subject and the elemental and environmental drives that they are subject to can also be seen in the poem 'Santa Fe Trail' (*Collected Poems* 41) where the subject's journey along the trail route takes place not only across multiple historical moments, but is subject, in the present and the past, to the effects of westerly winds, glaciers, and the searing heat and storms of the desert. In each of these poems, Guest further sets herself apart as a female speaking subject. In 'Santa Fe Trail', she repeats the refrain 'I go separately' even though the text makes it clear she is speaking to her traveling companion, and in 'On the Way to Dumbarton Oaks', she betrays all her 'vast | journeying sensibility in a tear dropped before | "The Pride Treasure of Petersburg"'. Guest's feminism is not asking for a reversal of patriarchy but that value be ascribed to being female and all that that entails. Lynn Keller has commented on this aspect of Guest's feminism remarking that in 'On the Way to Dumbarton Oaks', Guest 'plays upon and subverts contemporary gender

expectations', and that the poem, 'exemplifies Guest's tendency to cultivate or accommodate what she can of the conventional feminine – in ways that might dismay some feminists (…) – even as she allots to the mysteries of femininity [the liberating] resources of mobility, self-reliance, and emotional and creative freedom'.[107] This refusal to simply reverse existing gender dominances is a position that is shared by Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous, all of whom seek an equality of genders based on mutual value and understanding rather than dominance of one over the other.

Irigaray states that women should seek 'an individuality of their own' and that their entry into public life should 'be a task of individualisation and not a competitive claim in relation to men'.[108] Seeking to reject the binary opposition between nature and culture that, it may be argued, both radical feminists and radical ecofeminists retain as a premise, Irigaray proposes a nature-culture relation in which culture is understood as continuous with and responsive to nature rather than as a break from or a triumph over.[109] The charges of essentialism that have been levelled at Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous are a product of a feminism that has, for the last few decades, diminished the significance of materiality, focusing instead on the discursive production of the body and of nature. This focus renders both the body and nature passive[110] and serves to reinforce the very binary structures that it seeks to undermine. Joan Retallack notes the potential for entrenching a binary narrative, describing the risks inherent in viewing the 'generic feminine as *sub*text, either *sub*jugated or *sub*versive (*re*active) to *the* master narrative', and finding that the 'consequences of defining feminine power only as the power of *sub*version, (…) valoris[es] the predominance of the masculine 'version'' (emphasis in the original).[111] It is these 'versions' that feminism and ecofeminism seek to overturn but much of the dialogue around essentialism, particularly in the 1990s, serves only to reinforce

[107] Lynn Keller, 'Becoming "A Complete Travel Agency": Barbara Guest's Negotiations with the Fifties Feminine Mystique', in Terance Diggory, and Stephen Paul Miller, eds *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets.* (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), p. 220.
[108] Luce Irigaray, 'There Can Be No Democracy Without A Culture Of Difference', in Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds *Ecocritical Theory*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 200.
[109] Christopher Cohoon, 'The Ecological Irigaray', in Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby, eds *Ecocritical Theory*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), p. 211.
[110] This is a particular critique made of Judith Butler's work by Karen Barad, a discussion of which can be found in Susan Heckman's essay 'Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism', in Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman eds, *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 105.
[111] Retallack, p. 112.

them. More recent branches of ecofeminist thought offer a way out of these binary structures and are based in an increasing understanding of the very real impact of nature on all bodies, regardless of gender. Affect theory finds that we process texts and experiences 'with a cognitive apparatus that is not wholly distinct from our bodies [and] our feelings',[112] noting that the affectivity of human bodies has often been neglected in ecocriticism in favour of the championing of greater attention being paid to the more-than-human world.[113] Such arguments attempt to move ecocriticism beyond gender and into a materiality that encompasses both the human and more-than-human world and realises the impact of each on the other. As Ynestra King points out, 'Connecting women to nature need not acquiesce to biological determinism … if nature is understood as a realm of potential freedom for human beings – both women and men – who act in human history as part of the natural history of the planet, in which human intentionality and potentiality are an affirmed part of nature'.[114] Positing the term 'trans-corporeality', Stacey Alaimo calls us to inhabit the 'time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from "nature" or "environment"', finding that the 'movement across human corporeality and nonhuman nature necessitates rich, complex modes of analysis that travel through entangled territories of materials and discursive, natural and cultural, biological and textual'.[115] This then builds a relationship to the body that is ethical rather than reductive and (re)inscribes the body, gendered or otherwise, as a site of agency rather than of passivity. These bodies are no longer discursive formations but *lived*.[116] With this in mind, the semiotic drives and pulsions the Kristeva describes and the material bodies that Cixous would have us write, are sites of liberation and can be written about in their materiality without losing the insights of discursive analysis. Susan Heckman notes that the political commitment that lies at the heart of feminism demands that feminists are able to talk about 'the reality of women's bodies and their lived experiences' but that 'extreme linguistic determinism precludes such discussions', finding that they are then unable to assert the truth of their statements as, 'embracing social constructionism and the relativism that it

[112] Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Landino eds, *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment.* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2018), p. 2.
[113] Ibid, p. 4.
[114] Ynestra King, 'What is Ecofeminism', *The Nation* (December 12, 1987), p 702, as quoted in Noël Sturgeon, *Ecofeminist Natures – Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action.* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 45.
[115] Stacey Alaimo, 'Trans-corporeal Feminism and The Ethical Space of Nature', in Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman eds, *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 238.
[116] Susan Heckman, 'Constructing the Ballast: An Ontology for Feminism', in Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman eds, *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), p. 107. Emphasis in the original.

entails makes it impossible to make such truth claims'.[117] It seems in many ways that the very physical nature of our current ecological crisis and the recognisable impacts that it has on all our physical bodies affords feminism the opportunity to reclaim the materiality of the body that it originally cast off. In this way, Cixous' call for women to write their bodies offers a way in which the 'viscera emotions experienced through our bodies', might enable us to 'develop a kind of alternative engagement with, and embodied knowledge of, nature that might lead us to respond more appropriately to the ecological threats'.[118] Work that draws on the materiality of the body and nature and, through language, makes it manifest, realises the trans-corporeality that Alaimo describes. The body is no longer essentialist but essential and a place where the 'biological and literary or artistic come together with all the force of lived reality'.[119] Guest's poetry is a site of multiple liberations as she manifests the personal, the political and nature in her work. Her representation of nature as means of (re)imagining the personal and the political, treating it as a semiotic drive and having it push at the symbolic, further layers this liberation, creating poetry which demonstrate the multiplicity and symbiosis of the female speaking subject. By (re)mapping the body back to nature through poetry such as Guest's, not only will we (re)establish relations with nature, but with ourselves. Cixous demands we consider the speaking subject not as an individual, distinct or single, but as a multiplicity that is derived of the forces that are acting on it and we can see evidence of this process throughout Guest's work.

Guest achieves this mapping and liberation in the poem 'Santa Fe Trail' by realising the reciprocal relationship between the drives of the body and those of the environment. She sees that whilst there is an inherent reciprocity in this relationship, we have, for the most part, forgotten it. David Abram discusses this reciprocity at length in his book *The Spell of the Sensuous*, noting that in indigenous oral cultures, 'language seems to encourage and augment the participatory life of the senses',[120] and that all human language is 'informed not only by the structures of the body and the human community but by the evocative shapes and patterns of the more-than-human terrain'.[121] This duality of the forces of the body and the environment working on the speaking subject, both echoes and furthers the theses of Kristeva and Cixous,

[117] Ibid.
[118] Mary Phillips, p. 62.
[119] Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 4.
[120] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous.* (New York: Vintage, 1997), p. 71.
[121] Ibid. p. 90.

who see the role of culture as a producer of the speaking subject but less so the role of nature. Guest, however, is aware of the pressure of nature on her and represents it in her work as a further layer of signification. The refrain 'I go separately', suggests that her experiences of the trail is not shared by her traveling companion or even those who have gone before her and that she is separate in her relationship with the environment but not separate from it. It also suggests that a relationship with nature is not an experience that can be shared, but something that is wholly individual; yes you can walk through the woods together, but your response to it will be yours and yours alone, distinct from that of your companion. Her recognition of this duality is key to Guest's relationship with nature, and her manifestation of the speaking subject as it describes the points of symbiosis that creates our individual experiences. The recognition of the history of the trail in this poem describes a dialogue between nature and the people and animals that have inhabited it; the oxen, the gold diggers, and the twin missions of religion and capitalism, all play a part in the dialogue with a space that both shapes and is shaped. Guest recognises the animism of the environment and its relationships with indigenous cultures as she speaks of the owls who 'from their bandaged eyes send messages | to the Indian couple. Peaks have you heard?'. This recognition of a relationship with the environment that is different more rooted to it than her own and that of the culture she is part of describes a desire to make an alternative connection to nature. This recognition brings her a new understanding of herself, 'O mother of lakes and glaciers, save us gamblers | whose wagon is perilously rapt'. The wagon perilously rapt suggests that, unlike the lakes and glaciers that last for millennia, the human travellers in the poem are transient, ephemeral and somewhat afraid of this dangerous state. Guest recognises this danger in the car culture that generates the 'rubber wind' of the modern traveller not only in terms of the impact of the car on the environment, but on us within it and calls for it to be opposed, 'a climate to beard'. The spacing of the lines in this poem replicate the steady passage of time, a time that layers and builds to create the now of the trail that the poet travels. The repetition of 'I go separately' is echoed in the separated-ness of the lines that also asks that we read into the silent spaces between them.

In that Guest's poetry is highly semiotic and seeks an exploration of the physical and instinctual in its representations, and that it facilitates and allows the enunciation of jouissance and the self, it also troubles it by its linking it so closely with nature. Literature that engages with nature and the environment develop this enunciation, and extend the range of the jouissance out from the speaking subject and into the

spaces that it inhabits. As it becomes external to the speaking subject, we realise that jouissance includes that which is external to it, or rather, the boundaries of the self are blurred and destabilised, and the notion of what is other, is called into question. Whilst the jouissance of nature and of our interactions with it can never be fully or properly enunciated, the rifts in the symbolic that poetry manifests, afford a means of at least a partial representation. This destabilisation of the boundaries of the speaking subject and the other is at the heart of Cixous' project in a realisation of *écriture feminine*. Whilst stating that 'it is not a question of making the subject disappear', Cixous does want to attack the notions of the '"chez-soi" (self-presence) and the "pour-soi" (for itself)' in order to give the subject back its 'divisibility'.[122] This divisible subject is without the encumbrance of an other because that other is intrinsic within it. Cixous states that 'writing is the passage way, the entrance, the exit, the dwelling place of the other in me'[123] and this duality of the self and the other is wholly positive. For Cixous, the self cannot be lost because it is not a singular identity that can be actualised. This blurring of the self and the other can be seen throughout Guest's poetry as the push of the semiotic draws the other into the speaking subject. In the poem 'Sand' (*Collected Poems* 53), Guest's placement of the text towards the centre of the page describes the position of the sand in relation to the land and the sea that it borders. In doing so, Guest describes the liminality of this border space, and of the speaking subject, as each is shaped by the forces at work on it. Guest also includes the space above the beach; separate but still part of the same whole:

water

extending

Sand

while
the sky airs itself

Guest's line spacing describes the relationships between the individual parts of the scene, setting them together so that they blur and form the whole, but also discrete from one another so that they can each be seen. This is echoed in the relationship that she sets up between the wider environment and the physical self of the poet:

[122] Hélène Cixous, 'The First Name of No One' in Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader.* Ed Susan Sellers. (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 29.
[123] Cixous and Clément, *Newly Born Woman*, pp. 85-86.

clouds remain
        in numbers
far off
also
        the hand,
eyes, limbs
sand tests
        coolness and heat
        body levels

The physicality of the beach space and the body enter a reciprocal relationship where they are each aware of the other; the sand tests the heat of the body, the 'tongue clasps the swell', and sends the 'ceaseless | thirst back to ocean depth'. The speaking subject and the environmental object are acting on one another, creating a dialogue in which the lines and boarders that define and separate them, become fluid and indistinct, and so, lacking definition, they merge and pull apart at will, disrupting traditional binaries and forming new ways of being. The capitalisation of 'Poets' as they walk this liminal space suggests that Guest is asking that comparisons are made between her as a poet, as both a woman and as a writer of contemporary poetries, and the 'Poets' of the canon. I think there is also particular relevance to this capitalisation in this poem as it is so focused on the reunification of the speaking subject and the environmental object, something that Guest seems to suggest is not common in poetry written by those usually described as 'Poets'. Guest draws the subject and object together and through her representation of the semiotic, is engaged in a process of writing that is a kin to what Cixous describes as *écriture feminine*. The poem enunciates the jouissance of the reciprocal nature of this relationship through the way the semiotic pushes through the text. The semiotic is 'articulated by flows and marks: facilitation, energy transfers, the cutting up of the corporeal and social continuum as well as that of signifying material',[124] and in Guest's poetry, meets the symbolic in a visible dialogue.

This drawing of the speaking subject and the object together creates, in Guest's work, repeat points of meeting where meaning is formed and explored. One of the overwhelming images and themes in Guest's work is that of the edge, the liminal and the spaces where meanings are negotiated through symbiosis. These spaces where meaning is negotiated, that generate rich dialogue and are ecotone, manifest the Kristevan thetic or thetic break. The thetic is the point of articulation where the

[124] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 40.

semiotic drives of the *chora* interact with the regulation of the symbolic and are articulated, 'all enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thetic'.[125] Kristeva describes the semiotic drives and pulsions of the body that are evidenced in poetry such as Guest's as articulated by a notional space that she calls the *chora*, 'a rhythmic but non-expressive totality' that is 'formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated'.[126] The *chora* is a space of dialogue; a meeting point for the physical drives of the body and the external, social regulations. The *chora* is a generated space where articulations are mediated and one which all discourse 'simultaneously depends upon and refuses'.[127] For Kristeva, this is a wholly feminine space. Irigaray also references the *chora* but describes it as a space that is insufficient to contain that which is feminine, noting that the feminine exceeds its figuration because it is subject to masculine signification.[128] For her, the space of the *chora* describes the exclusion of the feminine from language, rather than facilitating its inclusion, as it has been appropriated by phallocentric discourse, colonised and nullified, rendering it a space that can no longer create meaning anew but one that can only reflect back the dominant discourse. Kristeva's premise that the *chora* precedes the symbolic offers us some hope for its liberating potential, and it is this premise that informs my reading of the thetic space. The thetic is the point of negotiation between the semiotic and the symbolic and the 'type' of enunciation that occurs evidences the relative strengths of these two positions. The site of the thetic break is not limited to traditional word based linguistic forms and can be found in any position where the multiple agencies of the semiotic and the symbolic interact. With this in mind, places and spaces also become thetic as they are points where thoughts and feelings are articulated. The urbanised space of the town and city, the rural spaces of the wider countryside, the wildernesses of the moors, forest and highlands can all be described as manifestations of the thetic as they are places on, and through which, thoughts and feelings are articulated.

The multiplicity of the thetic manifests immediately, and by no means exclusively, in several of the poems in Guest's first collection, *The Location of Things*, such as 'The Location of Things', 'Les Réalités' and 'Sadness'. In these poems Guest explores the city as a thetic space, articulating the multiplicity of meanings that the space facilitates through a sustained development of the notion of the threshold, specifically

[125] Ibid. p. 43.
[126] Ibid. pp. 40 and 25.
[127] Ibid. p. 26.
[128] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On The Discursive Limits of "Sex".* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 39 and 41.

in relation to the indoor/outdoor binary. The poems repeatedly move between the indoor and outdoor spaces, and this movement across and around this threshold, articulates multiple meanings as the view from within, or without, changes with the positionality of the speaking subject. The poems also explore the fluidity of nature across this threshold with images from the natural world made manifest in both the indoor and outdoor spaces. The role of nature in the creation of meaning for Guest is evidenced in these poems, and the interaction between nature and the human-made, as a dialogue that creates meaning in her work, is initiated.

This interaction with the social by the subject at the point at which the semiotic meets the symbolic is important in the consideration of nature poetry. It is a means of describing and understanding our relationship with nature, and is particularly important where the poetry is positing a blurred distinction between an environmental object, and the speaking subject. Both subject and object are created through the process of enunciation, at the point of the thetic. Mimesis is 'a transgression of the thetic when the truth is no longer a reference to an object that is identifiable outside of language',[129] and it refers to an object that is constructed through the semiotic network. Because it is only posited in the symbolic it is, 'from then on, always verisimilar',[130] we realise that through the process of mimesis, we create objects which only exist in language and with them, we enter a world of simulacra; a world of original-less copies which we can then relate to only by virtue of the process of our creation of them. The realisation that the simple process of trying to talk about how we are in our environment is, essentially, to separate ourselves from it, is a rather depressing thought. Nature created in this way is not 'real', it does not exist but it becomes the nature that is seen. In this way, nature becomes a simulation, something that is bought to us entirely through language.

Certain places, it can be argued, have fallen victim to their linguistic (re)creation and are now lost to us in their original, organic form, indistinguishable and inseparable now from the representation of them; Wordsworth's Grasmere, Abbey's Arches and Canyonlands National Park, Thoreau's Walden Pond and Muir's Californian Sierras. It is quite possible to counter this with the argument that these (re)creations of these natural spaces, and the descriptions of the relationships these men had with them, have served to make the landscape visible, but the icons that have been created are so deeply entrenched that it is only a supreme act of subjugation or hibernation that

[129] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 58.
[130] Ibid.

will allow one to be seen without the other. By this token, nature and the environment are used as icons in films and television, providing emblematic backdrops to popular human dramas and so the Pacific Northwest is no longer a diverse rainforest environment, but 'Twilight Country'. Timothy Morton also sees the problems inherent in the process of mimesis for environmental literature. Coining the term ecomimesis, Morton describes the process as an 'authenticating device' evoking the here and now of writing, of its environment.[131] For Morton, ecomimesis is 'a pressure point, crystalizing a vast complex ideological network of beliefs, practices and processes in and around the idea of the natural world'[132] which splits us away from our environment and places it as other to us describing it as 'a specific rhetoric that generates a fantasy of nature as a surrounding atmosphere, palpable but shapeless'.[133] Guest's poetry places us right back into nature, not as a fantasy, but as something that is intrinsic to us; as something that is part of the fabric of ourselves and, particularly in poems such as *Quilts,* as something that we are an intrinsic part of. Guest's nature is both lived and lives, and whilst it does describe the ideological network that Morton identifies, Guest has it do so in a way that manifests the reciprocity of the relationship, showing us not just how we define it, but how it defines us and, more importantly, how a dialogue with it, enables the female speaking subject to signify. The representation is, at times, flawed, but Guest's work does manifest a unified female speaking subject that is at one with, and derived of, its natural other.

Whilst I share Morton's anxiety at the split between us and our lived environment, even after (re)unification, it will always be subject to a vast complex ideological network of beliefs, practices and processes, all of which are in constant motion. Indigenous cultures for whom there is no such splitting apart, maintain a vast array of cultural and religious beliefs and practices that describe their relationship with their lived environment. Whilst these are notably more holistic than those that predominate in urbanised cultures, the relationship that they have with their environment is still mediated by culture. Cixous' call to women to 'Write yourself. Your body must be heard',[134] does provide a means by which writing about nature can be more attuned to a lived environment. By accessing the body drives of the semiotic as they are in the *chora*, before the regulation of the cultural, nature and the environment which act on the body are bought back into the process of language. The rhythms, inflections

[131] Morton, p. 33.
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid. p. 77.
[134] Cixous, 'The Laugh Of the Medusa', p. 880.

and patterns of an utterance that are the upwelling of the semiotic into the created, symbolic space, describe the relationship between the speaking subject and its object and afford an opportunity to properly investigate the reciprocal relationship between subject, object, language, and their environments – natural and cultural. By writing in this way, the environment is the core of the text and is no longer peripheral to it. Morton writes that, for many, environmental and ecological writing is a means by which we access and describe the feeling of being surrounded by an 'otherness, something that is not the self', and that whilst this kind of writing will often seek to displace a wider social and cultural collective in favour of the natural environment, this in itself is telling of the culture that that writing comes from.[135] This type of writing distances the cultural from the environmental and perpetuates the splitting into otherness, offering no means by which one can negotiate a space between the two poles. Guest's work however, seeks to (re)unite the poles of nature and culture and purposely seeks out, and writes from, that place in between. Camilla Nelson recently identified what she describes as a 'growing tradition of writers and thinkers who understand the emergence of the human, writing and environment as a process of enmeshed mutual influence' and who are seeking to emphasise the importance of the process of writing in the reestablishment of our relationship with the natural as being equal to what is actually written.[136] I suggest that Guest should be seen as the first in this tradition.

Harriet Tarlo states that 'for many poets in the modernist tradition, it is fundamentally through form that they present their challenges to the status quo'[137] and in this, Guest is no exception. The formal pull and tensions that Guest places on language in order to achieve a plasticity that looks 'outwardly and inwardly',[138] demands readers recognise the dialogue between the speaking self and the reader and, between the human and the more-than-human. Invested in the materiality of language, Guest refuses simple mimesis in her representations of nature and as she does, renders a nuanced relationships to it as both part of the self and other to it. Jonathan Skinner finds that 'any writers who wants to engage poetry with more-than-human-life, has no choice but to resist simply, and instrumentally, stepping over language', stating that 'poetry frank about the materiality of language, [must] move beyond an uncritical

[135] Morton, p. 17.
[136] Camilla Nelson, 'Human Language-making as Environmental Praxis', in *Politics of Place*, 3 (Winter 2015), p. 58.
[137] Harriet Tarlo, 'Preview of *The Ground Aslant: Radical Landscape Poetry*', in *English*, Vol 58 no 222 (2009), p. 197.
[138] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, pp. 20 – 22.

mimesis'.[139] Through its innovative form and language, Guest's work moves in the uncomfortable territories of nature where simple or uncritical mimesis is impossible and it is in this way that her work is ecopoetic. George Quasha identifies two sides or approaches to ecopoetics; the first is where the poet directly addresses ecological issues, the work of Gary Snyder being his example, but the second, for which I suggest Guest as exemplar, is 'not necessarily concerned foreground action orientated issue (…) but engages in an inquiry onto the nature of poetics such that ecological thinking can evolve'. He goes on to state that 'ecopoetics has to do with the very instrument of this discovery process, the domain of thinking/speaking (the poetics of thinking)' and that 'the poetic is our point of access to the ecos as language field – the field speaking itself'.[140] In this way, Guest's point of access into the ecos as language field is most clearly seen in poems such and 'Geese Blood' and 'Atmospheres', both of which are discussed at length in chapter three, where the distinctions between the human and more-than-human become fluid to the point of unity by virtue of both form and language.

In Guest's poem 'Sand' (*Collected Poems* 53), the unification of the speaking subject and the environment destabilises the verisimilitude of mimesis that Kristeva describes and Morton fears. The beach and the poet becomes intrinsically part of one another and then, of the poem itself;

the hand,
eyes, limbs
sand tests
coolness and heat
body levels

… Remain flat

Guest's realises the semiotic push on the symbolic in the visual presentation of the text as it follows of the shape of the waves on the beach as an echo rather than a replication or imitation. The poem is no longer a representation, verisimilitude, but an actuality of the integral relationship between the human and the natural. This actuality is, of course, still wholly subjective and individual to Guest, but importantly the splitting away of the object from the speaking subject does not distil it. In this particular text, this resistance to the split, the maintenance of the unification of the subject and object, speaks not only to the intrinsic importance of the environment to

[139] Jonathan Skinner, 'Why Ecopoetics', in *Ecopoetics*, 1 (Winter 2002), pp. 105 – 106.
[140] George Quasha, 'Letters to the Editor' in *Ecopoetics,* 2 (Fall 2003), p. 171.

Guest but, when considered against the contemporary social and cultural attitudes, speaks to the role of women in relation to writing, the environment and notions of intellectual and cultural impermanence in the face of nature. Guest's exploration of the semiotic and the realisation of it in her work facilitate a layering of meaning that renders these interactions more available to the reader, and offers new ways of seeing contemporary social and cultural attitudes. The particular prominence of nature, when married with the prominence of the semiotic in her work, strips away the cultural significations. Instead of standing along side it, Guest's poetry describes the reciprocal relationship between nature and culture, and a new environmental voice is heard. In Guest's work, the beach is not ascribed meaning by virtue of the fact that the poets walk on it, the poets derive meaning through their walking, and through the relationships that the exist within the whole expanse of elemental nature that makes up the beach; the sea, the sand, the sky, the clouds and then the land beyond. Guest is aware that the beach itself does not need her to give it meaning, it does not need to 'mean' at all, and so equally, her walking poets join it and 'Rejoice | in ancient nothingness'. With this in mind, Guest's poetry goes a long way to allay Morton's fears about the tendency of poets towards setting nature up as an aesthetic object and as a unified but shapeless fantasy.[141]

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The following chapters provide a wide-ranging survey of Guest's poetry as a means of evaluating and understanding nature, feminism and language in her work. With the poetry grouped chronologically, each chapter considers themes relating to representations of women and nature in Guest's work over her 50-year career, and charts Guest's ambiguous relationship to feminism. Chapter one considers Guest's earliest works from the 1950s and 60s, concentrating on an analysis of Guest's response to the feminine mystique and identifies her feminism as it is represented in her images of nature. The chapter focuses analysis on Guest's seascape poems as well as those that represent urban nature and the garden space and discusses the liberation and limitations of the ecotone spaces that Guest manifests. Chapter two focuses on Guest's poetry published in the 1970s and 80s and sees her focus move inland to the prairies and plains of rural America. These poems contrast the suburban housewives of her early works with those of the rural Midwest as Guest (re)claims the space of the domestic home as a site of women's autonomy and

[141] Morton, p. 77.

authority. Guest continues to co-locate women and nature in these poems and exceeding notions of *écriture feminine*, as she replicates not only the drives and rhythms of the body in her poems, but those of nature too. Chapter three describes how, in poems from the 1990s, Guest's expression of the semiotic creates feminist artistic practices and how, through a confrontation of the abject, Guest is able to realise a female speaking subject that does not seek to suppress the violence of prohibited longing. Guest's poems from this period show an increasing emphasis on the role of the reading other in the realisation of meaning and they become progressively more demanding as the words on the page become fewer. In order to realise meaning, these poems seek a symbiosis between Guest and the reader that leads to a greater expression of the semiotic, and which has the potential for a greater liberation of the female speaking subject. The final chapter discusses two of Guest's millennial poems. Exploring Guest's intertextuality as a means of manifesting a female speaking subject and through her continued positive co-location of women and nature, and women in the domestic space of the home, it describes Guest representation of these spaces, and the women within them, as fundamental to life, language and literature. This thesis charts the progression of Guest's feminism from her early poems, which considered suburban women trapped in the home and unable to step off the porch, to her millennial work and the liberated, older woman for whom the spaces of the domestic home and nature are places of authority and autonomy, and who has walked, finally, 'from this porch to your farthest'.

Chapter 1.

The paling light: nature and feminism in Barbara Guest's early poems.

> Not for us the paling light
> the white urn on the driveway,
> nor for us the palmettos and the squeak
> of tiles.
>
> 'Dido and Aeneas'

Barbara Guest's early work, as Lynn Keller states, 'conveys a profound social disaffection' that is 'focused on gender expectations of the era' and 'registers social rebellion and attempts a social intervention.'[142] This chapter discusses this early work, analyses it as a response to the feminine mystique described by Betty Freidan, and assesses Guest's feminism and considers its representation in her images of nature. It argues that, whilst Guest's work is often discounted by feminists, it describes a multifaceted feminine that promotes female empowerment within the spaces traditionally proscribed for women as well as within traditionally male dominated cultural spaces. In these early poems, as Erica Kauffman suggests, Guest 'introduces the notion of the sovereignty of female space', a notion that Guest develops in her later poems, and we see Guest attempt to 'reclaim gendered space'[143] by inhabiting it positively and purposefully. In order to reclaim them, Guest troubles and questions these gendered spaces with vibrant lyric voices that speak from them in order to question a feminist refusal to view women in the domestic

[142] Keller, p. 216.
[143] Erica Kaufman. 'On 'The Location of Things''. *Jacket* 36, late 2008.

home and in nature as positive. Guest seeks to assert these spaces as places of agency for women as much as any traditionally male dominated cultural spaces they might seek to inhabit outside of them. In these poems, nature takes the form of trees, rain, flowers and birds and the sea but each is represented at the point at which they intersect with the human in the created spaces of the city and garden, and in the comparatively people-less space of the seashore. These early poems are key in defining nature in Guest's work as they describe its breadth, reaching as it does, from the trees of the city, in through apartment windows and back out through the gardens of town and holiday houses, and on, all the way to the ocean. We are also introduced to Guest's notion of wild nature as one that threatens and makes the human fragile and barely visible before it. The boundaries of nature in these early works are fluid and in them, we see Guest manifest a female speaking subject in the ecotone space, the hybrid space between one habitat and another. In these early works Guest is asserting herself as a feminist as she refuses the 'paling light' of the suburban fences and asserts the liminal space of the 1950s and 60s feminism described in Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Guest's refusal to completely reject the troupes of femininity, such as the marked ascription of value to family and the domestic space for women, complicates but seeks to expand the feminism of these poems.

Having moved to New York in the mid 1940s with her first husband, Guest did not live the conventional domestic life described in Friedan's book, but instead travelled extensively and moved in and was creative of literary and artistic circles, specifically in these early years, with the artists and poets of the New York School. Having divorced her first husband soon after coming to the city, within eighteen months, Guest was married again and writing and publishing poetry, writing and staging plays and publishing art reviews as well as being prominent in the cultural and social scene of mid-century New York. By the end of the 1950s, Guest had divorced and remarried for the final time, moved uptown into considerable financial comfort and in 1960, her first collection *The Location of Things* was published. Two years later, it was republished as *Poems: The Location of Things, Archaics, The Open Skies* and contained more that sixty poems of startling scope and variety. *The Blue Stairs* was published in 1968. Whilst, as Keller states, Guest's work at this time 'conveys a profound social disaffection' that is focussed on and refuses the gender expectations of the feminine mystique, what Keller does not note is that in her work, Guest can also be seen to question the rebellion against the mystique and the seemingly all-or-nothing alternatives available for women in the 1950s. Linda Kinnahan notes that

Guest's early work forms part of the feminist poetics that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s which 'insistently probed relationships of gender and power and that specified the materialities of women's lives'.[144] But while Kinnahan finds that 'whilst the feminist poetry that dominated during this era, supplied by publishers and circles of feminist poets central to the movement, relied upon a coherent, accessible idea of voice and authenticity derived from the lyric traditions', poetry such as Guest's provides an alternative approach to the lyric subject that 'questions the viability of the unified "I"'.[145] I find it all too easy to read the lyric voice in these poems as Guest herself and to imagine her sitting at her uptown writing table watching leaves, to see her standing on the beach watching the waves roll in, or reading a magazine in Paris, but Guest's 'I' is a '"biographeme" – selected, made – a work of art'.[146] Guest is, however, visible in these poems even whilst their subject is shifting and evanescent and their oblique autobiographical details only serve to heighten these markers even as Guest distances herself from them, a distance that is challenged by her saying in interview, 'I think all poetry is confessional'.[147] The 'I' in these poems both is and is not Guest, and this fluidity in the speaking voice makes for challenging reading and readings. Guest's female speaking subject speaks with a voice that challenges traditional notions of femininity whilst manifesting them as a locus of female authority and autonomy and in doing so, anticipates a feminist (re)evaluation of these spaces in the early twenty-first century.

Watching leaves: looking for liberation in the city.

Having described Barbara Guest as a nature poet, it is perhaps odd that I should start my discussion of her work by looking at those of her poems that are set in the city. Recognised as one of the founder members of the New York School, it might seem surprising that more of her work does not focus on the city but, when taken as a whole, only a small fraction of Guest's total poems are set in, or focused on, the city space. As Timothy Gray points out, 'members of the New York School found in their city a charged atmosphere conductive to their ambitions, a realm where the discussion, exhibition, and performance of literature, art, and music quickened their

[144] Linda A. Kinnahan, Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), p. 3.
[145] Ibid.
[146] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. 41.
[147] Guest and Hillringhouse, p. 23.

creative energies'.[148] Whilst Guest was no exception to this, she is not an urban poet. The role of the city in her realisation of a poetic voice, however, is important, not least of all because the title poem of her first published collection is set in the city and it, and the others set in the city from her first collections, give us a particular insight into Guest as poet, as a female poet, and one who privileges the role of nature in the manifestation of the female speaking subject. Elizabeth Wilson describes the city as 'a place of liberation for women', finding that, 'the city offers women freedom'[149] and Guest represents the city as a place of women's liberation and uses it as a location from which to realise a female poetic voice.

As a member of the first generation New York School, Guest remembers the period in interview with Charles Bernstein, saying that 'we were trying to experiment and we had certain ideas about the way poetry should be written. We were not going to write about ordinary things unless they were encased in extraordinary thoughts'.[150] But Guest, along with her New York School contemporaries, particularly Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler, did write about ordinary things and in many ways, their early poetry can be seen as celebration of the extraordinary in everyday life. O'Hara writes that 'what is happening to me, allowing for lies and exaggerations which I try to avoid, goes into my poems. I don't think my experiences are clarified or made beautiful for myself or anyone else, they are just there in whatever form I can find them'[151] and for Guest, his 'energetic celebration of the whole of life in its dailiness was a great permission giver'.[152] Guest's early poems also celebrate and explore the dailiness of life but contrast with O'Hara's poems, which are infused with chatty, fast-moving speech that fizzes with the immediacy and excitement of the city streets and bars. O'Hara is readily visible as subject in his poetry but Guest is much harder to locate. The dailiness in Guest's poetry speaks to the duality of her life as writer and mother; subject matter that would continue to be explored by second-generation New York School poets such as Bernadette Mayer and Alice Notley. Guest is one who listens for the sound feet on the wooden floor but will find lakes and mountains by her chairs and tables, but also one who frequents the artist bars, attends the parties and walks the same streets that O'Hara did. Guest's poems are perhaps more nuanced

[148] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*, p. 1.
[149] Elizabeth Wilson. *The Sphinx in the City: Urban Life, The Control of Disorder, and Women.* (California: University of California Press, 1991), p. 7.
[150] Barbara Guest, 'Interview with Charles Bernstein'. LINEbreak Series. Pennsounds.
[151] Frank O'Hara, untitled, in Donald Allen ed, *The New American Poetry 1945 – 1960.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). p. 419.
[152] Kathleen Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), p. 29.

in their exuberance at city life as they echo the wind in the city trees much more than the human chatter of the streets they stand in. These poems describe the proximity of nature to city life, adding to its multiplicity rather than detracting from it as the human become ephemeral within it. In these early poems, Guest is already elusive as the speaking subject, an elusiveness that permeates her work even as it develops and changes across the decades.

Guest's early city poems describe the 'continuous passage of the natural into the cultural'[153] as in them, we see Guest infuse the cultural hub of the city with images of nature, drawing these usually opposing polarities together. In the opening lines of 'The Location of Things', the poem describes both the pull of the outside space and nature as Guest's speaking subject watches leaves through the window, and the comparative constriction of the domestic space of the apartment halls. The image describes a separation from the relative freedom of nature outside, whilst acknowledging that that freedom is contrived and constructed in the city space as the trees have been positioned and pruned. The poems in these collections see Guest start a discussion focused on the interplay between nature and the spaces that women inhabit that will permeate her later work and through which she investigates and comments on the roles and places of contemporary women, identifying similarities between the control and domestication of nature and the social restriction of women. For Guest, the cities of the 1940s and 50s were places of both artistic and personal liberation, and her experience chimes with Jean Baudrillard's claim that 'nothing could be more intense, electrifying, turbulent and vital than the streets of New York'.[154]

Whilst Irigaray's work, with its emphasis on (re)establishing a relationship between women and nature, is frequently critiqued as essentialist,[155] her refusal to refute this relationship offers a lens into the relationship that Guest is manifesting in her poetry and particularly in her early works. Whilst describing women as the 'guardians of "nature" ', Irigaray maintains that this role situates women at the point of the very foundations of culture; a culture that arises from nature. Describing women as 'the ones who maintain, thus who make possible, the resource of mimesis for men' and who 'have always nourished this operation', so providing the link between nature and

[153] Irigaray, *je, tu, nous*, p. 13.
[154] Jean Baudrillard. *America.* Translated by Chris Turner. (London: Verso, 1989), p. 18.
[155] Stacey Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 6. Whilst Alaimo herself does not consider this to be the case, she notes the wider tendency.

culture, Irigaray describes the process as 're-producing (from) nature' and sees men 'giving it form in order to appropriate it'[156] as a resource of mimesis. In taking this view, Irigaray empowers women through an alliance with nature as the foundation of culture and which it is a representation of. 'Exposing how the male logos does not merely reproduce nature but reproduces "(from) nature" ', Stacey Alaimo notes that 'Irigaray's parentheses playfully mirror the mechanisms of concealment [which] serve to deny that the language, knowledge, culture and subjectivity of men are produced from the very (female) matter they disavow.'[157] In 'The Location of Things' (*Collected Poems* 3), Guest recognises and describes the unique position that Irigaray identifies in the duality of her being the other to, but also the originator of, that from which she is othered.

'The Location of Things' explores the experience of being female in the male dominated city and specifically in the male dominated cultural and intellectual space of the city that the female speaking subject is both a part of and excluded from; spaces that Guest returns to later in the poems 'The Brown Studio' and 'Piazzas'. 'The Location of Things' draws on and expands this duality, by focusing on images that switch between inside and outside, and of being a part of, and excluded from, and by Guest's marking the differences between the domestic situations of women and men, and the differences in domestic situation between women. Guest uses this duality to create 'a pull in both directions between the physical reality of place and the metaphysics of space' which then 'build[s] up a tension within a poem giving a view of the poem from both the interior and the exterior'[158] and thus from the place of the subject *and* from the place of the object. It is this duality that enables Guest to write from the place of both the subject and the object, and from which she is able to narrate an ecotone space that encompasses them both.

Timothy Gray notes that these city-based poems, Guest 'deconstruct[s] confining architectural spaces'.[159] Guest juxtaposes the urban with nature to deconstruct the city space, placing both the subject and the object in process in order to create and narrate an ecotone space that encompasses both. This deconstruction of the 'confining' male space of the city by the introduction of the feminine in the form of the natural sees Guest troubling dominant discourses and, creating an alternate space for women whilst rendering an ecotone that encompasses the duality of the self. The

[156] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One,* p. 77.
[157] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 6.
[158] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 20.
[159] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*, p. 93.

linguistic devices Guest employs give rhythm to the poems, replicating those found in nature and which are not the steady precision of the pentameter, but a scattered, flowing, sometimes joyful lilt, that is reminiscent of rainfall, or the wind blown leaves. It is through this and the imagery she presents that Guest is able to resist the 'arbitrary separations of indoors and outdoors',[160] and which facilitates the push of the semiotic flow into her work so that it might present multiple meanings. This affords the work urgency in its contemporary context, exposing as it does the creative space of the multiplicity of the forces working on it. Guest's attentiveness to these different spaces allows her to create a liminal, ecotone space in which to site herself that is neither inside nor out, but seemingly both. This ecotone space is rendered thetic and enables Guest to create meaning that is not wholly derived of either site.

The city space in 'The Location of Things', and Guest's other urban poems is a place of opportunity, but it is shown to be incomplete. As such, these poems identify the gendered restrictions that Guest felt to be at work on women, including herself, and the city's inability to relieve them and to allow women to realise liberation. Whilst Guest led a life of bohemian luxury that included travel, a comfy home, help with the children, and space to write, she was still aware of, and subject to, contemporary gender restrictions and this awareness manifests in her poetry from this era. Guest's feminism is prominent in these early poems but it is a feminism that is predicated on a multiplicity and symbiosis in women's roles rather than a flat rejection of one, or some, in favour of another. Family was a hugely important part of Guest's life and her daughter recalls that she 'always valued very highly the role of being a wife and mother'[161] and that she wanted to be a wife and mother *and* a poet and a writer, and to do so on her own terms.[162] Whilst this attitude is one that might reasonably be expected to inspire solidarity from contemporary feminists, such alliances did not occur and Hadley Guest explicitly states that 'feminists turned against her', noting that 'Barbara was a feminist in her own way'.[163] Across the body of her work, Guest seeks to enable women, should they wish, to define themselves as wives and mothers but without the definition being forced upon them or as a limit to them, and as such, to have that self-definition be an assertion, a deliberate act, and so a point of liberation and autonomy. Half a century later, this self-definition is (re)emerging as a political act where, from a feminist and environmental base, the new domesticity is

[160] Ibid, p. 81.
[161] Hadley Guest, 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.
[162] Ibid
[163] Ibid

promoted as an 'anti-capitalist environmental activism that embraces a global vision of sustainability based on reciprocity and care'[164] promoting the domestic sphere as an empowering space. The semi auto biographical narration of these 'lifestyle' books, blogs and articles promotes domesticity as an empowering, earth-minded, eco-political, anti-capitalist act but still ignores the unpaid nature of work, by women or men, in the home and the very real fact that a significant proportion of these 'activists' will also be working full time jobs in order to keep the roof over their quietly subversive heads. It can be argued that 'at its core, (…) the new domesticity is a feminist domesticity' and that it is one that 'focuses on the empowerment of women as political actors who promote human an ecologic justice', where the spirit of the 'pioneer homemaker exists in every act performed outside of the market economy'. [165] However, a significant number of these writers will also have product lines or businesses attached to their domesticity, so whilst the 'new domesticity that these authors present re-appropriates the figure of the homemaker, constructing her as an ideal of feminist empowerment',[166] many are also trying to sell us their grass-fed beef and more cook books. Guest's home situation with its financial comfort and supportive husband allowed her to be wife, mother, *and* writer, but for women without these means or the support, the designations of wife and mother were often far from satisfying and definitely not taken up as a deliberate political eco-anti-capitalist-feminist act. However, Guest's earliest collections do confront the strictures that were placed on mid-century women, and those that they placed on and maintained themselves, and make a significant exploration of that which Betty Friedan branded the feminine mystique.

In 'The Location of Things', Guest grapples with the issue that Betty Friedan describes in *The Feminine Mystique* as the 'problem that has no name'[167] but that Friedan saw as endemic across post-war America. Unsettled by the guilt that she felt in work that took her away from the home,[168] Friedan started her research in the late 1950s and, focusing initially on her collage classmates of fifteen years earlier, identified 'a strange discrepancy between our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform'.[169] Friedan's book exposed the emotional battle ground of home-life for mid-century American women as many found it stifling and

[164] Valerie Padilla Carroll, 'The Radical Possibility of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity: Housewifery as an Altermodernity Project', *ISLE* 23.1 (Winter 2016), p. 52.
[165] Ibid, p. 55
[166] Ibid, p. 65.
[167] Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 17.
[168] Ibid, p. 9.
[169] Ibid.

desired liberation from it, but were so repeatedly told that they were 'Having too good a time' they found almost impossible 'to believe that [they] should [or even could] be unhappy'.[170] Friedan describes the duplicity of the mystique, stating that

> The feminine mystique says that the highest values and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity. It says that the greatest mistake of Western culture, through most of its history, has been the undervaluation of the femininity. […] it is in no way inferior to the nature of man; it may even in certain respects be superior. The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women's troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfilment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love.[171]

The mystique's proscribed role for women in mid-century America, 'Occupation: Housewife' rendered 'certain concrete, finite, domestic aspects of feminine existence – as it was lived by women whose lives were confined, by necessity, to cooking, cleaning, washing, bearing children – into a religion, a pattern by which all women must now live or deny their femininity'[172] and which, as Friedan describes it, then 'hardened into a mystique, unquestioned and permitting no questions, shaping the very reality it distorted'.[173] Lynn Keller describes the feminine mystique as 'prescriptively defin[ing] the feminine in ways that kept middle and upper class women from developing their human potential',[174] and in relation to Guest's early poems, notes her 'keen awareness of contemporary crippling expectations of women' as well as her 'countering impulse, like Freidan's, for female empowerment'.[175] In these early poems, Guest is setting out her stall as a feminist and, like Friedan, is one that refuses the single definition of 'housewife' for women, but does not require them to leave their husbands, abandon their children or give up their home.[176] To this end, the social disaffection that Keller notes in these early poems is not only directed at the restrictive gender traditions that confine women to the home, but at any liberation that requires them to wholly reject it. Along with this, Guest's association of women and nature in these poems furthers this refusal to reject traditionally ascribed associations with the feminine and instead both become a site of female liberation, and particularly, a space in which to realise a female speaking subject and its multiplicity.

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[170] *Time* magazine headline, 1960, as quoted in Friedan, p. 20.
[171] Friedan, p. 38.
[172] Ibid.
[173] Ibid, p. 44.
[174] Keller, p. 216.
[175] Keller, p. 217.
[176] Friedan, p. 297.

This multiplicity is at the heart of Guest's elusiveness making the reader engage with the poem in an effort to try and grasp a speaking subject that is seemingly everything and perhaps nothing all at once. This absence of an overriding, imposed, recognisable personality in the poem's speaking subject is uniquely Guest and contrasts with her New York School contemporaries and with contemporary female poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, whose work is characterised by its drive for self-expression, and with that of Adrienne Rich and Denise Levertov, with their focus on feminist politics. But even whilst Guest herself is elusive as a speaking subject, her feminist poetics makes a significant contribution to the same contemporary debates that Rich, Plath, Levertov and Sexton did. Guest's poetry is concerned with poetic self-expression and with gender politics and women's liberation, but it is also concerned with an exploration of different modes of expression for these concerns, drawing not only on the Symbolist poetry of the late nineteenth century, but on the layered plains of cubism, imagism's drive for clarity of expression, the fantastical juxtapositions of surrealism, and the subjective expressiveness of abstract expressionism. Guest's early poetry, although less open in form than that of her later collections, bears all its hallmarks; the adroit turn of the line, the counterpointing of words and phrases, the engagement of the page as a signifying surface, the plasticity of her language, and the attention to linguistic rhythms both visual and auditory. Guest's poetry, early and late, is committed to 'excavating language'[177] but in it's so doing, it also engages with contemporary gender politics and the realisation of a speaking subject and is committed to 'subvert[ing] the ridged meaning that traditional structures produce'.[178] The visual form of Guest's earliest poems is much more reserved than that of those that come after and it is primarily through language that she innovates and challenges. Guest's early free verses twist and play with rhythm and syntax in order to convey meaning beyond the surface fact of the signifier. Guest's turning of the line further layer signification into the language and in doing so, render her early poetics innovative, exploratory and demanding. These early poems initiate a 'linguistically based feminism that locate[s] poetic and other discourses as primary sites of feminist

[177] Maggie O'Sullivan, 'To The Reader', in Maggie O'Sullivan, ed *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK.* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996), pp. 9.
[178] Wendy Mulford, 'After. Word' in Maggie O'Sullivan, ed. *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK.* (London: Reality Street Editions, 1996), p. 239.

intervention',[179] and in doing so, form the bedrock of Guest's own innovative feminist poetics as well as providing an alternative that contrasts with the feminist poetics of writers such as Sexton and Rich. Guest's poetry is however at the forefront of feminist poetics as it 'risks', as Robert Kaufman say, 'audience incomprehension' in order to 'bring light to, through poetic form and with as much precision as possible, aspects of a modern social complexity whose reality can hardly correspond to socially available, ready established, status-quo concepts of present society'.[180] Guest's early poetries were repeatedly positioned outside of the mainstream of women's poetry in the 1960s and 1970s, describing a wider critical division between the experimental, that which is concerned with language, and the expressive, that with a more accessible female voice.[181] As Guest's contemporary, Kathleen Fraser similarly experienced a separation from the more accessible forms of feminist poetics, a separation which Linda Kinnahan ascribes to a resistance to critically examining the received discourses of the voice and the self, particularly in relation to expectations of women's poetics.[182] Fraser was particularly inspired by Guest and her own work from this period starts to 'explore a particularly feminist approach to linguistic and formal innovations'[183] that, like Guest's, acts as counter to the claiming of the space of the page so energetically made by Charles Olson and his 'Projective Verse' in the same period.

In her early poems, Guest looks out from the home and towards nature for liberation and in order to realise a female speaking subject. Acknowledging the restrictions of the domestic space of the home, nature seems to provide a contrast but Guest's depictions of it trouble this easy juxtaposition. The realisation of a female speaking subject is central to Guest's early work and as such, 'The Location of Things' starts with a set of questions that co-locates the speaking subject with the domestic, with nature, and with language and writing. In the role of the writer, Guest locates her speaking subject in the space of the domestic home and seeks to undermine the dominant gender discourse by appropriating it in order to question it. Guest's questions, however, seem to be directed inward to their speaker as much as they are to the reader as the speaking subject questions her own complicity and choice in her location. This interrogation of the self places the poem in concert with Plath and

[179] Elizabeth A. Frost, *The Feminist Avant-garde in American Poetry.* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. xi.
[180] Robert Kaufman, 'A Future for Modernism: Barbara Guest's Recent Poetry'. *American Poetry Review* 29.4 (July/August 2000), p. 12.
[181] Kinnahan, *Lyric Interventions*, p. 50.
[182] Ibid, p. 52.
[183] Ibid, p. 59.

Sexton even whilst it differs from their realisation of a female speaking subject. Guest's turn of the line in the long sentence creates a repetition of sound, creating rhythm in the free verse that echoes that of the 'feet going faster' as the lines shorten. Finding the inside space of the domestic home restrictive, the Guest's lyric voice is looking out of the window:

> Why from this window am I watching leaves?
> Why do halls and steps seem narrower?
> Why at this desk am I listening for the sound of the fall
> of colour, the pitch of the wooden floor
> and feet going faster?

In these first few lines Guest readily describes the difference between the life of the female poet and her male contemporaries. It is she who is constrained by the halls and steps that 'seem narrower', and the domestic setting where she must listen for, and mind, 'the pitch of the wooden floor | and feet going faster', suggestive of a husband or child, or perhaps anticipating Freidan's book, a woman who's 'empty […] incomplete […] feelings [have become] so strong that she runs out of the house and walks through the streets'.[184] Surely representative of the duality of Guest's life at this time, this poem contrasts the domestic setting, replete with the husband and children that she values, with the articulate, intelligent, liberated, questioning writer who frequents the Cedar Tavern represented in the poem's second section. Guest's use of the window as a space where meaning is negotiated, as thetic, is recurrent in this and her other city poems and she uses it as an ecotone space where multiple meanings can be envisioned if not realised. Guest's windows are both spaces of transition, letting the outside in or the inside out, and of reflection as each sees an insubstantial, somewhat opaque version of themselves reflected back. In the city, windows act as thetic, a place where boundaries meet and identities, particularly identities based on gender roles, can be negotiated. The speaker's gaze is focused outwards as she is 'watching leaves' and so away from the traditional restrictions of the inside, the domestic space, and outwards to nature. This is problematised, however, by the contrived and created nature of the city's trees that have been planted in relation to the city's streets and are intended as embellishment to them. The continual direction of the gaze towards this manufactured nature, however, troubles the notion of nature as liberation, a theme that is common throughout Guest's work. These trees, the leaves of which she so avidly watches in the opening line, have been selected, planted and are tended. This suggests a multiplicity and

[184] Friedan, p. 18.

layering of restrictions within the city that informs all aspects of contemporary life and that it is only in nature that exists outside of the confines of the domestic and urban, that liberation can truly be found. The amalgamation of the human, the domestic and the natural in this poem, when coupled with identification of the speaking subject as a writer at her desk, implies that she is seeking a symbiosis between these different elements of her life as a means of realising a female speaking subject. The image of the tree through the window becomes a representation of this desire for symbiosis and the desire to manifest a way of being that is based on the mutuality of a symbiotic relationship.

The image of the tree acts as a marker that unifies the disparate aspects of Guest's own life as intellectual, writer, mother and wife in this poem. Her confined and separated vision of it in the first section, is countered in the second by the images of the painter entering a New York bar and a dark haired man carrying a carton on his shoulder. This image puts in mind the Cedar Tavern which Guest and her fellow poets and painters of the time frequented. The painters of mid-century New York had a marked affect on the New York Poets, most of who were either writing about art or curating it in galleries. James Schuyler writes that 'New York Poets, except I suppose the color blind, are affected most by the floods of paint in whose crashing surf we all scramble'.[185] Whilst Schuyler also cites the influence of French poetry on the group and mentions that 'everyone goes to concerts when there are any',[186] he fails to include the influence of nature in their work, a key influence that he and Guest shared. Hadley Guest notes that both poets and painters could 'go out and live very cheaply in nature on Long Island' and how, echoing her mother's interview with Mark Hillringhouse, it got into the paintings and the poetry.[187] The leaves that Guest watches in the opening lines are now re-focused and we see Guest watching as they become the patrons of the Cedar Tavern, conflating the influences of art and nature in her work as they drift to and from the bar like a 'forest' that 'sheds its leaves on my table'. The halls and steps of her own apartment block and domestic life are described as narrow in comparison to the excitement and breadth of ideas and diverse conversations found at the Cedar Tavern. Guest bridges the gap between a restrictive domestic and the liberation of the bar space, through the changing image of the tree. In 'The Location of Things' the bar is a vibrant, liberating space but Guest goes on to trouble this image in the poem 'The Brown Studio', discussion of which

[185] James Schuyler, 'Poet and Painter Overture', in Donald Allen ed, *The New American Poetry 1945 – 1960.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). p. 418.
[186] Ibid, p. 419.
[187] Hadley Guest, 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.

can be found later in this chapter, where she describes the bar in melancholy terms, noting its lack of 'bright birds', an image that Guest uses to represent women throughout her poetry.

Guest's irregular line lengths create a rhythm in the poem that drawn from the images that it conveys; the enclosed apartment, the ever-repeating streets. The short, statement like lines contrast with longer descriptive passages, layering images that build into a scene in a bar or in the street. The turn of the line provides the rhythm of the breath as Guest syntax draws on the fantastical images of the leaves that are luggage, rain that is umbrellas. In these surreal, painterly images, Guest plays court to the notion that women's writing and the feminine are 'indeterminate [and] contingent'[188] but instead of this being reductive, the poem becomes a territory walked as act of particular courage.[189] Formally, even in this early poetry, Guest is both writing from and challenging of the position of that which is typically seen as feminine or women's writing. Whilst open to allegations of ephemerality and temporality, Guest's formally demanding poetry insists on the intellectual engagement of the reader and in doing so, describes that of the poet. When placed in concert with an association of women with images of nature, the poetry challenges the perceived negativity of that association on multiple fronts. To this end, Guest's originality, particularly in her early work, lies 'precisely in the distance of words from naturalist resemblance'[190] and in her (re)location of things.

Guest contrasts images of the urban with images of women that are associated with nature and, in 'The Location of Things', describes a city that is emotionless and self replicating juxtaposed with the emotion filled process of childbirth:

> pain suffered beside the glistening rhododendron
> under the crucifix. The street, the street bears light
> and shade on its shoulders, walks without crying,
> turns itself into another and continues

The city streets are places of contrasting light and shade that are self-replicating. They are emotionless as the streets are 'walks without crying' which is contrasted with the emotional nature of woman, with the process of childbirth and with the natural image of the flower. The street too, is without its own signification and whilst

[188] Retallack, p. 94.
[189] Ibid.
[190] Marjorie Welish, 'On Barbara Guest' in *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*. Ed Mary Margaret Sloan (New Jersey: Talisman House, Publishers, 1998), pp, 561 – 562.

this renders it blank and empty, it also make it a potential site of liberation, leaving it open to signification which Guest recognises and values. The image of the tree in this section again facilitates the shift between indoors and outdoors:

> cantilevers this barroom atmosphere into a forest
> and sheds its leaves on my table
> carelessly as if it wanted to travel somewhere else
> and would like to get rid of its luggage
> which has become in this exquisite pointed rain
> a bunch of umbrellas. An exchange!

The image of the urban tree, acts as a bridge between nature and the urban, and the restrictive domestic and the liberated city spaces. In the images of the bar, we can read the image of the forest as that of standing customers who would drop their leaves of ideas, thoughts and experiences on the table before they move onto the next stage of their cycle. The trees, real and metaphorical, are in constant flux as they move cyclically and this constant motion mirrors that of the city as it endlessly replicates its streets, turning 'itself into another and continues'. Whilst the images of the bar room exchange of ideas is a positive one, the poem's final lines allude to a role for Guest in the bar that renders her invisible and not wholly part of the action; as a support to it:

> Through this floodlit window
> or from a pontoon on this theatrical lake,
> you demand your old clown's paint and I hand you
> from my prompter's arms this shako
> wandering as I am into clouds and air
> rushing into darkness as corridors
> who do not fear the melancholy of the stairs.

This image of Guest as the prompter, as someone who feeds the main actors their lines and passes them hats, suggests that she sees the artifice of their world, the act of it, and in doing so, undermines the feminist project of the poem as she describes a 'rushing into [the] darkness' of the corridors and stairs of the opening section. Suggesting an inability to realise the liberation that she describes and would seek in the city, the feminist project of the poem is troubled and speaks to the problem of tradition that Rachel DuPlessis' identifies for the women writer. DuPlessis states that 'one of the great problems for the woman as writer' is to negotiate the traditions of women depicted as 'icon … a semi-frozen, singular figure, whose spiritual responsibility is often already to "be there" so that, with great sweetness and

intensity, she can induce the male followers to "get there" '.[191] Guest's prompter is, by virtue of that role, 'already there', knowing all the lines and encouraging the men to 'get there' whilst never acknowledging the fact that she had arrived there ahead of them. The incomplete liberation identified in the poem also suggests restrictions that women place on themselves, on their own reimagining of dominant gender boundaries and an inability to visualise and move beyond them and into a new realisation of a gendered self. The thetic, generative space of the window then starts to work in reverse, and instead of offering a positive liberation as it did in the opening section, it is repressive, blocking and restricting meaning as it reflects the opaque image of the viewer back at themselves. This thetic suffers the push of a culture that restricts women and which shuts down the potential for city life to offer an alternate way of being; to be an ecotone that offers an amalgamation of roles.

Contrasting sharply with the images Guest uses to describe the bustling bar of the Cedar Tavern in 'The Location of Things', in 'The Brown Studio' (*Collected Poems* 45), Guest describes the bar again but in very different terms:

> Walking into the room
> after having spent a night in the grove
> by the river
> its duskiness surprised me.
>
> The hours I had spent under foliage,
> the forms I had seen were all sombre,
> even the music was distinctly shady, the water
> had left me melancholy, my hands I had rinsed
> were muddy.

That Guest would use the image of the forest grove to describe the favoured hangout of the New York School is telling especially as she makes explicit reference to the shadowed darkness as she describes its duskiness. Forests are felt inhospitable and have an air of undisclosed danger about them, they are dark places, threatening in that they conceal more than they reveal and lack the landmark of the horizon. It is easy to become lost in the forest and, in the horizon-less half-light under the canopy, almost impossible to navigate. That Guest would use these terms to describe the bar she frequented and in which she was welcome, speaks volumes to the difficulties and dangers in navigating the artistic community she belongs to, dangers that are

[191] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'The Gendered Marvelous: Barbara Guest, Surrealism and Feminist Reception', in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets.* Ed. Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller, (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001). p. 203.

compounded by the fact that she is female at a time when gender inequalities still sought to consigned women to the domestic space of the home. Charles Altieri writes of this poem that Guest's creates 'tension by stressing the conflict between an elaborate linguistic syntax and the imagination' that 'creates a strange and uncontrollable otherness that at once frightens and exhilarates our linguistic intelligence'.[192] The formal tension Guest manifests in the syntax of the poem, one that pushes and pulls at the reader, hints at the semiotic pulsions that are to become increasingly evident in Guest's later poetry. There is a dreamlike quality to the poem, where images are pushed forward through enjambment, and the tension Guest places on syntax. The poem is painterly in its composition both in terms of the very image of the title 'Brown Studio' and its description of the studio space, and in the way in which Guest composes the scene as still life; noting its finer details, rendering them as such and inviting the reader to see both the wider picture and its composition. In this regard, the poem is reminiscent of the work of Nell Blaine and, perhaps particularly, Jane Freilicher with her juxtapositions of the domestic, the cityscape and nature and describes an intertextuality to Guest's work as she draws the methods and means of the painter into her poetry. Guest's insistence on brown and dark colours in the poem contrasts with the colour and vibrancy of much of Freilicher's work and describes an absence; 'Of course you weren't there', that can be read both as one of physical presence and of voice. The disrupted syntax demands that the reader pay attention, that they listen and it is in this way that Guest manifests the female speaking subject both in 'Brown Studio' and in 'The Location of Things'. These textual gaps and the disruptions of syntax hint at the formal tensions that Guest will manifest in her later work and in them, we start to see the exposure of the semiotic. The image of the trees, coupled with the restrictive gendered space, echoes that of the opening lines of 'The Location of Things', but renders it more dangerous by locating it in the forest space. This juxtaposition suggests that liberation is found away from the created nature of the urban space, which, be it real or metaphoric, is only ever, a partial measure. Coupled with the repeated image of the forest is the image of the birds that Guest finds in its foliage. Echoing the cardinals with their 'delicious plumages' that are described later in 'All Grey Haired My Sisters', in this grove Guest says:

I had seen only one bird with a bright

[192] Charles Altieri, 'Barbara Guest and the Boys at the Cedar Bar: Some Painterly Uses of Language'. *Chicago Review* 53/43 (Summer 2008), p. 83.

wing, all the rest were starlings,

the brownness alarmed me.

These lines suggest that there was only one woman, ‘one bight bird’ in the bar, only one who stood out as different from the men that she sees as the common, massed, bickering, starlings and that that worried her. This association of bright birds and creative women in these two poems describes both the obviousness and otherness of women in the artistic circles of mid-century New York, and of the excitement of that position. That birds inhabit the mysterious space that is air and sky, that they can defy gravity and leave the mundane confines of the earth, separates them from all other creatures and affords them an alternate view of the world, the view from above, that has both a greater range and a greater detail, and it seems a fitting image for artists and poets. The image is deliberate in its assumption of the gendered space of nature and its refusal to place women in a submissive role as the bright bird soars, and again sees Guest acknowledge female otherness and difference, and celebrate it. However, this celebration is troubled by the image of the speaking voice as a ‘dying brown’ suggesting a lack of confidence in their ability to speak, to make manifest their experiences and mark women’s difference, rather than simply replicating the brown voices of the starlings, or not be heard above their chatter. The bar and the city space become repressive, restrictive and these male dominated and created spaces are unable to truly provide the space necessary to realise the process of symbiosis and manifest the female speaking subject. The influence of nature is necessary in order to realise this speaking self, and requires the ecotone space that is created as the city and nature collide in order for the process of symbiosis to be initiated, even if it is not complete.

This representation of confinement and incomplete liberation are echoed in the poem ‘Les Réalités’ (*Collected Poems* 10), which also sees Guest engage with the thetic and describe nature as a point of female liberation. In ‘Les Réalités’ the window and the printed page articulate a point where meaning is created. The poem’s female speaking subject is ‘reading about pharmacies’ and it is through her reading that we see her (re)negotiate her experiences, and the process of, realising a female speaking subject. As in ‘The Location of Things’, the long sentences are punctuated by the turn of the line, and in the middle of the poem, Guest places a full stop seemingly in the middle of a sentence, as if describing the rupture of loss. Syntactically, the poem challenges the reader and describes the complexity of the poem’s lyric ‘I’. With its images of lost loves, magazines, and make-up the poem’s

subject matter is decidedly feminine but it treatment of the female speaking subject seeks to redefine the modes of that representation. Guest rejects the direct, easily defined narrative voice traditionally associated with the feminist lyrics of writers such as Rich and Sexton, in favour of one that is more fluid and elusive. As in 'The Location of Things', in 'Les Réalités', Guest describes the artifice of the city, echoing the clown's face paint of 'The Location of Things', in a woman's buying make-up with which to create her own reality. The self-imposed gender based regulation, seen in 'The Location of Things', is also found in 'Les Réalités' and that these poems link this self-regulation to the city space, troubles the notion of the city as a site of liberation. In 'Les Réalités' in particular, Guest also troubles the notion of the liberation that might be found in nature. These poems describe the culturally entrenched gender-based subordination of the mystique and the complexity of the contrasting and conflicting facets of women's everyday lives; a recognition that becomes increasingly apparent as Guest's body of work grows.

Unlike that in 'The Location of Things', the image of the tree in 'Les Réalités' is stifling:

> It's raining today and I'm reading about pharmacies
> in Paris.
> Yesterday I took the autumn walk, known in May
> as lovers' walk.
> Because I was overwhelmed by trees (the path from the playhouse
> leads into a grove and beyond are gravestones),
> squirrels and new mold it is a good thing today
> to read about second-class pharmacies where
> mortar and plastic goods disturb death a little
> and life more.

Here, 'overwhelmed by trees', 'squirrels and new mold', the image of the melancholy grove from 'The Brown Studio' is echoed. Nature is now overwhelming; a site of breakdown and decay rather than liberation as it was in 'The Location of Things'. The contrast of the overwhelming trees with the 'second-class pharmacies' of her magazine is marked and the image of the magazine and the pharmacies play to the superficiality of the feminine mystique. The feminine mystique promoted consumption and created the glossy magazine that describe the hyperreal lifestyles that are to be desired, but are impossible to realise. Betty Friedan describes the link between advertising, consumer consumption and the feminine mystique noting that 'the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*'

(emphasis in the original), that 'women are the chief customers of American business', and that 'women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives'.[193] Vandana Shiva notes that whilst 'modern chemistry, household technology, and pharmacy were proclaimed as women's savours, because they would 'emancipate' them from household drudgery', we now 'realise that much environmental pollution and destruction is causally linked to modern household technology'.[194] With this in mind, no one wins in the world of the feminine mystique and the dislocation between the human and more-than-human nature widens with each load of washing or wipe of the floor. Guest underlines the unreality of the mystique, and it's associated drive to consume, by suggesting that, by 'entering those doors one's tears | were cleaner', describing the melancholy that subscribing to the mystique induced in so many women and that was both relieved and perpetuated by the drug of consumption. The darkness of the grove, contrasts sharply with the bright gloss of the magazine but Guest troubles it with the notion that the pharmacies they are reporting on are 'second-class'. The pharmacies 'disturb death a little and life more', suggesting an escape back into a traditional gender definition that would have women concentrate on making-up their faces and echoing the image of façade in the 'old clowns paint' in 'The Location of Things'. Guest does, however, suggest that the city can offer this multiplicity and fluidity of roles, albeit incompletely. The desire for both the city and nature that is described in this poem and in 'The Location of Things' reflects Guest's own need for these two spaces and for the dialogue that they created in her emotional life and in her work. Here, Guest is anticipating the 'have it all' feminism of the 1980s, the problems of which Friedan would go on to analyse in *The Second Stage*, as she wants both her intellectual liberation and to wear a full face of make-up; to fill both the traditional image of women, that of the wife and mother, and to inhabit a non-traditional, intellectual role too. In linking women to the hyperreal of the glossy magazines and describing their melancholy, Guest is describing the relationship between nature and truth and between nature and women as a positive alliance, as opposed to, the manufacture women of the made-up magazine pictures. Guest's representation of the appropriation of nature by culture in the cosmetics names, 'orchidée, amber, rosé', speaks to Irigaray's notion of a mimesis that is 'reproducing (from) nature' in that it sees and appropriates nature and then uses it in order to produce and validate a cultural object. Guest however is able to describe the

[193] Friedan. p. 181.
[194] Mana Mies and Vandana Shiva. *Ecofeminism*. (London: Zed Books, 1993). p. 7.

ecotone space between these two positions and to undermine the perceived superiority of culture over nature so as to take back that space, uncomfortable thought it might be.

In 'A Reason' (*Collected* Poems 74), Guest creates an ecotone in order to encompass the duality of the city and nature. The poem describes the duality of life as it is divided between the city and the country spaces. We know that whilst Guest, in common with many of her New York School contemporaries, spent a large proportion of her time out of the city and in the country, she would return to New York once a week in order to ground herself saying that it was "extremely important because it breaks up the sequence of time and creates a tension between the city and the country".[195] In 'A Reason', however, it seems that the cold and wet of the autumn weather has forced a return to the city, and that it is uneasy at the transition. Has the city lost some of its draw? Is that space no longer offering the intellectual freedom and challenge that it once did?

> That is why I am here
> not among the ibises. Why
> the permanent city parasol
> covers even me.
>
> It was the rains
> in the occult season. It was the snows
> on the lower slopes. It was water
> and cold in my mouth.

Recognising that she is enveloped by the city as the 'permanent city parasol | covers even me', by the poem's end, nature, the cold and wet that was escaped at its start, pursues Guest's speaking subject and she is 'followed into the street'. As with 'the Location of Things', 'Les Réalités' and 'The Brown Studio', Guest creates a dialogue between the inside and the outside spaces. However, in 'A Reason', a poem redolent of Wallace Stevens' 'Woman Looking at a Vase of Flowers', it is not the window that acts as the point of negotiation, as the point of the thetic, but a vase of chrysanthemums bringing the point of negotiation right into the domestic space of the home. In the image of the darkening chrysanthemums Guest appropriates a traditional image of women as decoration, as objects of beauty to be displayed, flower like, and by coupling it with the 'wild, wild whatever | in wild more silent blue' aspect of nature she subverts it and it becomes threatening and the domestic setting

[195] Vickery, p. 251.

of the home and the arranged, constricted vase of flowers a site of rebellion. Again, like the still life painting of Jane Freilicher, the domesticity of the vased flowers is contrasted with the vibrant city beyond the window. Guest's use of colour and space in the poem describes an intertextuality that draws from Freilicher's art as the 'mustard feeling' and 'silent blue' manifest a visual scene that works in concert with the textual spacing and mid-line gaps in the poem. The poem is focused on the duality of the inside outside relationship described in city still life art such as Freilicher's and on the tension between the domestic and the artistic in the lives of contemporary female artists. This constant flux in the relationship is described formally in the line turns and breaks and in the poem's imagery as it 'clutches' and 'follows' her into the street:

> Well wild wild whatever
> In wild more silent blue
>
> The vase grips the stems
> petals fall the chrysanthemum darkens
>
> Sometimes this mustard feeling
> clutches me also. My sleep is reckoned
> in straws
>
> Yet I wake up
> and am followed into the street.

The images of the opening lines that are full of snow and cold wet are then described as the 'wild wild whatever', and are something unnameable, outside of language in contrast to the 'parasol' of the city, that is manufactured and named. The images then collide in that of the flowers in the vase; those things that were once wild, that were natural, but that were grown specifically for cutting and are bought from a city shop and that, like the planted city trees of 'The Location of Things', carry only the hint of a nature that is not posed, planted and proscribed. This still life image of the cut flowers in their vase that 'grips the stems' and makes their 'petals fall', then become hyperreal. The flowers are an image of a woman as someone who is gripped and constricted and who is outside of their natural habitat but who has been produced to be so, and thus, that constructed woman also becomes simulacra. Guest is engaging in a mimesis that reproduces (from) nature as a mean of subverting it, but rather than it being an affirmation, Guest describes an inability to struggle out from under it. The unnameable nature of the 'wild wild whatever', and the constricted, dying cut flowers do not liberate the poem's speaking subject, but nor does the city space that she has escaped to. In this poem, Guest is unable to create

an ecotone that will allow her to manifest a self and negotiate and merge these two spaces. Guest is gripped by nature as 'sometimes this mustard feeling | clutches me', but she is also seeking to escape from it. This poem describes a narrative voice not yet fully comfortable with the duality of her self, and which is able to recognise it and to allow it, rather than battle with it. In this image, I see Guest describing the problems of a feminism that calls for the rejection of traditional, subordinate roles for women when women still want to assume these roles in the home and to find liberation within them. Guest grapples with the dominant notions of the feminine described by the mystique, and which are seen as restrictive, in order to realise a female speaking subject that encompasses her duality in these city poems. Guest then inhabits a liminal position that is neither wholly part of the dominant discourse that subscribes to the tropes of feminine mystique, nor of the subversive discourse of feminism, and, as such, she becomes the embodiment of the liminality that she is describes and as a place where the influences of the city, arts and culture and the natural meet. However, her inability to reconcile these two spaces troubles what should be the positivity of that liminal, ecotone space and instead it becomes a place of conflict rather than affirmation.

Guest's urban poems interrogate the cityscape and the way in which it reflects and forms the feelings and experiences of a female speaking subject in relation to nature, and feminism and the feminine mystique. For Guest, this interrogation of the place of women in her work is twofold as through representations of their liminality, she is able to draw a much wider arc that describes the wider female experience of marginality both socially and culturally. I see Guest herself in many of the representations of women's experiences that these poems contain; sitting at her writing desk gazing out of the window of her apartment at the city trees, wandering the streets of Paris, and flitting in and out of the Cedar Tavern, but they also provide a lens through we can also see some of a wider contemporary female experience, albeit one that is limited in scope to college educated, white, middle class America, as one of wanting motherhood and family to play a part in, or run alongside, an intellectual life. Guest uses the city space to negotiate boundaries and to assess and test them against the confines of wider society, and against those confines that women create or perpetuates themselves. Formally, Guest's poetry also tests these confines as it seeks to challenge the norm of valuing feminist writing for its courageous representation of the continued devaluation of female experience at the

expense of a formally innovative poetics.[196] Guest's poems offer both an expression of that which has been 'stoppered within our cramped domain [and] a radical reorientation [of] the notion of domain'.[197]

By the time 'A Reason' was published, Guest was living in Washington D.C. with her third husband and whilst she continued to travel back to New York, these poems suggest that Guest's relationship with the city had changed as she began to travel in Europe and she and her contemporaries started to move out of the city and settle elsewhere. Set in the context of her later work, this is one of the last of her poems that is directly located in the city and the collections that follow it describe a move from the enclosed spaces of the city streets to the wide-open spaces of the prairies and these urban poems only hint at the formal innovations that that move would lead to. The multiplicities of women's lives that Guest explores in these urban poems, the juggling of a home, a family and an intellectual and creative self, are further described in each of her other early poems, but most tellingly in her poems that focus on, or draw images from, a garden setting. In these early collections, Guest charts a passage from the city to the sea but stops off in the unsettling space of the garden where the tempered, tethered plants can see their seemingly unconfined cousins over the fence and are made restless by it. As Guest moves into the garden and closer to the fence and the wild nature beyond it, we also see her poems open up formally, admitting the spaces beyond the fence and their place in the manifestation of her poetry.

Rioting lawns: subversions and negotiations in the garden

Across Guest's poetry, the garden is a place of subversion and negotiation. In this space, Guest seeks both a subversion of the dominant gender roles and values of the feminine mystique as she seek intellectuality outside of the home space, and a negotiation of those roles and values in the domestic home as she seeks to embrace them as a wife a mother and to represent these roles for women positively in her poetry. Consequently, these tended garden lawns are a riot with the struggle Guest both witnesses and experiences in negotiating these positions, and these poems describe the movement between positions of subversion and submission. Key in

[196] Retallack, p. 116.
[197] Ibid.

Guest's struggle to negotiate these seeming polarities is the desire to positively represent women's work in the domestic space of the home. Increasingly evident in her later poems, such as the sequence *Quilts*, Guest seeks to positively express the domestic space and the women who inhabit it, either willingly or through social convention. I have already noted the importance of family and home to Guest and the desire to foster the domestic space as a place of authority and autonomy for women grows from their importance in her own life. Like Emily Dickinson before her, Guest foregrounds the domestic space, especially that of the garden, recognising it as an extension of the house and home, and more than seventy years after Dickinson's death, Guest describes this outside space of the home as a positive, feminine space and as a site of the (re)negotiation of women's social position. Whilst gardens are private and domestic spaces, they are part of the wider outdoors that is inevitably shared, not just with the human, but with the more-than-human too. Guest's gardens are fluid in that they not only encompass the flower bordered and over-mown squares of grass that make up many a domestic garden but, in her later poems, include the larger, often rural spaces of owned, semi-cultivated land that is often unfenced but are an intrinsic part of the houses that they surround. These gardens acknowledged the shared nature of the outdoors and are a bridge between the created confines of the home and the wider landscape beyond it and which presses against their fences, and that sometimes forces its way through the board and wire frontiers. In Guest's poems, the garden space is always an ecotone that describes a negotiation between the controlled domestic, and the less or unconfined nature of the landscape beyond it. They are the in-between spaces that draw the very big space of nature into the very small space of the domestic. In Guest's poetry, gardens are 'places where nature takes root in the domestic and the domestic opens out into nature'.[198] These poems show Guest deliberately co-locating women and nature and empowering women in that space as well as challenging received formal traditions of women's poetry within these spaces. These poems are at once narrative and referential of women's experiences in the way of contemporary feminist poetries, but also formally challenging as Guest places language under visual and syntactic tensions. These poems provide a transition between the urban poems I have already discussed, and the rural, prairie poems that make up the sequences *The Countess of Minneapolis*, *Quilts* and *Musicality*, as they introduce Guest's relationship to that transitional, ecotone space of the garden that sits between the confines of the home and the wider landscape beyond it. Guest's garden poems represent what Rachel

[198] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, p. 39.

Blau DuPlessis describes as a 'crossing of vectors' in Guest's poetry as they combine Guest's 'feminist understanding of poetic innovation, the approaches to proto-feminist analysis made by women innovators [and] the cavalier attitude to women artists sometimes evident in artistic groups'.[199] Among her earliest works, these poems are formally innovative, engage in a feminist discussion of women's experiences and representations and, are among the work that was readily dismissed by some of Guest's early contemporaries.[200] This crossing of vectors also describes the positive intertextuality of these poems as Guest draws on mythology and ancient history in order to trouble the representations of women in them.

The garden is a space that we often like to think of as natural and is a space in which we encourage nature to flourish so that we can take pleasure in interacting with it. It is, however, a place where nature is ruthlessly controlled, confined, manicured and wholly subject to phases of fashion and cultural pressures. In this respect, the cultural pressures on the garden space can be allied to those on women, particularly in the 1950s when Guest was writing these poems, where women were restricted and subject to standards of beauty that they had no role in setting and that did not adequately represent their diversity. The reality of the garden space is that it is the antithesis of wild, natural spaces, such as the sea, and Guest uses this opposition in her the poem 'All Grey-haired My Sisters' (*Collected Poems* 5), having birds and bees move in and out of the contained space which she then contrasts with the expanse and the violence of the sea which tears dresses, 'as over each receded | and pebbles were lifted at your feet | in the foam'. The poem describes Guest's relationship with feminism and, as in 'The Location of Things', the turmoil that she experiences through the multiplicity of her roles as writer, wife, mother and woman.

'All Grey-haired My Sisters' is the first of Guest's published works to be located specifically in the garden space. The poem is both a call to female liberation and a refusal of that call. Guest uses the garden space as a place from which to call her ancestors, who she sees as those strong women who have gone before her and 'walked into wars', but also as a place in which to disengage from them, as she 'quickly' passes them by. We see the complexity of Guest's relationship with these women and the struggle for the identity and freedom that they represent for her as

[199] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'The Flavour of Eyes'. *The Women's Review of Books* 13:1 (October 1995), p. 23.
[200] Kathleen Fraser recalls in her interview with Hadley Guest that in the 1970s, the poet Bill Berkson recounted that Barbara Guest was excluded from the seminal Pagett and Shapiro anthology because, 'we didn't think her [Guest's] poetry was that interesting'.

Guest refers to them as ‘sisters’, ‘relatives’, ‘adventuresses’, ‘my darlings’, and ‘ancestress’. Guest clearly feels a kinship with them and affection for them but refers to them as ‘savages’, and entreats them to ‘forget animosities’. The poem opens with the question ‘what is it in the more enduring | climes of Spring that waits?’ posed to the grey-haired sisters, the classical stone statues standing in the confines of the garden. These statues represent the timeless images of nameless women and bear all the marks of the unreality of the hyperreal. The statues are totem for the real women to whom the poem is actually speaking, the women who precede her, and in these figures of stone, Guest locates not just the classical representation of women, but all women distilled to this single representation. However, they are not limited by this representation and instead it draws our attention to the limits that have already been placed upon them. Guest’s long sentences flow between strophes, undulating through the notional breaks that are highlighted by indented text, capitalisation and italics. Again Guest challenges multiple modes of representation as she (re)writes mythological and historical representations of women, and the ridged definitions of subject and object through her association of the female poet as viewer of the static female statuary. That they are placed in the garden, in the liminal space between the wider landscape and the domesticity and control of the home, suggest that they are neither part of the dominant historical, cultural discourse nor wholly separate to it and that Guest is appropriating this space in order to subvert the dominant order. Guest is not seeking to assume the dominant masculine position for women, rather she is seeking to realise liberation in an alternative space that is beyond a gender binary, to realise an ecotone.

Guest’s images of women in this poem are equally ones of strength, as she calls them adventuresses and savages, but also of that strength being controlled as they are statues set static in the confines of the garden. Guest states that, ‘”Reason selects our otherness”’ and unlike any of her urban poems, she uses this otherness to unify women. Whilst this poem sees Guest making a call for female solidarity, to ‘forget animosities’, the closing lines suggest that the link has yet to be fully forged:

> All grey-haired my sisters
> this afternoon’s seraphicness
> is also fading. Linger while
> I pass you quickly lest the cherry’s
> bloom changed to white
> fall upon my head.

Whilst the poem is forthright in its condemnation of gender inequality, it does not wholly offer a means by which contemporary women's liberation might balance the scale. The savage adventuresses are static statues which suggests entrenchment, they cannot (or will not) move or change, and contrast with the mobility of the images of nature and of the garden in the falling blossom and the sea's twist of spume. This contrast suggests that women's liberation might best be found through a (re)negotiation of the spaces already ascribed to them rather than a battle to assume the spaces that are denied. Guest's imagery suggests a call for women to look beyond a simple reversal of the gender dynamic and instead to a creation of a new space that is derived of both aspects and is therefore an ecotone. In this way, the garden space can then act as a point of negotiation and multiplicity rather than a space of control and subordination. This, however, is a big ask as the garden space is wholly historically circumscribed and culturally scripted and, as such, it struggles to offer the liberation that Guest seeks. As Linda Kinnahan notes, the gender norms of the fifties depended 'upon a denial of the performative and constructed quality of gender, encouraged by a regulated view of masculinity or femininity as natural rather than historically circumscribed, as universal rather than culturally scripted'.[201] The garden space that Guest manifests acknowledges this constructed quality and her representations of a nature that lies beyond it also notes the constructed nature of the images of the rearranged oak and the sea's story. As such, Guest's garden space is mimetic not only because it reproduces (from) nature but because it also (re)produces culturally as the two spaces interact and shape each other. This mimetic dynamic is also played out formally as Guest draws on the lyric's push towards epiphany and closure, but counters it with textual disruptions, of both visual presentation and syntax. This dynamic then serves to unsettle received notions contemporary feminist poetries as it manifests a new interaction between poetic representation of women, both as subject and object, and of the mode of that representation. In this way Guest's line, ' "*Reason selects our otherness" '* describes a double bind as reason is 'selected' as an indicator of acceptability by both the male establishment and the reinforced by the traditions of contemporary feminist poetry. Guest continues this unsettling dynamic in the poem 'Dido and Aeneas' both formally and in the mutuality of the cycle of nature and culture.

[201] Linda Kinnahan, 'Reading Barbara Guest: The View From The Nineties', in Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller, eds *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets.* (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), p. 241.

Guest mixes and troubles every image of nature that she presents in the poem 'Dido and Aeneas' (*Collected Poems* 34) with an image of the human made, so describing a space that reproduces (from) nature and (re)produces culturally. Unlike the birds of 'All Grey-haired My Sisters' that flit through branches, the birds in 'Dido and Aeneas' settle in the 'garage eave' as it 'yields its water cup'. Whilst the act of saying choirs is 'as if the late birds sang in branches', the birds do not engage with the natural spaces of the trees, only the created, human spaces of the house and specifically the garage, the home of the car, the antithesis of the body's natural process of movement. Rather than describing nature as liberation in this poem, Guest is describing the constriction and subjugation of it in the unnatural space of the garden. The suburban husband, that Guest writes Aeneas as, has gone leaving Dido abandoned and the idyll of suburban America starts to crumble:

> Not for us the paling light
> the white urn at the driveway
> nor for us the palmettos and the squeak
> of tiles. The fountain at noonday cries
> "You are not here" and the sea at its distance
> calls to a single path flanked by hibiscus,

Whilst Guest rejects the suburban idyll of the feminine mystique, with its light filtered through the fences and the posed garden palm trees, the poem is still a description of control in the domestic space, even when the male figure is absent. The refrain 'I love you' that repeats throughout the poem, becomes a mantra that repeats as if to remind Dido why she had subjected herself to that control. Indented as the opening line to the strophes, the visual presentation of the text draws the eye to the repetition, and contrasts it with the disclaimer 'Not for us the paling light', as they become both ore desperate and more empty as the poem closes. The repetition creates a rhythm that flutters, suggesting the agitated heart beat of anxiety as Guest exposes the semiotic. Dido is described as complicit in her subjugation, and willingly, or at least knowingly, submits to the traditional gender roles, to the constriction of the space of the house, whilst being well aware of the potential to live in a way that is other than this. In the image of the sea that 'reminds itself each day | that it is solitary', Guest links female liberation to nature and particularly to an unconfined nature, in the form of the vast strength of the sea with its 'wrecker foam' and 'great reaches of wave and salt'. Dido is, however, unable to follow it to its full extent and the image is troubled with the that of the suicide, perhaps suggestive of the suicide Guest saw in single motherhood for a creative way of life and writing. On Dido's 'rioting lawns', the

flamingos become static and staid even whilst birds are usually images of liberation in Guest's poetry. 'All Grey-haired My Sisters' describes and negotiates the dualities of women's daily lives and seeks to show the domestic and the garden spaces as ecotone, as sites of meeting borders that create alternate habitats. Guest appropriates these spaces and (re)writes them as sites of liberation. That they reproduce (from) nature and (re)produce culturally, cause them to be in a state of constant flux and negotiation and images such as the sea's 'wrecker foam' and the endured wonder suggest that the balance is tenuous.

Both in her own life and in her poetry, Guest seeks a balance between the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother and that of the intellectually mobile writer. This duality is surely among the sites of contention that have seen Guest's excluded, for the most part, from contemporary feminist scholarship. Rachel Blau DuPlessis notes that 'sometimes feminist readers have been wary and resistant to any writing that evokes the feminine and the decorative',[202] and Guest's poetry of this period certainly evokes the feminine in its representations of the domestic and the co-location of women within it. Whilst wary of over simplification, DuPlessis suggest that 'feminist poetries are often based in narrative, use naturalist imagery to bead the surface of statement, are conversational in tone, forceful in personal-political naming, and make proud, sometimes subtle examinations of women's lives and consciousness'.[203] Guest, however, employs a different 'feminine' voice, one that is rich with 'collage, suture, association, tonal glissades, evocation of the quotidian and unsolemn, interruption, jump-cuts'.[204] Guest's is a formally innovative poetics that resists overt feminist classifications whilst being firm in its feminist statements. In these early poems, Guest's feminism is subtle and perhaps difficult to discern amongst the fabulous, playful imagery in poems that refuses easy narrative and direct statement. It does however, mirror the lives of many of other contemporary white, middleclass American women who desired and built a home and family and saw it as a place of female authority and autonomy even whilst they desired a life that was not defined by it. Guest's poems exemplify a feminism that acknowledges the duality of many contemporary women's lives and in doing so demands that the domestic space be seen not as a site of subordination but as a place of women's authority and power. By refusing the potential for the domestic space as a place of female authority, feminism risks subordinating the very women it purports to be seeking to

[202] DuPlessis, 'The Flavour of Eyes', p. 23.
[203] Ibid.
[204] DuPlessis, *Blue Studios*, p. 43.

emancipate. In her book, Friedan is careful to present the home as a locus of female authority, consciously separating it from the contrived images of femininity that make and sustain the feminine mystique and demonstrating that it is not the home, husband and family that subordinate femininity, but the culturally created tropes that are constructed around it for that purpose.[205]

In 'The Voice Tree' (*Collected Poems* 39), Guest continues to explore this potential for conflict in and around the domestic space of the garden. Mark Silverberg describes 'The Voice Tree' an 'exploration of voicings and rootings – those things that go out and those that go in – along with its collapse of subject and object, interior and exterior'.[206] Across her poetry, the garden is a space where these interchanges occur and the interior, in the form of the domestic, and the exterior, in the form of the nature beyond the fence, that of wild birds, the weather and its large, terrestrial aspects such as the sea, are placed in process. In this poem, it is also a site of negotiation between feminisms and Guest seeks to collapse distinctions occurring between different approaches to feminism and describe instead their commonalities. The poems opening lines collapse the subject/object opposition as Guest describes the exchange between parallel positions:

> Of Anger and Sorrow
> Growth
> the parallel vines
>
> from you to me

The poem's speaking subject describes the mutuality of the parallel positions, noting the potential for common influence even whilst they are in seeming opposition. The notion of these positions being in parallel is fundamental in this poem as a means of describing commonality rather than difference and so the space between becomes a site of interchange and exchange rather than a no-(wo)mans land between oppositions. Guest does not, however, seek to remove the notion of difference all together; the vines run along side each other, suggesting two routes to the same end rather than a supplanting of one in favour of another. Reading the poem in the

[205] Friedan's chapter 'The Happy Housewife Heroine' investigates creation of these tropes in detail and pays particular attention to the changes in the editorial focus in women's magazines post-WWII.
[206] Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic.* (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 69.

context of the other work surveyed in this chapter, I suggest that Guest locates the tree in the garden in order to connect parallel positions of feminism; that which would locate women in the home as a site of authority, and that which would view it as a location of subordination and have them seek authority beyond it. In doing so, the garden hosts a dialogue between women's oppression and their rebellion.

Guest's choice of the birch, the 'white shadow', as the central metaphor in this poem is complex. Often seen as the embodiment of the feminine principle, birch bark was historically used as paper[207] and it is this connection to the page, to the paper that the poem is written on, that draws attention to the written word as a site of female liberation, pre-empting Cixous proclamation that writing is the realm of female communication with its 'capacity to inscribe the forbidden and forgotten'[208] and that women should 'Write! Writing is for you'.[209] With this in mind, through the very act of its being written, Guest's poem becomes an act of liberation that inscribes the forbidden, contested and forgotten voice of the female speaking subject. It also describes a relationship between that voice as speaking/writing subject and a listening/reading other. As Silverberg states, the image of the tree then 'offers a form of liberation by suggesting that the treeness of trees is not given (not ironically *natural*) but rather develops from a relationship between subject and object, speaker and tree, me and you' (emphasis in the original).[210] This relationship, the parallel between subject and object, is generative rather than deleterious, manifesting an ecotone and facilitating a dialogue and interchange that renders both subject and object anew. With this in mind, women can chose to embrace and embody elements of the feminine mystique; decorousness, femininity, domesticity, as these are not a given and can also chose to embody intellectuality and autonomy along side them. The notion of an active choice is fundamental in the image of the parallel lines and the interchange between them. This interchange is described as Guest marks a series of parallels that the speaking subject alternates between:

> Season's, horizons,
> natal days and those
>
> that are dark

[207] Maud Grieve, *A Modern Herbal.* (West Molesey, Surrey: Merchant Book Company, Revised edition 1973), p. 103.
[208] Hélène Cixous, '(With) or the Art of Innocence' in Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader.* Ed Susan Sellers (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 107.
[209] Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', p. 876.
[210] Silverberg, p. 71.

I celebrate wisely
or with terror or watch
the leaves as they fall
minutely and crack
the wide underground.

Here, Guest's falling leaves are reminiscent of those watched through the window and that fell on the bar room table in 'The Location of Things', of the blossom that falls in 'All Grey-haired My Sisters', and anticipate the ideas that might be found in trees in *Rocks on a Platter*. As a repeat image, the tree is representative of intellectuality and ideas and is frequently associated with the feminine. In this regard, the association of women and nature in Guest's poetry also associates them with the intellectual, and with literature and language. Taken as an image of poetry, and specifically of women's writing, Guest's leaves give us an image of words meticulously chosen and describes in them the revolutionary potential of poetic language that Kristeva identified as they crack the wide underground. Guest's language is spare, carefully chosen and this contrasts with the energy and rage of the voice in the poems final lines as, with red flames and wild sparks, it leaps and shouts in the smoke. Guest's voice and language in liberation is not strident, violent and lost in the smoke, but calm and sinuous as icicles melting and reassuming their fluidity as water. Guest's poem presents the 'dissolution of self-consistent statements' in favour of the 'substitution of an evanescent, shifting subjectivity'[211] that is both unsettling and liberating. Guest resolutely turns away from the traditional forms of feminist poetry that DuPlessis identifies, and towards a poetics that is influenced by the wider arts, and invokes aspects of both the traditional feminine, in the association of women and nature, and privileges the decorative alongside linguistic play and innovation. As such, the 'I' of Guest's speaking subject is 'not dissolved; that wayward creature is multiplied (…) to be *both* and *and*, to be viewer and viewed, insider and outsider, we and me' (emphasis in the original).[212] As a reader, it can be an uncomfortable place to find oneself. Guest's image of the tree as a 'spine | and leafless branch' is one of nature pushed to the edge of its very existence, with the surrounding fire recalling the burning of witches. As a feminist piece, the image it then of women persecuted for their difference, those who did not conform, and went unmarried, and is made all the more stark by the contrast of the fire and the snow that packs the garden. The final image of the leaping, shouting

[211] DuPlessis, 'Flavour of Eyes', p. 23.
[212] Ibid.

voice in the smoke is liberating and terrifying in equal measure but the melting icicles suggest transformation rather than destruction.

Guest's attention to the visual presentation of the poem informs the reading of its imagery. The poem is carefully laid out on the page; it is indented, its lines are grouped or spaced apart from each other, there are visual rhymes where word patterns appear, all of which can only be seen on the page and resist vocal representation. Formally, Guest sets up tensions within the poem both in its visual presentation, the syntax, rhythm and rhyme of the poem, and the imagery, each of which pulls at the other as Guest snaps lines off in order to draw attention to their specifics; 'Growth', 'natal days and those | | that are dark'. Denise Levertov writes that 'content determines form, and yet that content is discovered only *in* form', noting that 'every space and comma is a living part of the poem and has its function'.[213] Guest's poetry eloquently describes the dialogue between the poem's form and its content as each draws from and shapes the other and Guest's formal 'tension' echoes Levertov's 'dynamic interaction'.[214] In this way, the parallel vines of the opening lines are mirrored in the parallel lines 'the red flame to your green throat | the wild spark to your open mouth' the word patterns of which mirror one another exactly on the page even though rhythmically, they are different lengths. The tension that Guest manifests in these lines then works on the reader on several levels; visually, rhythmically, and in the multiplicity of meanings that the poems syntax and imagery offers. This layering of the plains of the image in this poem suggests Guest is as much a cubist as she is the imagist she describes herself as.[215] These plains replicate the parallels of the vines of the opening lines as well as the words themselves as 'a break' is followed by a caesura and then a line space. The image of the window, with its connotations of openness, of visibility, but also of opacity and reflectiveness again occurs in this poem and it mediates between the viewer and the view, the inside and out as the white shadow of the birch is cast upon it and it reflects the straight drop of the falling tears. There is an intrinsic surrealism in the images of the skeletal tree, the frames and reflections in and of the window, and the melting ice, the cracked earth and the tears that turn into bulbs. The decorated, pictorial quality of the images and the poem itself is referenced in the image of the feathers of

[213] Denise Levertov, (Untitled) in Donald Allen ed, *The New American Poetry 1945 – 1960.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). p. 412.
[214] Denise Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form', in Donald Allen and Warren Tallman eds, *The Poetics of The New American Poetry.* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973). p. 314.
[215] Barbara Guest, 'Interview with Charles Bernstein'.

the sea tern, which seem to be being worn decoratively, and the tree of iodine; iodine being a chemical used in photography and which like the window, seeks to trouble the distinction between viewer and viewed. 'The Voice Tree' exemplifies the difficulties of Guest's work when attempting a feminist reading. Guest's deliberate association of women with nature and the decorative, her refusal to fix the speaking subject, the ethereality of her imagery all make for poetry that seems to sit in opposition to the high-level checklist DuPlessis identified earlier. Whilst all of this is true, the closer reading of Guest's imagery in these early poems uncovers their feminism and their difficulty, which is born as much of their subtlety as their complexity, is surely to be celebrated for its latent attention to, and reimagining of, its progenitors and for its intertextuality.

The tease and stress of wave song: liminality as liberation

In Guest's early collections, the representations of the power and danger of the sea describe the tease and the stress of the relationship between the freedom of a life outside the prescriptive limitations of the feminine mystique and the domesticity of the suburban home and garden. In these poems Guest develops the ecotone space that allows for the duality that she sees as necessary for female liberation and there is a dialogue between these positions in her seascape poems. Elizabeth Robinson states that, in Guest's poetry, there is a 'tension between movement and stasis, between boundary and the illimitable', and particularly in these seascape poems that challenge the feminine mystique, 'what is at stake becomes clear: revelation beguiles, but leads only to an enhanced knowledge of how partial [that] insight is. Discovery can be wounding; it inevitably results in vulnerability'.[216] In these poems, we see Guest move her speaking subjects between the spaces of the domestic home and the ocean, and between action and inaction and in doing so, she manifests the tension that Robinson identifies between the action of the seemingly unconfined nature of the sea and the comparative inaction of the domestic space. In these poems, Guest describes a nature that is dangerous and juxtaposes it with the vulnerability of the speaking subject.

Although at the time of publication of these poems Guest had lived in New York for more than twenty years, the influence of a childhood spent on the East and West

[216] Elizabeth Robinson, 'Direction' in *Jacket* 36, late 2008.

Coasts can be seen in the recurrence of images of the ocean in her poetry. In her 1992 interview with Mark Hillringhouse, Guest describes California as 'another place of consciousness', laughing as she remembers her much younger, surfing self.[217] These poems draw on her very early years on the Florida coast as well as those spent in California and remember storms, and the ice cold waters off Florida in a unusually cold snap. Timothy Gray notes that Guest's Florida and California poems reveal 'a tension between natural and imaginative forces'[218] and it is in this tension that Guest's negotiation with the feminine mystique and contemporary feminism is described. Regardless of whether they are located on the East or West Coast, in each of these coastal poems, we see Guest not only rail against the confines of the feminine mystique but also refuse any alternative that wholly rejects the domestic space as a space where women might find meaning, authority and autonomy. As such, these poems can be seen as precursors to her prairie poems that directly seek to promote the domestic space as a place of female authority and autonomy. In these seascape poems, Guest seeks to realise a speaking subject that is allied to the unconfined aspects of nature in the form of the sea, and as she does so, she disrupts form and syntax and plays with sounds in order to represent that experience. In these poems, we see the genesis of an on-going vein of language and poetic form in Guest's work that is actively bound in a feedback loop with its environment as each becomes generative of the other. Guest's seascape poems see that start of a manifestation of a lyric that is in dialogue with its environment and in doing so, acknowledges and is receptive to the role of that environment in the emergence of meaning.[219] This deliberate alliance of the feminine with the unconfined, both formally and metaphorically, contrasts starkly with dominant lyrical, realistic representations of women in contemporary feminist poetry. In these seascape poems, Guest is already moving into and marking her territory in the very masculine space of the field of Olson's projective verse, albeit not as a direct act of its appropriation.

Kimberly Lamm states that from Guest earliest poems, 'nature possesses a capricious and unwieldy power; the human being is fragile and barely visible by comparison', noting that these poems are 'teeming with water, wind and sand' and

[217] Guest and Hillringhouse, p. 26.
[218] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*, p. 93.
[219] Sharon Latitig, 'Dwelling with the Possible Lyric Obscurity and Embedded Perception' in Mary Newell, Bernard Quetchenbach and Sarah Norton eds, *Poetics for the More-Than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary.* (New York: Dispatches Editions, 2020), p. 433

that 'the speaker is continually in danger of becoming immersed or overtaken'.[220] Guest's seascape poems are teeming with water, wind and sand and in them the human is humbled and made small by the vastness of the sea that she stands before. This is the essence of wild nature in Guest's poetry; the fragility of the human, the threat of their becoming immersed or overtaken, and their comparative invisibility in the face of it. Guest's acknowledgement of, even reverence for or excitement at, human fragility in the face of wild nature, echoes that of the Romantic sublime. In her co-location of wild nature and the domestic spaces of the home, Guest not only seeks to 'name different aspects of the American landscape', but 'different qualities in the human response to the natural world: a sense of being at home and cared for, in beautiful places, and a feeling of shock, alienation, but also inspiration, in the face of the sublime'.[221] Guest's co-location of women, the domestic, and the wild, sublime nature of the sea, not only appropriates the sublime aspect that has traditionally been seen as masculine,[222] but seeks to reimagine the relationships between these aspects, manifesting an ecotone. Just as Charlotte Smith does as she reclines atop the cliff in 'On Beachy Head', Guest's women walking along the stormy shores appropriate the masculine space of the sublime and stake a physical claim to that territory. As Guest then returns these women to the domestic spaces of the house and garden, they bring the wild sublime with them, troubling easy distinctions between the spaces and unsettling the Romantic association of women with the small and beautiful.

In these early poems, it is the sea that Guest positions the speaking subject in relation to but her later poems find her exploring the wide expanses of the prairies and plains and the vast weather that rolls across them; a continued interest that she would wryly note in interview thirty years later.[223] In questioning Gray's assertion that Guest is seeking 'immersion in watery environments',[224] Lamm states that 'while water is no doubt a figure for Guest's fluid expansion of poetic form and thought, water also represents the threat of engulfment and destabilisation'.[225] As with the weather in her later work, in these poems, the sea is a constant presence that troubles and threatens those on the shore, destabilising their quite home-lives and leading them to question the spaces they inhabit. This threat of watery engulfment

[220] Kimberly Lamm 'Fair Realism: The Aesthetics of Restraint in Barbara Guest' in Mark Silverberg, ed, *Colour of Vowels* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 126.
[221] Purdy, p. 102.
[222] Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism.* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 71.
[223] Barbara Guest, 'Interview with Charles Bernstein'. LINEbreak Series
[224] Gray, *Urban Pastoral,* p. 85.
[225] Lamm, p. 127.

and destabilisation is seen in a speaking subject who is caught between the land and the sea, the home and the roaring natural of the ocean in 'The Hero Leaves His Ship' (*Collected Poems* 9) and in 'Timor Mortis, Florida' (*Collected Poems* 52). In these poems, Guest describes a female subject that is caught between desire for the freedom of the ocean, and a rejection of it that renders the staid, staked palmettos of the suburban garden, desirable. The female subject inhabits the controlled confines of the tideless and empty marina that, whilst it does not offer the full liberation of the sea, achieves instead, the negotiated liberation of the ecotone.

As she did in 'Dido and Aeneas', in 'The Hero Leaves His Ship', Guest juxtaposes the sea and the domestic space of the house and garden. Whilst in 'Dido and Aeneas', we only glimpse the sea 'at its distance', as it 'reminds itself each day | that it is solitary' and separate from the house and garden, in 'The Hero Leaves His Ship' Guest foregrounds the sea, placing it in close proximity to the domestic space:

> I wonder if this new reality is going to destroy me.
> There under the leaves a loaf
> The brick wall on it someone has put bananas
> The bricks have come loose under the weight,
> What a precarious architecture these apartments,
> As giants once in a garden. Dear roots
> Your slivers repair my throat when anguish
> commences to heat and glow.
>
> From the water
> A roar. The sea has its own strong wrist
> The green turf is made of shells
> it is new.

The poem's opening describes a change, a new reality but one that bears the echoes of the old. There is a gentle surrealism to the image of the half-hidden loaf and the wall-breaking bananas in these opening lines. These misplaced objects are domestic and in a domestic setting but they are made strange by the uncanny qualities that Guest imbues them with. The sea's roar and its strong 'wrist', a description of the flicking, throwing action of breaking waves that Guest also uses in 'Hurricane' (*Collected Poems* 50) and that echoes Wallace Steven's description of breaking waves in 'Infanta Marina',[226] is contrasted with the precarious architecture of the apartments. When considered in the light of Guest's continued association of women

[226] Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems: Corrected Edition* edited by John N. Serio and Chris Beyers (New York: Vintage Books, 2015), p. 8.

with nature, this image imbues women with the raw power of the sea. However, the question in the opening line, 'I wonder if this new reality is going to destroy me', troubles this assumed of power even whilst the statement contrasts with the crumbling walls. The lack of question mark suggests that there is an inevitability to the destruction and that it is, after all, expected, if not welcome. Guest describes a domesticity that is crumbling and the impending move toward the roaring seascape that is both strong and new. Guest hesitantly announces the entrance of the speaking subject by saying, 'I am about to use my voice | Why am I afraid that salty wing | Flying over a real hearth will stop me?'. These lines echo the inherent fear in the act of speaking in public for women that Cixous identifies in 'Laugh of the Medusa',[227] and her use the verb to fly anticipates Cixous use of the French verb *voler* meaning both to fly and to steal. Guest's explicit linking of this fear with the 'real hearth' of the home describes the restrictions of the home and the feminine mystique that it is created by, and also perpetuates. The 'real' is illusory as it is created by the ad-men Friedan identifies as key perpetuators of the mystique[228] and in this way, Guest's 'real hearth', is ironic. The fear, however, is real, but by the next strophe, she has 'said "no"' to the burden of her home and garden and is ready to take to the sky.

Having described a new green turf that is made of shells, Guest continues at a distance from the garden space occupied in poems such as 'Dido and Aeneas' and 'All Grey-haired My Sisters'. Having first associated the speaking subject with the controlled and confined natural of the garden and echoing the imagery of 'The Voice Tree'; 'Dear roots | Your slivers repair my throat when anguish | commences to heat and glow', Guest then describes it as a burden:

> Yesterday the yellow
> Tokening clouds. I said "no" to my burden,
> The shrub planted on my shoulders. When snow
> Falls or rain, birds gather there
> In the short evergreen. They repeat their disastrous
> Beckoning songs as if the earth
> Were rich and many warriors coming out of it,
> As if the calm was blue, one sky over
> A shore and the tide welcoming a fleet
> Bronzed and strong as breakers

[227] Cixous, *Laugh Of The Medusa*, p. 880.
[228] see chapter 9 of *The Feminine Mystique* in which Friedan discusses the link between advertising, consumer consumption and the feminine mystique

This rejection of the controlled nature of the garden space that had once been a solace is also a rejection of the domestic and its 'beckoning songs' in favour of the liberation of the sea. The final lines, prepositioned with 'as if', suggest that there cannot be 'one sky over' both the shore and the garden space to welcome the fleet, that a choice must be made, and the risk of destruction by the new reality of the wild natural taken. Unlike the poems I have already discussed in this chapter, in 'The Hero Leaves His Ship', Guest seems to suggest a move out of the confines of the garden space and into the roar of the sea, but by the poem's close returns once more to the safety of the house saying 'Goodnight I go to my bed. | This roof will hold me. Outside, the gods survive'. For now at least, our hero has not left her ship. The duality at work in this poem, as it moves between the domestic space of the home and the expanse of the sea, describes the dualities that can be seen in Guest's own life. As a wife and mother she deliberately stakes her claim to the home space even whilst it is designated hers by the tropes of the feminine mystique, and so it becomes and act and place of empowerment rather than subjugation. As a poet, and an emerging poet who is hesitant in finding her voice, she fears the destruction of this claimed space of the home that this new reality might bring and, of the formal traditions that women's writing has been ascribed and which she is moving away from. We should not forget the importance of being a wife and mother to Guest, nor the importance of her poetic work and it is in this poem that we, perhaps, see this juxtaposition most clearly. Guest grapples with the need to write and fly and the comforting weight of the roof that holds her. In this poem Guest describes the difficulty of the ecotone space she has created and the fluctuations within it as she moves between, and negotiates with, the elemental stations of work and home.

Guest's later poem, 'Timor Mortis, Florida' from *The Open Skies*, also locates the speaking subject in the garden space, but in contrast to 'The Hero Leaves His Ship', Guest uses it as an ecotone space that negotiates between the danger of the sea and the domesticity of the house. In this poem the sea is dark, cold, and full of storm swell and Guest presents it as a place of great risk and danger. Hadley Haden Guest states that 'Hurricanes are a symbol of death in [Guest's] poetry',[229] noting how whilst living in Florida, Guest experienced hurricanes first hand. 'Timor Mortis, Florida' is one of a number of poems that draw on Guest's childhood memories of the destructive power of the hurricanes and Guest's language particularly describes the violence and destruction of these extreme weather events. Guest's title translates

[229] Hadley Guest, 'Susan Gervits Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest', Berkeley, May 9, 2007. PennSounds

from the Latin as a fear of death and the images of dark, thrusting, retched sea with its huge waves that crash with the sound of a Greek death cry recall the fears of a child in the face of the brutality of such extreme weather, but also how those fears remain into adulthood and are rational in the face of such a destructive elemental force. In ‘Timor Mortis, Florida’ however, Guest not only recounts the violence of the hurricane and its scale but seeks to locate the human within in it. This co-locating of the human and the vast, dangerous, elemental aspects of nature develops in Guest’s later poetry, particularly in works such as *Musicality* which is discussed in the next chapter. The garden space that Guest describes in ‘Timor Mortis, Florida’, that created space in between the domesticity and confine of the home and the vast danger of nature, manifests as a place of negotiation that allows access to each of the spaces but attempts to mediate between them. In representing this ecotone space, Guest asks that we consider the boundaries that we seek impose in nature and their permeability in the face of it. The imagery in this poem recalls and contrasts with that in some of the poems I have already considered and, as such, offers and opportunity to read those boundaries in terms of Guest’s feminism even whilst it does not present specific representations of it.

Guest realises the garden as an ecotone space rather than a space of confinement, through the language that she uses to describe the sea:

> White foam tide
> waves descending
> line of blue and white
> blue submarine
> where the dark sweel of thrust
> retched water

Rather than ‘the strong wrist’ of the breakers in ’The Hero Leaves His Ship’, these waves are crashing, ‘descending’, and there is the chaotic ‘white foam tide’ that is whipped up onto the shore by stormy seas. The four syllable rhythm of the indented lines contrasts with the irregular sound patterns of the left aligned lines, creating a formal tension in the poem that is rhythmical and visual and that describes the rhythms of breaking waves as they draw back from the beach and then break again. The sea is ‘retched’ without the clean, clear waves of the summer, and is instead full of the ‘dark sweel of thrust’, combining the ocean swell of the deep water and the thrusting reel of the breaking wave on the shore, suggesting the breaking of large, dark, deep-sea waves that draw cold water from the ‘blue submarine’. Guest’s sea is unappealing and dangerous in this poems and is in contrast to its portrayal in ‘The

Hero Leaves His Ship', 'All Grey-haired My Sisters', and even 'Dido and Aeneas' with its 'wrecker foam'. The wave's 'sweel of thrust' is paired with the repeated line 'Aii the width of it settling' where the death-cry sound replicates the draw of the wave and its breaking on the shore. The sound is not the low sound of the regular tidal surge but the higher, urgent sound of the cold storm swell which contains the sharp intake of breath at the sight of 'riders' and 'sails' out in, and on, the unseasonably cold water of this 'odd winter'. This is a sea that Guest does not want to be a part of, and one that is best observed from the safety of the garden.

The garden space that Guest locates her speaking subject is disrupted by the storm and by the unnatural cold:

> A near palm leans, frond chilled
> arched breeze and frontal cold
>
> (…)
>
> In gardens, in snow, in flurry and flake
> the bird wren, bare tree, to follow.
>
> Desire at the stake of palmetto
> Desire the empty marina tideless
>
> Sands
>
> Oars in the fronds
>
> through bullrushes
>
> Sunset the backland washes gates
>
> While silt as light as dawn
>
> over the threshing sea

Unusually, this Floridian garden is full of snow and cold rather than warmth and sunshine but the 'desire at the stake of palmetto' recalls the sunny suburban palmettos of 'Dido and Aeneas'. Guest seek distance from the violence of the sea, but draws attention to the wren that flies in and out of the garden and the sunset that washes its gates, recognising it as ecotone and as moving between the enclosed garden and that which is beyond it. The wide spaced lines of the end of the poem describe the movement away from the shore space as Guest moves through the

gate that is set at distance from it both physically and textually; a representation that asks us to see them as both allows entry and defines an exit. Jed Rasula notes that 'in poetry, topographical space is coextensive with a typographical dimension'[230] and this relationship is evident in the line spacing Guest uses to denote the movement away from the sea and into the garden. Guest's use of the page as a signifier speaks to the influence of the visual arts on her poetics but also to the nascent influence of Olson's field poetics albeit perhaps through 'a subtle mix of osmosis and affinity rather than a direct reading of Olson's manifesto'.[231] Guest's desire for the 'tideless sands' of the marina refuses the catastrophic natural that puts 'oars in the fronds' of palm trees, and instead watches the sunset through the bullrushes beyond the gate. In the 'empty marina', Guest creates another ecotone space where the sea is tamed and distanced by the shelter of the harbour. Guest is not seeking to explore the extremes but to hold them at bay with the wild 'threshing' sea seen at a distance. Guest's contrasting of the uninhibited nature of the sea with the tended and created space of the garden and her recognition of the elements that slip between the two, renders the garden space a point of negotiation and an ecotone where the domestic space of the house merges with wider nature and spaces beyond its borders.

Whilst 'Timor Mortis, Florida' does not read as a feminist or ecofeminist poem, the images that Guest employs repeat in and are repeats of those in poems such as 'Dido and Aeneas' and 'Wave' (*Collected Poems* 55) which do make explicit Guest's feminism. Having created an ecotone space in the garden that mediates between the domestic home and the sea and shore spaces in her earlier poems, Guest then moves this ecotone space out onto the shore and into the water and the breaking waves of the ocean in the poem 'Wave' where she seeks 'your half-wayness' and to 'meet you there'. Guest is still seeking a (re)negotiation of the feminine mystique, represented by the domestic home, and an out and out rejection of it, represented by the sea, but in 'Wave' she realigns the ecotone space she has created with the sea and its shore. Whilst Guest does not reject the home as positive space for women, in 'Wave' she is seen to seek to step off the porch and walk out of the garden and onto the dunes and breakers, testing the farthest. In 'Sand' (*Collected Poems* 53), and 'Cape Canaveral' (*Collected Poems* 12), Guest leaves the home behind and seeks to inhabit the liminal space of the shore and then the sea itself. Kimberly Lamm comments that in Guests poetry, 'nature possesses a capricious and unwieldy power'

[230] Jed Rasula, *This Compost: Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry.* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2012). p. 60.
[231] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, p.175.

finding that 'the human being is fragile and barely visible by comparison'.[232] In these poems Guest celebrates this unpredictable, unmanageable power and whilst the human is present, it is small in comparison and in 'Sand' and 'Cape Canaveral', barely visible. Whilst these poems do not represent a development in Guest's thinking that can be defined in terms of their publication date, there is a marked change in Guest's representation of the sea and the female speaking subject in relation to that representation, and which is then seen across her later work in relation to the wide, wild expanse of the prairies and plains which I will discuss at length in chapter two. These poems also hint at the visual presentation of the text and the importance of the page that will become such a feature of her later work and that is in such contrast so much of the period's feminist poetry. These early poems, especially 'Timor Mortis, Florida', 'Sand', and 'Wave', echo the early work of Helen Frankenthaler in which she would leave portions of the canvas uncovered resulting in light-filled negative spaces in and around the painted areas so that the sub-surface of the painting, the canvas, is drawn to the fore and the lack of paint becomes as eloquent as its presence. These early poems of Guest's draw on the page, the sub-surface of the poem, and make it visible. This visibility is at once a silence, in that there is an absence of words, and a call to listen to the undercurrents of the text, to listen to its pauses and breaks and to hear the sounds of nature and the body in them; to listen to the semiotic in the 'Patterns of drift' and the 'stray ephemeral visible' as 'Without you I cannot see' ('Sand'). As such, Guest is anticipating the 'more dynamic, open form style of writing, which makes use of the whole page-space to create', the use of which Harriet Tarlo identifies as being 'more capable of reflecting and engaging the landscape' as it is 'closer to an open field or a moorland or a hillside than closed forms of poetry'.[233] This dynamic, open form is a feature of much of our contemporary ecopoetics and of Guest's later work.

Timothy Gray describes 'Wave' as a poem in which Guest 'survey[s] the borders separating sea, sky and land' suggesting too that she 'seems willing to risk everything in order to commune directly with the ocean's treacherous power'.[234] Whilst I concur with his assertion that the poem is concerned with marking of borders, I see a distinct disinclination on Guest's part to risk diving into the 'long roll' of the 'equinoctial plunge', and instead see Guest not as a swimmer, as Gray does, but as one who, sensibly, observes and communes with the storm-swell from the

[232] Lamm, p. 126.
[233] Tarlo, 'Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction in Context'.
[234] Gray, *Urban Pastoral*, p. 89.

shore. Whilst Guest states ‘Wave | whose arm is green | your | half-wayness I, too, would meet you there | in foam | Borders’, as a coastal resident, Guest would know that wave’s green water is drawn up for the deep ocean, that it is cold, and indicates strong currents and a huge breaking force. Reminiscent of the storm she feared in ‘Timor Mortis, Florida’, this ocean is dangerous and Guest describes the riptide that can be seen from the border of the beach but not from out on, or in, the water:

> the rip slices turns backwards
> swimmers this treachery is cast by mirrors
> once in profile only this multiplied
>
> the arrowed backstroke sent to bliss
>
> we cry deepest and turn not daring to spy
> full-face on ocean crest that carries on
>
> on
>
> space now azure fullest where the depth
>
> is danger
>
> long roll

The riptide cuts back through the roll of the waves onto the shore, drawing the water and swimmers back out to sea. This image recalls the episode in Guest childhood where, having gone to the beach to look at the storm swell, two people were swept out to sea and drowned.[235] The sea is treacherous as its ceaseless movement towards the beach is reversed and ‘cast by mirrors’ as the rip heads away from the beach and back out to sea, the ‘arrowed backstroke’ pointing away for the land and the unwary swimmer ‘sent to bliss’, to death by drowning. In these lines, Guest not only describes the sea in terms of its behaviour, depth and colour through language, but in the visual presentation of the text. The wide spacing of the lines that precede those quoted above suggest the long roll of the breaking waves over the flat of the beach which changes to compacted lines as Guest describes the danger of the riptide. Guest creates a visual rhythm in the poem that reflects the sea’s changing states, its ebb and flow and the arrow like line of water that shoots out from the centre of the riptide by indenting the line, ‘the arrow backstroke sent to bliss’, representing the swimmer shot out of the rip into the deep water behind the breakers. In this visual use of the text, Guest is both reproducing nature and (re)producing from

[235] Hadley Guest. ‘Susan Gervits Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest’.

nature as she seeks to replicate the patterns and pauses and the wide spaces of nature on the page. This replication of the natural rhythms is akin to the representation of the body drives that Cixous describes as a necessary part of the process of *écriture feminine* but Guest's replication of these rhythms found in nature is an extension of drive realm of the body. Guest's willingness to 'meet you there | in foam' co-locates the sea and the poem's female speaking subject and in doing so, incorporates both the body and the natural into the same speaking space.

Having started the poem on the shore and looking out to the ocean's depths, Guest draws the poem back into the domestic space:

> Remembering the violence
> we turn on house pillows and let
> dolphins surmise us (dreams) the lap
> of shore water enter our heads as ponds
> forced from sea are inlets, we are
> islets become soft

The sea is internalised and domesticated as 'on house pillows […] the lap of shore water enters our heads'. The rhythms of the sea move into and merge with those of the body as Guest further amalgamates women and nature, as we become 'islets'. Guest unifies the images of the sea and the self in this poem but at its close, she is still on the shore and inhabiting the ecotone space of the beach:

> I would walk from this porch to your farthest
> do I dare
> Lights without you the house is ghostly
> the pier is broken
> its points are webbed
> cricket and bird song about alas
> until morning the great sea and ledge
> from which pines such low surroundings pines
> that are green and the sea that is swelling
> sea whose earth is sandy who in sleep
> changes as the pilot arm beckons
> the arm we lie on shifts
> early the stir
> to crease from night close to begin

to gather to fall as Wave
Bountiful and Bare

In this final section, Guest describes the ecotone space of the shore as rich and varied through the 'cricket and bird song', and the 'pines | that are green' which echo the 'wave song' of the sea and the 'wave | whose arm is green'. Guest describes a mutuality and dialogue in these lines as the sea shapes the shoreline and the sea bed, 'whose earth is sandy', and which shapes the waves that 'in sleep | changes as the pilot arm beckons' as the tides shift the sand bars and influence the wave's shapes. Guest recognises this duality and it is echoed in her rhyming of 'dare' and 'bare' at the sections open and close. The poem recognises the multiplicity of the female speaking subject and so necessarily locates it in the ecotone space of the shore where the multiple influences on it can be regulated and negotiated. When acting as a site of regulation and negotiation in this way, the ecotone space acts as a *chora* in that it regulates the drives of the semiotic and the pressures of the cultural. In this poem, the shore acts as a space where the uninhibited nature of the sea and the staid domestic space of the land and home are amalgamated and regulated, each pushing at and informing the other in changing degrees. The structure of the poem replicates the 'shifts' of the sand bar and the 'swelling sea'. Through this attention to the visual presentation of the text, Guest replicates the changing nature of the shore, and the poem 'obtain[s the] plasticity that the flat, the basic words – what we call the language of a poem – demands and, further, depends upon' and which 'cannot be achieved through language alone, but arrives from tensions placed on the poem's structure: variability of meter, fleeting moods of expression, trebled sounds'.[236] Guest's repetition of long sounds as in 'wave', 'half-wayness', 'wailings', 'swaying', creating a rhythm in the poem that replicates that of the swirling sea, (re)producing from nature. Combined with the visual presentation of the text, the poem 'create[s] an embrasure inside of which language is seated'[237] and a manifests the rhythms and drives of the sea. The poem also sounds a distant echo of T. S. Eliot's 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', drawing on Eliot's use of repeated rhyme sounds to create rhythm and tension in his free verse as well as seeming to recreate his images. Guest's 'wave rolling brings in brightest | phosphorescence their

[236] Guest, *Forces of Imagination,* pp. 21 – 22.
[237] Ibid. p. 22.

hair' compares to Eliot's 'white hair of the waves blown back',[238] and the poem as a whole speaks to, and quotes, Prufrock's essential question 'Do I dare?' as it describes an inability to move from a point of contemplation into action for fear of something worse. Alice Ostriker comments that 'women will recognise certain features of Prufrock's predicament as coinciding with their own, in particular the linked dilemmas of feeling oneself a mere object on the eyes of the other sex and being unable to participate in its modes of discourse'.[239] Whilst Guest's poem speaks to this similarity, it also seeks to move beyond it and the adoption of modes of discourse that reinforce a binary, looking instead to the shared dialogues of the ecotone; to that 'half-wayness'.

Returning again to the unusual cold snap on the Florida coast that she describes in 'Timor Mortis, Florida', 'Cape Canaveral' sees Guest move out into the sea itself and take on the persona of the cold salt water. 'Fixed in my new wig | the green grass side | hanging down' Guest inhabits a watery persona that is full of seaweed, kelp, and which is immune to the cold, 'Climate cannot impair | neither the grey clouds nor the black waters | the change in my hair'. Guest's rhymes in this poem link phrases and replicate the repetitious roll of the breaking waves and the sea swell. Impair, hair, spare and air are end rhymes that generate a rhythm in the poem as well as internal rhymes such as melt and kelp, and withers and glitters within lines as a means of replicating the rhythms of the sea. The 'spinning pockets' of the breaking waves are then repeated in the poem's sound patterns and their variability and fleeting nature allude to the rhythm and repetition of wave sets as they push towards the beach. In this way, 'Cape Canaveral' is one of the poems in which Guest most fully reproduces, and (re)produces from, nature as she both replicates the sea rhythmically and adopts its persona. Guest's speaking subject cannot be confused with a swimmer or surfer in this poem, the 'I' is very much that of the cold winter sea itself who is 'hiding its shudder in this kelp' and into whose as 'autumnal winter-fed cheek', 'glaciers melt'.

These early poems describe Guest's profound disaffection with the roles prescribed for suburban women by the feminine mystique and what she sees as the alternative. These poems attempt to mark out a middle ground, an ecotone, between the two

[238] T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' in, Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter and Jon Stallworthy eds. *The Norton Anthology of Poetry (Fourth Edition).* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company. 1996), p. 1230.
[239] Alice Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America.* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986). p. 66.

states whereby women might find liberation. Guest's feminism is clearly described in these poems as one that refuses to disassociate itself from the roles and spaces traditionally ascribed to women, instead seeking out the value in them. Guest's co-location of women and nature seeks to further this project and the mimetic representations of the drives of nature in the work, seeks to describe nature as the foundation of language and culture rather than something that is secondary, or placed in opposition, to it. The feminism in Guest's early poetry is subtle and her playful imagery and the twisting syntax, the textual presentation and challenging language make for complex works that are as exciting as they are uncomfortable to read. These early poems inspired work in response to them by both Mary Abbott, whose painting *Wave* includes text from Guest's poem and represents images from it, and Grace Hartigan who produces a series of lithographs after 'The Hero Leaves His Ship'.[240] With these early poems, Guest is starting to manifest the types of 'feminist artistic practices […] that exceed struggles with and against male dominance', [241] that would become a significant part of he later work, and are most notable for their insistence in defining a space for women in which they have an authority and autonomy that is not appropriated from that which is already defined as male. These early poems describe the foundations of Guest's feminism and her relationship with nature, both of which I will explore in the next chapter as Guest moves inland to the prairies and plains of the American Midwest.

[240] These works are discussed in some detail in Sarah Lundquist, 'Another Poet Amongst Painters: Barbara Guest with Grace Hartigan and Mary Abbott' in Terence Diggory and Stephen Miller eds, *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets.* (Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001), pp. 249, 257 - 260
[241] Lamm, p. 115.

Chapter 2.

Elemental understandings: restriction and liberation in Barbara Guest's poetry of the prairies and plains

> Selective engineering architectural submissiveness
> and rendering of necessity in regard to height
> eschewment of climate exposure, elemental
> understandings
>
> 'Prairie Houses'

Having closed the first chapter with a discussion of Guest's seascape poems, focusing on poems published in the 1960s, chapter two turns our attention inland to the landlocked prairies and plains of the rural Midwest and poetry published in the 1970s and '80s. This chapter demonstrates how Guest counters the notion of the domestic space as restrictive and seeks to reclaim the home, and the work of women within it. In these poems, Guest expounds a feminism that reclaims the space of the home as a site of women's authority and autonomy rather than their captivity. These poems also develop the positive association of women and nature, contextualising the human within the much broader sweep of the vast, more-than-human natural of the prairies and plains and (re)claiming that space as a site of women's liberation. The wild nature of Guest's ocean spaces was always peopled and linked with the human as the waves were ridden, the shores walked on and the seas sailed. The people of the prairies, however, are allowed houseroom there only by the good grace of the weather and their tenacity. In these poems, people become small in the face of the wider, wilder nature of the landmass and they seek to negotiate with rather than force themselves on the space, accepting their position as other to the land and that other's position within the formation of themselves. The vastness of Guest's wild

nature of the sea that I identified in chapter one, expands to include the prairies and plains of the mid-west and whilst Guest again, contrasts their fragility and invisibility of the human in the face of it, she also seeks to describe their claim on it and the ecotone spaces that that claim manifests. Whilst Guest was living in New York and Long Island for much of this period, the city and the sea of her earlier work take a back seat in these collections and the vast land expanse of America is bought to the fore.

For Guest, the 1960s had been a prolific period. As well as publishing *Poems: The Location of Things, Archaics, The Open Skies*; she published a further collection, *The Blue Stairs*; the sequence *I Ching*; wrote four plays, two of which were staged; and won the Longwood Award for *The Location of Things*. The 1970s sees this proliferation continue as Guest publishes: a further collection of poetry, *Moscow Mansions*; the sequences *The Countess from Minneapolis* and *The Türler Losses*; and her only novel, *Seeking Air*. In addition, she serves as editor of the *Partisan Review*, wrote a further, staged, play and won the Fund for Poetry Award. As the decade ended, Guest rented a house in Long Island where she worked on her biography of H.D., completing the project in 1983. Immersion in the H.D. archives did not, as one might expect, stay Guest's startling creative output, and she published the sequences *Biography* and *Quilts* whilst working on the book. *Musicality* and the collection *Fair Realism* would be published at the end of the decade. By the end of the 1980s, Guest is nearly 70, and still writing essays and poems, collaborating with artists, serving on notable panels and committees, and winning awards with startling energy and regularity. At last, Guest is starting to gain the critical attention recognition that her work deserves and discussions of it are broad in their scope. Guest's work from the mid-1980s onwards, is dominated by the collaborations that she was a part of. Whilst *The Countess from Minneapolis* is not a collaborative work, it was the artist Mary Abbott's move to Minnesota, and Guest's subsequent visits to her studio, that provided the inspiration for the sequence and Guest's introduction to the American Midwest.

These poems see Guest expand the range, both formally and subjectively, of her already innovative poetics. Ecofeminism was emerging from movements of social justice and political activism in multiple locations and whilst there is no evidence to suggest that Guest was at all involved in the movement, the links between women and their environment and nature deepen and her poetry from this period has a particular focus on the relationship between the female speaking subject and their

environment. This is however, much less about identifying environmental injustices than it is about recognising the fundamental links between the human and the more-than-human environment. Guest's poetry from this period explores and marks the spatial territories of the page and of the land itself, seeking to (re)claim them as feminist spaces. Guest's feminism is, however, seemingly at odds with the overt feminist politics of writers such Adrienne Rich and Marge Piercy and the differences in their social experiences are readily apparent in their writing. This period sees a divergence for Guest from the New York School of Poets and the differences in the work and feminist experiences of Guest and the female second generation poets such as Bernadette Meyer, Eileen Myles and Alice Notley are marked. Guest's affluence had enabled her to send her children away to school and for her to chose not to teach, and puts her in stark contrast to the lives of many female poets of the period who, like Notley and Mayer, wrote, taught classes and kept house for their children and poet husbands. The women in the Guest's work are perhaps then romanticised, happy housewives but this suggestion does Guest's feminism a disservice. Guest's feminism seeks to offer the opportunity for women to find authority and autonomy within the domestic setting rather than having to move away from it in order to realise a feminist subjectivity. This then can be seen as having the effect of opening up the scope for women's liberation rather than restricting it. Guest is continuing to (re)claim spatial and textual territories for women in her work from this period and in this, their feminism cannot be ignored even whilst it does not sit easily with a wider feminist poetics of the period that placed and emphasis on finding a common language as a means by which to forge a community with a shared identity.[242] The emergence of Language Writing during this time did come as kith and kin to Guest's work but for Guest herself, the association would always be peripheral.[243] Guest's work did, however, appear regularly in the feminist avant-garde journal *HOW(ever)* and received critical attention through the publications purposeful voicing of an alternative feminism that had until that time, largely been ignored by scholars, activist and literary circles.[244] The sheer formal variety of Guest's work makes its easy categorisation impossible and whilst it may drawn on, exhibit and exert many influences, it subscribes wholly to none.

[242] Frost, p. 110.
[243] Hadley Guest, 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.
[244] Frost, p. 111.

Musings on the Mississippi: realising the self and the other on the river.

In *The Countess from Minneapolis*, Guest weaves multiple narratives into a sequence of poems that describe the role of place and nature in the realisation of the feminine self. The Mississippi, that 'unreasonable river', is key to these realisations as it winds through people and poems shaping of, and shaped by, those who live along its banks. The river is a persistent presence in Minneapolis and these poems. Whilst the industry of Minneapolis might seek to shape it, the unreasonable Mississippi exerts its own pressure, shaping the city in turn. Whilst Guest maintains a positive relationship between women and nature in *The Countess from Minneapolis* she also describes a divide between them, showing that there is an inability for the human to fully understand, or be equal to, more-than-human nature. It is through this identification and then acceptance of, the unknowable other, that she is able to realise a female speaking subject. The ecopoetics of *The Countess from Minneapolis* describes the co-location of the human and the more-than-human and the interconnections and mutual influence that exist between them whilst still recognising their difference. Guest's manifestation of a female speaking subject renders the sequence ecofeminist in that it describes and explore that relationships between women and the environment, finding points of mutual pressure and exchange. With this in mind, *The Countess of Minneapolis* can be read as a poetry that 'begins to take into itself ecological processes' in its formal representations of nature that work in concert with it imagery, and in its 'confluence of matter with perception, observation with process, concentration to transmission' that turns 'nature poetry into a more dynamic, affective, and pertinent poetry'.[245] The ecological processes embedded in the sequence are, however, represented at the point of their interactions with the human and this duality of influence manifests an ecotone in which the relationships between the human and the more-than-human can be explored and, issues of gender within that dynamic. Guest's sense of the human and more-than-human as a reciprocal duality is expressed visually. The visual presentation of Guest's texts describe the drives, constrictions and pulsions of, and on, the human body and wider nature as she pushes strophes into regimented blocks, drifts lines in and out of one another, and later, entangles them with the pictorial in *Musicality*. Guest's female speaking subject is realised not only by the language and imagery she uses, but also through poetic form. In these poems, Guest challenges traditional poetic form and language, plays with syntax and

[245] Durand, p. 117.

replicates the rhythms of both the body, and the rhythms of more-than-human nature in the text. In *The Countess from Minneapolis* Guest situates the Countess and the city space of Minneapolis, within the wider, wilder nature of the prairie and describes both the narrative 'I' and the Countess as both subject and object to the wider nature of the Minnesotan plains.

Vast in its scope, although very precise in its location, *The Countess from Minneapolis* arcs from an opening poem that describes the river and the collision of the industrial and human with nature, out across the prairies and back again, ending in the heart of the city at the art gallery where the sculpture *Amaryllis* by Tony Smith, Guest's mentor and friend, was sited in 1968[246]. This type of arc is common across Guest's work but it is more usually seen in individual poems rather than across a whole collection suggesting that she meant this work to be seen as a whole rather than as discrete pieces, individually paginated and numbered though they are. Guest wrote *The Countess from Minneapolis* after a number of visits to her friend, the painter Mary Abbott, who left New York to teach in the University of Minnesota's art department and who prevailed on Guest to visit so she could teach her how to live there following the shock of the Minnesota winter.[247] Abbott's broad, abstract swathes of colour translate into Guest's poetry in the cadence of language as rain falls, high and thin above the prairie and in the still life vignettes that depict the Countess and her travails. Guest also recreates Abbott's studio, painting it as a collage of colours and sounds, and making a sketch from its window. These links make it easy to read Guest into the poem's narratorial 'I', but like her earlier work, Guest herself is elusive. Whilst Guest can also be read into the Countess herself, it is through her that Guest is able to explore her own transition from the relative confines of the city to the expanses of the wide-open plains of the Midwest and to explore the mind-sets of the inhabitants of each, rather than as her. The Countess allows Guest to reflect on her own city sensibilities and to observe them at a distance. Instead of critiquing as provincial the ways of the Midwest, Guest critiques the cosmopolitan city attitudes of the Countess and her inability to understand Minneapolis. The Countess is always in the position of the other in the poem and only given 'permission to approach through that immigrant air' (*Collected Poems* 150). The Countess is a refugee and bears traces of the refugees from WWII that came to New York in the 1940s; a group that Guest's second husband counted him self among and with

[246] Terence Diggory, 'Barbara Guest and the Mother of Beauty' in *Women's Studies*, 30:1. 2001, p. 86. and Sara Lundquist 'The Midwestern New York Poet: Barbara Guest's *The Countess from Minneapolis*' in *Jacket* 10, October 1999.
[247] Lundquist, 'The Midwestern New York Poet'.

whom Guest associated and observed whilst living in New York and among which there was rumoured to be a real, but now penniless, countess.[248] Guest's choice of the title 'Countess' also describes the social, financial, and intellectual gap between Guest and Abbott, as women who had money enough to travel at will, and the blue-collar workers who run the boats on Mississippi and that shape, and are shaped by, the river.

Sara Lundquist describes *The Countess from Minneapolis* as 'an odd little book which eludes generic classification' and that 'reads something like a fragmented novella'.[249] This 'odd little book' is challenging as Guest mixes prose poetry, abstract verse, lyrics, dialogues, lists and weather reports, yet its narrative quality affords it an accessibility that is lacking in much of Guest's later works. Guest is, however, already exploring the formally progressive poetry that would characterise her later work. Maggie O'Sullivan writes in her introduction to *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North American and the UK*, that 'rather than perpetuating prevalent notions of writing poems "about" something', Guest and the other poets collected there have 'committed themselves to excavating *language* in all its multiple voices and tongues, known and unknown'.[250] In *The Countess from Minneapolis*, Guest's linguistic excavations enable her to manifest a diverse speaking subject that is both accessible and elusive. The combination of formal practices Guest employs describes a diversity to the female speaking subject and the world she inhabits, and moves away from the narrative, confessional poetries still most usually associated with feminist writing of the time. Guest's work from this period can be situated with the growing field of formally innovative feminist poetics, along with writers such as Marjory Welish, Susan Gevirtz, and Katheleen Fraser. The work of these women explores a female subjectivity that is not bounded by the tradition of the lyric and instead engages the 'feminine' in a poetics that is rife with collage, association, tonality, interruption and jump cuts and that is as minded to the fantastical as it is to the quotidian. These women are engaged in poetics that, through formal innovation, describes the 'multiple performance dimensions that characterise everyday life'[251] and that expands the range of the female poetic voice by (re)inhabiting textual spaces in ways that had been denigrated as feminine, but made up the formal backbone of a (male) avant-garde poetics. Olson's 'field poetics' is exemplar of this contradiction as he roundly claims textual and formal practices

[248] Hadley Guest, 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.
[249] Lundquist, 'The Midwestern New York Poet'.
[250] O'Sullivan, pp. 9 - 10.
[251] Retallack, p. 125.

that are considered feminine as a territory of the male avant-garde, subsuming them into an irrefutably male speaking subject, particularly in his Maximus poems. As Retallack notes, as the feminine has never been exclusively embodied or exercised in female writing, its manifestation is entirely a question of power[252] and whilst Olson strives to welds it convincingly, Guest and other feminist innovators were seeking to (re)claim it as a means of women's representation and liberation. Guest's work is both influence on and influenced by a growing community of female innovators, even whilst she, and many of them, resist classification within any particular group. Guest's multiplicit poetic practice is 'attempting to open up closed systems of signification' that 'critique[s] the meaning of authority, the reading of history' and which undertakes a 'radical revision of both meaning and history'.[253] This project of revision started in Guest's earlier works as she reread, –wrote, and –imagined classical myth and challenged contemporary gender politics but it gathers strength and impetus in both *The Countess from Minneapolis* and *Quilts.* In these poems, Guest can be seen to be making a direct challenge to a male dominated recording of history, space and place.

Lundquist states that, 'there is a constant overwhelming awareness of nature'[254] in *The Countess from Minneapolis*, an awareness that is intrinsic to all of Guest's work but that is seen particularly in her later collections such as *Defensive Rapture* and *If So, Tell Me*. *The Countess from Minneapolis* forms a bridge between the urban poems of Guest's early collections and the vast rural expanses of those of *Musicality*. *The Countess from Minneapolis* is focused on the intersection between the city, the river and the land around it and, on the people that inhabit these varying spaces as well as the impact that they have on each other. *The Countess from Minneapolis*, as well as Guest's later work, draws on the drives of both the body and nature as Guest replicates the rhythm of the river flow, and the pull of sexual desire making them manifest in the text resulting in tensions in form and language. Guest is also quick to identify the role of culture in the creation of these drives. Guest's rendering of the multiplicity of drives through the form of the poetry and words she uses give us a Countess who is a collision of contradictions. Through this tumult, Guest describes the social pressures at work on women of the period and links them to the pressures on nature. It is in this way Guest exhibits an intrinsic understanding of what it is to be an ecofeminist, showing herself to be someone who sees the inherent link between

[252] Retallack, p. 137
[253] Mulford, p. 239.
[254] Ibid.

the attitudes, treatment and forces acting on women, and those acting on nature and identifying them as one in the same.

The Countess can be read as an alter ego for Guest that she uses to explore Minneapolis and her own personality and responses to people, places and ways of being. Guest is curious and outgoing where the Countess is not, getting 'high on Mississippi rock water' (*Collected Poems* 146), but where the Countess is 'frightfully sad' and 'truly lost' (*Collected Poems* 155), this insularity, and even fear, allows Guest the opportunity to explore the closed-in self. As Lundquist points out, even as Guest critiques the Countess, for her to 'portray so clearly the Countess's unhappy distraction in dislocation is surely in some measure to share it'.[255] Lundquist goes on to note that the Countess 'suffers from a certain agoraphobia, unmixed, as it is in Barbara Guest, with a counterbalancing agoraphilia',[256] highlighting the duality of the self and Guest's recognition of it. In the character of the unhappy Countess we see Guest's own unhappy distraction at the dislocation of her own childhood which Lundquist calls 'typical […] in its frequent dislocations',[257] as Guest moved between family members, and then as an adult with her husbands, from the East to the West coast and back again. In her interview with Mark Hillringhouse, Guest states that 'its very hard on me not having a definite place. It has created a lot of anxiety. Growing up […] I never really had a "home". That was hard and it created a lot of unnecessary anxiety'[258] and we see this anxiety replicated in the character of the Countess. Through the Countess, Guest is describing her own childhood feelings of dislocation and rootlessness and exploring the unhappiness and feelings of being unsettled that accompany them.

Whilst we note the presence of Guest and her history in *The Countess from Minneapolis*, we should also note that of William Carlos William's *Paterson*. In interview, Hadley Halden Guest identifies William's as a significant influence on Guest[259] and it readily apparent in *The Countess from Minneapolis* both in terms of the form of the sequence and the relationships described between the human, the city and the nature that surrounds, that is interwoven with and exerts and influence on them. Whilst it would be wrong to suggest that in *The Countess from Minneapolis* Guest seeks to reimagine *Paterson,* their shared aspects are numerous even as the

[255] Ibid.
[256] Ibid.
[257] Ibid.
[258] Guest and Hillringhouse, p. 26.
[259] Hadley Guest, 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.

poems diverge. Guest's Mississippi echoes Williams' Passaic River and the sense of place, and of the three-way reciprocity of the relationship between the city, its wider natural environment and its inhabitants in both sequences is readily apparent. The similarities in form between *Paterson* and *The Countess from Minneapolis* are keenly apparent as both mix prose, dialogue and lists in with the poems as well as disrupting and challenging received notions of the role of syntax, punctuation, and the visual representation of the poem on the page, with both rendering the white space of the page as a place of signification. The influence of art on both Williams and Guest is equally apparent in the closing of the poems as each interrogates the role of art in the formation of a society. Guest's closing of the Countess sequence on the roof of the Walker Art Museum under the regal, unyielding stance of Smith's *Amaryllis* describes arts centrality and its marginality in the Minneapolis; its visibility and its invisibility up on the roof and in the lives being lived below. Williams dedicates *Paterson's* fifth book to the memory of Toulouse Lautrec and populates it with artists including Klee, Picasso, Dürer, Pollock and Bosch, which are then interspersed with letters from Alan Ginsberg and an interview in which he discusses E. E. Cummings. The proximity of art and poetry for both Williams and Guest is clearly represented in their respective works as is the role of each in the formation of the cities that they site themselves in, even while the inhabitants of each are unmoved or hostile. Having drawn attention to the role of art in the formation of these city spaces, both poets then make an associative link between art and the wider environment through their attention to the role of nature in the formation of the cities they write about. The river is a powerful symbol in both *Paterson* and *The Countess from Minneapolis*, the sound of which Williams describes as 'a language which we were and are seeking' and which he sough to 'interpret and use'.[260] In *The Countess from Minneapolis,* Guest continues this project of representation.

The opening poem of *The Countess from Minneapolis* (*Collected Poems* 143) places us immediately on the Mississippi river and is without punctuation. The poem's form becomes representational as the regular, blocked text replicates the rhythm of the turning of the wheel of the paddleboats that navigate the Mississippi in the autumn and winter. The regular spacing between the words, all of which are justified to give a very specific boxy shape to the text, suggest something very considered, utilitarian and almost dogged, and which lends to the rhythmic quality of the poem as Guest expresses the semiotic both visually and rhythmically. The reader is directed to the

[260] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson.* Ed Christopher MacGowan. (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. xiv.

regular, chugging pace of the barges that pilot the river and its constant flow south to the Gulf of Mexico:

> water wheels river turns asides over and under falls
> splice rapid brown slow turn fist thrust signal ahead
> winter autumn water barge season thrice water bank
> bridge system barge deep search over falls rush edge
> search nearly there river bottoms watersurge bridgespread

The dominant force in this poem is not the humans and their boats but the river as is falls, splices, surges, rushes and runs brown, dominating the area. The relentless drive of the river flow is replicated in the form of the words on the page that both describe its dominance as well as the way in which the city and the boats themselves shape it. The concatenation of the final words represent the reciprocal pressure in the relationship between the human and the river, 'watersurge bridgespread', and describe both the drive of the water in its surge, and the human challenge and desire to dominate it as the bridge spreads across it. Guest is describing a human that exists alongside nature, a human that has staked its claim to the river space but that is not wholly dominant in it as the river dictates the pace and shape of the human and the city, and its bridges. The focus that Guest placed in *The Location of Things* on the created nature of the city trees that are there by human design is contrasted here with a city that is shaped by, and around the river. Whilst it is certainly true that in the beginning, the river ports shaped New York, the difference that Guest notes in Minneapolis, is that New York as a city has taken over from the river that spawned it, and now seeks to control that space, but that the Mississippi still rules Minneapolis. This contrast is seen in the poem 'In Dock' (*Collected Poems* 20) where Guest refers to the 'Fleeting rivers' that have 'paved our zones' and that are 'alive in our hearts | as yesterday or tomorrow' but have no sense of an identity of their own or permanence outside of the human space. In these contrasting descriptions of the two river spaces, Guest draws our attention to the continued role of the Mississippi River in the lives of the Minneapolitans and, to the symbiosis in that relationship. The Minneapolitans accept the role of the river in the shaping of their way of life in contrast with the New Yorkers who seem almost oblivious to the Hudson as they go about their daily business. The nature in the city that Guest describes in urban poems like 'The Location of Things', is always confined, maintained, placed and mastered by the human, but the nature in the city that she describes in *The Countess from Minneapolis* is much less so. This shift describes Guest's own changing relationship with nature and the city as she moves between locations, visiting Mary

Abbott in Minnesota, between New York and Washington, D.C., and then later, between New York and Long Island and so the confined and created nature of the city space is complimented by the wilder nature and spaces of the prairies, plains and dunes.

Guest describes the influence of the Mississippi over her, drawing on its power in '7 Eating Lake Superior Cisco Smoked Fish' (*Collected Poems* 146) and describes herself as 'high on Mississippi rock | water' that 'flows over the rock leaving rich traces'. This positive image of the river and the mineral qualities of its water, is challenged by the statement that these life affirming minerals are only found in the 'tough arm of water that likes to mingle with the crowd and pick up its | bitters in a dirty old smokey fist', an image that echoes that of the sea's 'strong wrist' in 'The Hero Leaves His Ship'. In these lines Guest not only identifies the role of the river in the creation of Minneapolis, but that of the Minneapolitans in the creation of the river as its waters mingle with the crowds, picking up their bitters and smoke, their industrial and personal wastes. The river is both creative of, and created by, the human and its culture, and in this recognition, Guest unities the human and more-than-human, placing them both in the same space, shrinking them in and showing us that our wastes do go somewhere - right back to where they came from. Timothy Morton makes this point in the introduction to *Ecology Without Nature* where he describes the foregrounding of nature in texts such as Guest's, as being a means by which nature 'stops being That Thing Over There that surrounds and sustains us', and noting that 'when you start to think about where your waste goes, your world starts to shrink'.[261] Guest is also describing nature as tough and in doing so, as she associates women with nature, they are imbued with these qualities and become tough. From its passage through the masculine, industrialised crowds, the river water has picked up their bitterness and taken on their dirt and so taken on some of its qualities. These lines show Guest seeking, and seeing, a feminine that encompasses elements of the masculine and thus is one that includes the other in its formation of self, so that it is not 'pure', 'feeble' or 'weak because the minerals are lacking'. Whilst Williams manifests both man and place in the symbolic figure of Paterson, Guest expands this relationship and draws in a multiplicity of voices, particularly women's voices, into the city that she describes. For Guest, Minneapolis is a place that is defined by its multiplicity of associations and influences as they

[261] Morton, p. 1.

each act on the other resulting in an ecotone that is in a constant state of flux and mutual, if unrecognised, influence.

In these early poems from the sequence, we see Guest as a poet who inhabits both the natural spaces of the river, and the created city spaces and she returns to this duality in the poem '8 Musings on the Mississippi' (*Collected Poems* 146). Guest describes Minneapolis as 'persistently nagged | by the unreasonable river that both gladdens and disturbs her heart', a river that drives the poet to 'study, | chew, harry a map' as a means of surviving the harsh Minnesotan winters. For Guest, the city is female, troubled as she is by her unreasonable river, and the woman who sits in 'a hut by the log fire […] looking past the tears of confusion and loneliness', who is perhaps representative of Abbott, is seeking to understand, to visualise and trace with her map. The image of the map suggests a dislocation from the actuality of the city and the river. In earlier poems such as 'Les Réalités' and 'The Location of Things', Guest has walked or moved around the city almost as a fláneur, physically inhabiting and appropriating the space as she goes but in the grip of the 'long, unsettling, barren Minnesota winter' her recourse to surveying the space is entirely static. The river is then filtered through the lens of the industrial, the man-made, the mapped and that it has, for all its strength and vigour, become a created space. Thus, in contrast to her earlier poems, when Guest seeks make nature a point of liberation, she fails as it is mapped, controlled and shaped and so cannot be the site of liberation that she seeks. Whilst the blocked text of the prose of this poem reflects the shut-in nature of the winter and the slowing of the drives of both the human and the more-than-human in the winter months, it also reflects the slowing of the river by the human interventions of dredging and shaping. This slowing is then contrasted with the long sentences that replicate the continual flow of the Mississippi and the timeless quality of the river and more-than-human nature. Guest's places the visual presentation of the text in tension with the long flow of the sentences within it, drawing on the semiotic to describe the flow of the river and the locked-in feeling of the Minnesotan winter. The imagery of these prose poems describe the strictures of the created spaces on the wild nature, and their visual presentation in the blocked, justified text echoes the boundaries that Guest describes.

Whilst Guest has established the dominance of the Mississippi over Minneapolis early on in the sequence, she has also recognised the influence of the city and its human and heavily industrialised inhabitants on its banks and waters. The poems in which Guest describes the river; 1, 7, 8, 10, 32, all describe an uncomfortable

symbiosis between the human industrial and the natural, more-than-human river. The strong, dominant river still flows, but it becomes ‘the unappetizing swell’ which is polluted, bridged, mapped and navigated and lacking an identity other than that which it is given. In the poem ’12 Prairie Houses’ (*Collected Poems* 149) however, Guest moves away from the river to describe a different relationship between the human and more-than-human nature, turning to that which exists between the elemental prairies and the settlers who build on them:

> Unreasonable lenses refract the
> sensitive rabbit holes, mole dwellings and snake
> climes where twist burrows and sneeze
> a native species
>
> into houses
>
> corresponding to hemispheric requests
> of flatness
>
> euphemistically, sentimentally
> termed prairie.
>
> On earth exerting a wilful pressure
>
> something like a stethoscope against the breast
>
> only permanent.

The text here is no longer in blocks but moves out across the page, suggesting the push of the gusting wind and the expanse and rolling sweep of the land itself. The land and the elements wholly shape the houses built on the prairies. Even though they exert ‘a wilful pressure’ on it, these houses are not part of the prairie and Guest describes them as submissive, even in their ‘baronial burdening’, for ‘the heavens strike hard on the prairies’. This elemental threat is discrete to the prairie space and is not seen on the river that is now so controlled and confined. It is little wonder then, that the Countess, who is not present in the sequence until poem 15, should fear these unconfined prairie spaces that, as we find in poem 21 (*Collected Poems* 155), ‘confuse [her] so’, echoing Guest’s own negotiations with this new space. There are echoes of Mary Austin’s *Land Of Little Rain* in Guest’s descriptions of the local fauna and in her intrinsic understanding that in order to survive in this space, one must come as kin rather than coloniser.

Guest's mixing of contrasting prose and free-verse poetries in the sequence describes a formal ecology that can be identified with the physical experience of the speaking subject. Marcella Durand describes ecological poetry as being 'much like ecological living', in that it 'recycles materials, functions with an intense awareness of space, seek equality of value between all living and unliving things, [and] explores multiple perspectives as an attempt to subvert the dominant paradigms of mono-perception, consumption and hierarchy'.[262] Guest's poetics draws on the materiality of the environment in its formal representations but in doing so, communicates an awareness of space and the place of the human within it, both in the industrialised, controlled space of the river running though the city and its mapping, and in the wide, inhospitable space of the prairie. Guest's use of blocked text represents a pressure and a containment, usually on the environment, but in '39 June' (*Collected* Poems 164), this convention is reversed as the blocked text describes elemental nature of the prairie space and the monotony of drought and dust:

> dust dust dust dust dust dust
> only small rain small rain small
> thin thin rain starved rain rin

The repetition of dust describes it as a constant presence and echoes the image of the dust that fills the Countess's eyes in poem 21. The final, truncated rain that becomes 'rin' describes the prairie rains that do not reach the ground and that are so insubstantial in the hot air they evaporate high in the atmosphere and are starved and thin. The absence of the human in these three lines, a contrast to the poems about the river, render the drought and dust threatening, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. The image of the small, thin, starved rain is in contrast to the image of the river that runs vast though the poem and the opulence of the spaces around it. The prairie is then described as a barren space, a space defined by a lack of water just as the city is defined by its presence. The repetition in the poem echoes not only the nature of alienation and depression as Sarah Lundquist suggest,[263] but obsessive thoughts and the seeming endlessness of the dry prairie. This seeming endlessness unsettles the Countess, and rather than being liberated by the vast space and seeming freedom of the prairie, she is cowed by it as 'the sidewalk drifted into dirt and her grey eyes filled with dust'. The Countess is, however, also unable to find liberation in the city space. In this description of the Countess's inability to settle in either place, Guest describes the Countess as one who is stuck between restriction

[262] Durand, pp. 117- 118
[263] Lundquist, 'The Midwestern New York Poet'.

and liberation, highlighting again, the position of women who were ill at ease with either subscribing to the feminine mystique or with its wholesale rejection.

In poems 21 and 22 (*Collected Poems* 155), the Countess struggles with her life in Minneapolis and Guest identifies the contradiction of the Countess's situation in these prose pieces as the Countess describes herself as feeling 'frightfully sad somehow and truly lost' in the streets of Minneapolis, but also confused by the prairies. This impasse draws on the images of women stuck between the wars and water in 'All Grey-haired My Sisters' and 'The Hero Leaves His Ship', and Atalanta in 'Atalanta in Arcadia' (*Collected Poems* 32) who is tricked into marriage because she cannot be allowed to remain free and as she is. Guest's Countess is caught between the feminine mystique, that is represented by the city space, and the liberated, 'pioneering purpose'[264] of the feminine that is represented by the wild nature of the prairies, echoing the female figures in Guest's earlier works. Guest describes the temporary nature of the created, city space and its society in the face of the wild nature of the prairies as the Countess hesitates 'as the sidewalk drifted into dirt'. In poem 22, Guest then links the Countess to their destruction as she shreds her curl papers 'as she would attack a silo', silos that are representative of the human mastery of the wild space of the prairies:

> Seated at the mirror rolling up her hair, feeling the thin papers curl around her fingers, the air in contrast thick from the low glaucous clouds, the colour of flour, her fingers twisting the papers into shapes like grain bins –– cylindrical ... exactly the shape ... remembering those on passed driving out over the rutted roads. The same routes she often dreamed of as passage to better things. [...] She tore into the curl papers as would attack a silo, knowing she had rendered them useless as the silo wrestled from its usefulness would in turn relinquish the fortunes that yet sustained her.

Guest uses the paired images of the wild, natural clouds and the produced and refined grain flour in this poem to describe the duality of the Minnesota prairies and the uneasy relationship between nature and agriculture that she sees there. Guest associates the low glaucous clouds, which are the colour of flour, with the curl papers that the Countess twists 'into shapes like grain bins'. The Countess longs to escape but depends on this agrarian industry 'for the fortunes that yet sustain her'. This desire for liberation co-locates the Countess with nature, but Guest also describes her rejection of it as she applies the unnatural curl to her hair. The Countess's recognition that she is unhappy with this unnatural state, represented in her

[264] Friedan, p. 59.

shredding of the curl papers, describes the circularity of the Countess's unhappiness and her feelings of being trapped and contained by these wide-open spaces and also by the human structures on them. We see that the Countess is unable to engage fully with either position and in this, Guest again draws our attention to the impossibility of realising a liberated female self when the only options that one sees are so disparate.

Guest's blocked, justified text in this section echoes that of Williams' letters and reportage sections in *Paterson*. As it did in the section 'Musings on the Mississippi', the section describes constricted, hemmed in feelings and here the Countess twists and shreds the curl papers, mirroring the chewed, harried map of the earlier section and the broken and mended parquet floor, echoing the divagations, falls and dredgings of the river. As in *Paterson*, the differing visual representations of the text suggest multiple, changeable distances between the speaking subject and the poetic object. It also suggest multiple, interchangeable speaking subjects and speaking perspectives. As the speaking voice moves between William's, the city, the character Peterson and a host of contemporary poets and local people, real and imagined, in *Paterson*, so Guest mirrors these shifts in *The Countess from Minneapolis* as she moves between the lyric I of the poem, the voice of the Countess and conversations and reports from local people, legends and events. This multiplicity of voices describes the layering of influences and controls exerting pressure on the human and more-than-human and the spaces they inhabit. The Countess's feelings of sadness and loss reflect the depressing weight of these pressures on the individual and particularly those exerted by the feminine mystique on women as she shreds her curl papers. Guest image of the Countess with her dust filled eyes as she is stood on the dusty sidewalk having been thinking about hot baths, dresses and dinner is particularly redolent of the societal pressures placed on women and the feelings of meaninglessness that they might engender.

Guest describes a dissatisfaction with a feminised domestic and its rituals that are without a 'promising livelihood' in poem 34 (*Collected Poems* 161):

> And still she said,
> walking towards Crocus Hill Market,
> one desires to live. I wish there
> were wishes and not lists.
> I wish vegetables were gown
> by heart and artichokes would heal,
> I wish this rhythm

of my approaching butcher
were more than a knuckle
attaching itself to me
perhaps a crocus, a
root of limited possibilities,
yet promising livelihood.

In this poem the distinction between the sequence's dual voices blurs. Through its lack of speech marks, the 'I' who wishes 'there | were wishes and not lists', can be read as either the narratorial I, that may be Guest, or that of the Countess. The desire for wishes rather than lists and the image of the knucklebone, representative of tending to and feeding the family, and that attaches itself rather than being something that is intrinsic to the body, describe the duality of women who long to create, to wish, and who are restricted to the to the care of the home and family. The image of the knuckle echoes the fist in '7 Eating Lake Superior Cisco Smoked Fish' that picks up the bitters of the crowd and again, we see Guest describing the assimilation of the precepts of the feminine mystique. The assimilation of these attitudes leads to their perpetuation by women and they take on the role of self-regulation, something that Friedan noted as women asked themselves, 'who am I?' and why they are 'so dissatisfied' on finding that they 'wake up one morning and there's nothing to look forward to'.[265] The notion of woman as fláneur is again troubled in this section as domestic restrictions of the home impede her ability to map or take an ownership of the city as she walks; the possibilities are limited even whilst the livelihood is promising.

In *The Countess from Minneapolis*, Guest's representation of the dual influences of the human created city and more-than-human nature, acting on and through an individual, provides a means of realising a female speaking subject that is derived of both the human and the more-than-human, the city and nature. Guest attempts to manifest a female speaking subject in these poems as an ecotone space that draws on, and incorporates aspects of, the human cultural and more-than-human nature and which can be seen as a distinct entity even though it is derived of those adjacent to it. This female subject is contrary to that which Guest sees in the feminine mystique and is informed by the natural rhythms of the season, water and the weather rather than the culturally produced structures of the city and its industry. The ecopoetics of Guest's sequence are seen most readily in the formal representations of the intersection of the human and more-than-human in the text.

[265] Friedan, p. 19.

Bordered and hemmed: the feminine mystique on the American plains.

The dislocated figure of the Countess can be contrasted with the women of *Quilts* (*Collected Poems* 191), who are firmly located on both the prairies and plains and in the domestic that the Countess is unable to embrace. In *Quilts*, Guest presents women who are in stark contrast to the Countess and the women of her earlier poems; these women are strong and autonomous in nature, and in the domestic space of the home rather than restricted and cowed by them. In *Quilts*, Guest suggests that the domestic space is a place of female power and authority and that 'Occupation: Housewife'[266] is not always the repressive state that Friedan's book suggests, pre-empting the millennial emergence of a feminist domesticity that focuses on the empowerment of women as political actors.[267] Rachel Bowlby writes, however, that 'the rejection of domesticity has seemed a principle, if not *the* principle, tenet of feminist demands for freedom', noting that 'the home figures as a place where the woman is confined, and from which she must be emancipated'.[268] Sara Ahmed identifies the home as the political nexus of feminism, stating that 'if we think of the second-wave feminist motto "the personal is political", we can think of feminism as happening in the very places that have historically been bracketed as not political: in domestic arrangements, at home, every room of the house can become a feminist room',[269] going on to render housework an act of revolution saying 'feminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild the master's residence'.[270] Guest's poetry is much less about transforming and rebuilding than recognising and (re)inscribing. As she did in her early poems, Guest refuses to site the domestic home as a locus of female oppression, but seeks to (re)inscribe it as a seat of female autonomy and authority, placing it within the wider narrative of history. The women of *Quilts* are the edging and interlining of wars and the warmth of the home's hearth as they wholly engage in the domestic space and are entirely located there even though Guest demonstrates their reach beyond it. The focus of these women is inwards, towards the home and domestic spaces, and whilst Guest places them within the context of a wider history of literature and war, the women themselves are not part of

[266] Friedan, p. 44.
[267] Carroll, p. 52 and 55.
[268] Rachel Bowlby, 'Domestication' in Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman eds. *Feminism Beside Itself*. (New York: Routledge. 1995), p. 78.
[269] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life.* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2017), pp. 3 – 4.
[270] Ibid, p. 7.

it. Guest presents a history that is specific and relevant to the women, and recognises the events that have shaped their lives, validating them by setting them alongside wider historical events. Guest describes her quilters as warrior women who are intrinsically linked to the home and nature, and whilst they are described as bordered and hemmed in the home, Guest challenges this as a confinement, describing it instead, as a defining of territory in much the same way that the early pioneers did as they struck out across America. Even Friedan states that whilst 'the material details of life' for the wives of pioneers were 'cooking and cleaning, [and] taking care of the physical needs of husband and children', she notes that 'the women who went west with the wagon trains also shared the pioneering purpose'[271] and it is this sense of inherited purpose that Guest seeks to describe.

Annette Kolodny describes the movement of the American Frontier outwards and onto the prairies as a point at which women began to claim the new terrain as their own. She states that while their 'husbands and fathers looked with a suspicious eye upon the treeless prairies and clung, where they could, to the edges of the woods', the prairie, 'spoke to women's fantasies' noting that in their 'public and private documents, [women] claim[ed] the new terrain as their own'.[272] In *Quilts*, Guest does not present us with these pioneer women who claimed the land as their own, but those who came after them, their daughters and granddaughters, who are now firmly rooted in the rural, domestic space of the prairie home. As agrarians who farm the prairies and plains, the land on which they live is intrinsic to the fabric of these women's rural existence as it shapes them and they way they live their lives. The domesticity that Guest describes in *Quilts* a far cry from that of the suburban housewife that Betty Freidan saw as such an oppression and that Guest alludes to in her early poems. In *Quilts*, Guest locates the domestic feminine in the rural rather than the suburban space and in doing so she identifies the agency and autonomy of women and describing them as protectors, teachers, poets, and warriors. They are the ones who stitch the clothes and bed linens for the family, the ones who cook, preserve and store the food to last the winter and who, through these skills, ensure a family's survival from year to year. These women have a purpose and recognisable skills that are tied to the land and the seasons. In comparison, the suburban housewives the Guest describes in her earlier work have none of these skills and their domestic lives can be seen to lack the purpose and urgency of these women

[271] Friedan, p. 59.
[272] Annette Kolodny, *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630 – 1860.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 6.

whose homes are situated in the rural space of the prairies and plains. For the suburban housewife, food and clothes are bought rather than made, and have become consumer objects rather than that which nurtures and sustains. Through the women in *Quilts*, Guest is attempting to describe liberated women from whom the rural domestic is a site of empowerment, rather than one of subordination. Guest's own poor childhood in rural Florida has echoes in *Quilts* as the 'backwoods people' who 'were always very kind to her', sometimes even feeding her,[273] are described with dignity, grace and strength. These women have authority and autonomy in the domestic space and in doing so they refute the feminine mystique even though they appear to have been subsumed by it. Guest's location of these women in the rural space of the prairies echoes Kolodny's statement that they claimed the terrain as their own. Furthermore, Guest's identification of the quilt as an historical and cultural object, places both women and nature as the foundation of each. Guest seeks to celebrate the role of women in the domestic space in this poem, and whilst some of the images may trouble this positive representation, the poem foregrounds the autonomy and authority of women in the rural domestic space.

Alongside the poems representations of the domestic space, the formally innovative poetics of Guest's *Quilts* continues place it at a distance from the more widely recognised feminist poetics of the period. The absence of a reliably fixed speaking subject in many of the poems in the sequence places it at odds with a feminist poetics that demanded a defined female identity, even whilst the poem purposefully celebrates female community and women's experiences. Guest's conjunction of textual spacings, found phrases such as clichés, quilting instructions and patterns, and parodied literary conversation and historical revisioning result in a complex, intertextual poetics that defies easy or fixed interpretation. However, the experimental poetics of *Quilts* manifests a 'self-determination in art as invention' wherein the creation of the self is bound up in the creation of 'language games and forms of life that draw on public knowledge and explorations of otherness'.[274] In this way, Guest manifests a feminist subject position that questions dominant notions of feminism and female identity on multiple fronts. Joan Retallack finds that a feminist poetics that insists on a recognisable, locatable, definable female speaking subject 'directs readers towards the subjectivity of empathetic identification and away from autonomous, critical production', going on to note that 'the prompt for female reader as writer (from Ostriker and Butler as well as Rich et al.) is, after all, towards

[273] Hadley Guest, 'Susan Gervits Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.
[274] Retallak, p. 115.

repetition with a difference (…) [which] may just not be different enough'.[275] In *Quilts,* Guest's innovative poetics explicitly seeks to manifest an autonomous female speaking subject and to place her within the spaces of the home and experimental poetics in order to celebrate the multiplicity of her difference.

The first poem in the sequence, ' "Couch of space" ' (*Collected Poems* 191), opens with an allusion to the dangers of the pioneer trail, but which might equally be read as representative of the dangers that might lurk outside of the relative safety of the domestic space of the home and marriage:

> Thought nest where secrets bubble
> through the tucking, knowing what it's like outside,
> drafts and preying beasts, midnight plunders
> testing your camp site and the aery demons, too,
> waiting to plunge their icy fingers into your craw
> and you crawl under, pull the quilt on top
> making progress to the interior, soul's cell.

Guest's 'outside' in this strophe is both the physical, natural space outside of the home or pioneer camp that is subject to the very real threat of preying beasts and midnight plunders, and the metaphorical space of the liberated woman who would leave the domestic home and family. Guest is alluding to what she sees as the lack of meaningful choice that is offered to women; that they are confined within the domestic space of the home, or must live outside it in a space that is beset by preying beasts and midnight plunders. As we have seen in the poems discussed in the first chapter, Guest is seeking to realise an ecotone between these spaces that will allow women to have autonomy and authority within the home and have the freedom of work and a life outside of it. Guest critiques a feminism that would abandon the home as a site of women's autonomy and authority, calling them 'demons', something to be hidden from. The imagery of birds; 'nest', 'aery' and 'craw', repeats from the earlier poems but these birds 'crawl under' and make 'progress to the interior, soul's cell' rather than being bright, flying crossers of boundaries as they were in poems such 'The Brown Studio'. *Quilts* celebrates women in the home and seeks to empower that space as a location of women's authority and autonomy rather than subscribe to a feminism that rejects it as a site of women's power. The poem describes the multiplicity of pressures at work on women,

[275] Ibid, p. 124.

both inside and outside of the home, and the difficulties in reconciling or choosing between them.

Guest places women at the centre of this domestic space in the third strophe and, as a means of validation, allies their skills within the domestic to high culture through her reference to poetry:

> You float now tideless, secure in the rhythm
> of stuffing and tying, edging and interlining,
> bordered and hemmed; no longer unacquainted
> you inhabit the house with its smooth tasks
> sorted in scrap bags like kitchen nooks
> the smelly cookery of cave where apples
> ripen and vats flow domestic yet with schemes
> of poetry sewed to educate the apron dawn.

Guest's listing of the skills of the domestic space as the 'stuffing and tying, edging and interlining', the sustaining of the scrap bag and ripening of apples, describes the domestic as a location of specific skills and understanding, and where knowledge is transferred between women. Guest's poem recognises the skill in, and the need for, the woman-to-woman education of the domestic arts. Guest's quilts become vehicles by which knowledge is transferred between women, and she celebrates this later in the poem as she places these quilts, and so the work of these women, in a wider historical context: as obsolete medieval war garments that were 'worn simultaneously for protection' (*Collected Poems* 192), and traces their history from the 'First Dynasty 3400' that 'quilted for warmth' (*Collected Poems* 193), to Europe where 'Sicily invented the first BED QUILTS!' and then on to India and China as 'Calico ancestors | snuggling under quilts' (*Collected Poems* 193). Through her reference to pharaohs and war, Guest's locates the significance of women's work in both the domestic space and then within wider, male dominated culture. In this (re)location of women within the historical, Guest seeks to (re)write it and to include their role in the survival of the pioneers. In this way, Guest's quilts anticipate Ursula K. Le Guin's 'containers' as Le Guin turns away from stories of weaponry and war saying 'I'm not telling that story. We've heard it, we've all heard all about all the sticks an spears and swords, the things to bash and poke with, the long, hard things, but we have not heard about the thing to put things in, the container for things contained. That is a new story. That is news'.[276] Le Guin's 'thing to put things in' seeks to refocus attention and narrate

[276] Ursula K. Le Guin *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.* (London: Ignota. 2019), p. 29.

the on-going relationships between lives and the land,[277] and not just the stories of its conquest. Guest's quilts (re)tell the pioneer stories, by quietly stitching the women back into them. The poem's close, 'this quilt's virago', has multiple significations as Guest refers back to the medieval war garments but also describes the women who inhabit the rural domestic spaces as warriors and female poets. Whilst naming only Marianne Moore, Guest also references the scores of women poets, published and unpublished, whose schemes of poetry she describes as having educated the apron dawn. The schemes of poetry that are sewed to educate the apron dawn describe how women's writing, and their quilts, negotiate 'definitions of home as a material space and home as an ideal place'[278] as Guest contrasts the comfortable perusal of these domestic skills with the dark, violent images earlier in the poem. The prairie homes of Guest's quilters are both material spaces that provide protection against the elements and, idealised places where 'vats flow' and 'apples ripen'. Guest goes on to use 'quilts' in the place of poetry, poets and philosophers throughout the sequence, referring to them as 'REVERED QUILTS' (*Collected Poems* 198) and suggesting the Keats was a great loss to 'romantic quilts', describing him as 'cut | off in his prime, dropped like silk into calico scraps', and bemoaning the 'untimely | decease of Shelly' and all the 'unfinished quilts –– I mean –– poems | he left' (Ibid). Guest's slip-of-the-tongue use of the word quilts, allies the domestic work of women with that of the poetic canon and, in turn, draws attention to the lack of women in that canon.

Poem 8 (*Collected Poems* 196) contrasts this lack of women in the canon with the community of women who work together at 'Aunt Dinah's quilting bee'. Guest's visual presentation of the text describes the community of women and is significant in this poem. This visual presentation, both expresses and then moves beyond the semiotic that Kristeva describes as the visual nature of Guest's language 'articulates other aspects of meaning which are more than mere significations'[279] and the text becomes focused round a central point as the women work on a shared task. Kristeva's semiotic as 'trans-verbal' is represented in both the visual nature of the poem and in the 'rhythmical and melodic inflections'[280] that that representation brings; the rhythm

[277] Donna Haraway, 'Receiving Three Mochilas in Colombia: Carrier Bags for Staying with the Trouble', in Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction.* (London: Ignota. 2019), p. 17.
[278] Catherine Wiley and Fiona R. Barnes, eds *Homemaking: Women Writers and the Poetics of Home*. (New York: Garland Publishing Inc, 1996), p. xix.
[279] Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*. Translated by Jeanine Herman. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). p. 11.
[280] Ibid.

of the stitching, the shared community of the task, the silences in the speech of friends and family, and their bursts of song and laughter. Through this expression of the trans-verbal, Guest manifests tensions in the poem as the women's names are set out in relation to each other but can be read horizontally, or clockwise or anticlockwise round the circle. The short phrases of the opening lines suggest the snapshot of memory and contrast with the contiguousness of the grouped women and then conversation. The text pictorially represents the women seated around the table or the quilt as they work, 'Quilting the Log Cabin Pattern: 1850':

> Fisherman's glove filed in a cornfield. Seen on
> the way to Aunt Dinah's quilting bee:
>
> Aunt Dinah
>
> Phebe's visitor Rebekah
> from Chattanooga Falls
>
> Phebe Nellie
>
> Liza Sarah
>
> Emily Jane
>
> Quilting the Log Cabin Pattern: 1850

Guest's textual grouping in poem 8, replicates both the shared nature of the work and the women as they are seated around the table. I also see this grouping as representative of the community of female writers and artists that Guest was part of in New York and who sought to support each other and their work. The communal nature and longevity of this female activity and community, described by their 'Quilting the Log Cabin Pattern: 1850', contrasts with the usually singular women in the poems discussed in chapter one. In 'The Location of Things', Guest's female protagonist looks outward 'watching leaves', and in 'Dido and Aeneas' the plaster flamingos of the suburban lawn signal the isolated and restless woman who hears the call of the sea. In *Quilts*, however, Guest's women find community and meaning in their domesticity, contrasting with the isolation that she describes in her earlier poems. The visual representation of Guest's circle of quilting women is strategic in this poem. Erica Kaufman comments that Guest's work 'introduces the notion of the sovereignty of female space' and that this space is 'an expanse built by word

placement and syntactical revolt'.[281] Whilst Kauffman's essay refers to 'The Location of Things', finding that the location of Guest's speaking subject and questions of the poem's opening lines seek to disrupt gendered activities within the space of the home, in *Quilts*, it seek to re-establish them, representing them positively and describing their sovereignty in that community space. The quilting bee is a wholly female space and Guest's word placement describes the circularity of the women's community and their lives. In *Quilts*, Guest plays with syntax, challenging the reader to interpret the women's spaces that she creates and refusing, as she does so, to confine them to a domestic space that is confining either by patriarchal terms or the radical feminism that perpetuates the binary through its reversal.

Guest's veneration of the quilts and women's work in the rural domestic that they represent locates them outside of the 'pragmatic needs and demands of the quotidian'.[282] It validates their practice of the 'essential, taken-for-granted continuum of mundane activities',[283] by (re)appropriating the domestic and rendering what was a space of subordination, an affirmation. Rita Felski states that 'everyday life is typically distinguished from the exceptional moment: the battle, the catastrophe, the extraordinary deed',[284] but in *Quilts* Guest links women's everyday to the exceptional moment, describing it as the foundation on which those moments are built and in so doing, seeks to make it exceptional too. With this in mind, Guest's visual presentation of the text in this poem can be described as 'the visual enactment of perspective and difference'[285] and as 'the site of watchfulness where we discover *how* we hear ourselves take in the outside world and tell it back to ourselves'.[286] Guest's poetry, and *Quilts* in particular, with her disruption of form and the visual nature of her text, demands that we see the importance of the role of women in the domestic space and particularly in the context of women's proximity to nature. In *Quilts*, Guest seeks to differentiate between the vapid, commercialised domesticity of the feminine mystique, which she sees plaguing suburban women, and the domesticity of the women in the rural setting whose domestic skill, historically at least, was their primary means of comfort and survival.

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[281] Erica Kaufman, Jacket 36.
[282] Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 80.
[283] Ibid. p. 77.
[284] Ibid. p. 80.
[285] Kathleen Fraser, 'Line. On the Line. Lining Up. Lined With. Between the Lines. Bottom Line.' In Robert Frank and Henry Sayer, *The Line in Postmodern Poetry*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), p. 152.
[286] Ibid p. 153.

Euphemisms of nature: (re)creating nature as a feminist text

Throughout her poems of the late 1980s, but particularly in the poem *Musicality* and the collection *Fair Realism,* the visual presentation of Guest's texts draw attention to the proximity of women to nature. In these works, we see Guest seeking to create feminist artistic practices and reclaim the spaces of nature and the domestic as places of feminine autonomy and authority. *Musicality*[287] was originally published alongside drawings by June Felter and is one of Guest's many collaborations with female artists. Alongside Felter's line drawings, Guest describes the vast nature of the prairie space and its weather and in doing so, acknowledges the artificiality of that representation; the euphemisms of nature. In *Fair Realism*, Guest goes on to unpick the construction of nature in the poem 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality' (*Collected Poems* 221), exposing the cultural construction of both nature and the feminine. Guest deliberately co-locates women and nature, and in so doing, exposes the transient nature of culture and our responses to nature. In these poems, and as Kimberly Lamm states, specifically in her work with June Felter, Guest is working towards 'creating feminist artistic practices among women that exceed struggles with and against male dominance'.[288] Guest's representations of nature are a means of asserting the feminine and the form and language of the poem critiques the male dominated logos that is 'reproduced (from) nature'[289] whilst rejecting it as its locus. However, Guest's recognition of the artificiality of these reproductions, through her descriptions of them as euphemisms and copies, problematises this critique as, in interview, she states that the poem was written not with a real, specific landscape in mind, but Felter's drawings of a 'moving landscape of house and field and mountain',[290] rendering the poem ekphrastic. As such, Guest's landscape is not a real landscape but one that is wholly constructed.

Kimberly Lamm states that, from Guest's earliest works, 'nature possesses a capricious and unwieldy power; the human being is fragile and barely visible by comparison',[291] calling Felter's line drawings in *Musicality* 'restrained and modest', and saying that she 'uses the pencil to suggest rather than depict'.[292] This suggestion rather than depiction can also be applied to Guest's text as although its prairie

[287] Barbara Guest and June Felter, *Musicality* (Berkley: Kelsey St. Press, 1988).
[288] Lamm, p. 115.
[289] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 77.
[290] Guest and Hillringhouse, p. 25.
[291] Lamm, p. 126.
[292] Ibid.

landscape is not detailed, it is instantly recognisable and it, and Felter's drawings, represent a vastness of space, and a depth of discourse with just a few, seemingly simple, lines. Kathleen Fraser find that 'Guest's trust of the timeless, minimal gesture as locus of the mysterious – its often unnameable presence – proposes a different visual encounter, powerful in what it leaves *un*said, as in a line drawing where the minimal number of strikes may open to immensity' (emphasis in the original).[293] In *Musicality*, the minimal gestures of Guest and Felter result in a visual encounter that leave much unsaid in its representation of nature and the human and the spaces in which they interact. The mysterious is found in this space of their interaction, a space that is fleeting and moveable yet recognisable and relatable. Like *Quilts*, the poem's location is rural and agrarian and pulls the reader down into the minute, human domesticity of these large, open spaces as well as forcing us out to the trees, encircling mountains and up into the vastness of the sky. Fraser's back cover note to the 1988 limited edition describes the work as an 'inspired collaboration' in which 'all is fugitive, perishable, mortal - - drawing one into the mind of pure longing as natural and imagined landscapes extend each other's tenuous fictions'. The fragile fictions that Guest and Felter create in their natural and imagined landscapes are fluid, changeable and transient. But spare though the poem and the drawings that accompany it are, between them they layer images that soon become greater than the sum of their parts and extend the text out into the seemingly vast blank spaces of the pages that surround them.

The blank space of the page that accompanies this work represents not only the vastness of the plains that the tornado moves across, but compares it to the minuteness of the human. The broad spaces in the poem anticipates those of Guest's 1996 collection, *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* of which Marjorie Welish states that Guest's use of space 'express[es] the semantics of the blank' as, far from being empty page, these blank spaces are loaded with meaning and should be read as such. Welish goes on to suggests that Guest's 'entire oeuvre […] foregrounds an intertextual usage of space' where it 'participates in the semiotic play of differences across a signifying surface'.[294] This is certainly true of *Musicality* where the blank space of the page around the words seeks to inform their meaning and draw attention to them. We have already seen Guest use spacing and so the page as a means of signification in her earlier work, but in *Musicality*, it comes right to the fore. Guest's practice in the poem of placing the written text only on the right hand page

[293] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, p.198.
[294] Marjorie Welish 'Spaced Intertext' in *Jacket* 36, Late 2008.

leaves an expanse of space to its left, leaving phrases, such as 'the example of cyclonic creativity equally devastates', suspended in the middle of the upper right quarter of the double page. The words are small within the wide context of the pages themselves, and the placement affords them both a gravitas in the isolation of their proclamation, and a transience as the page is turned over on them. In contrast, the proximity of Felter's lightly drawn clouds to the text describes the oppressive menace of the tornado's destructive disk, 'barrel cloud fallen from the cyclone truck'. In the poem, the silence of these blank spaces is made to signify the expanses of the plains and the vast reach of the natural and as such, the isolation of the text in these spaces signifies the smallness of the human and of language in the face of them. The importance of these huge blank spaces becomes clear when the original edition is compared to the text in the *Collected Poems,* which is reproduced without any indication of the page breaks or reference to the drawings, and its reach across the page is lost, as well as the significance of the page itself. The poem is a dialogue between the vastness and power of the sky and the land and the smallness and insignificance of the human and domestic which presents a fleeting but unassailable insight into the relationship between the human and the natural in the face of such vast, wild nature as the tornado. A dialogue such as this cannot be represented by words alone and so the spaces between them, their place on the page and the drawings around them become significant. These spaces are imbued with the semiotic as it is made manifest in the windswept syntax and scattered form of the text's presentation.

In exploring the relationship between women and nature, Guest once again seeks to disrupt the traditional gendering of the Romantic sublime by placing a female speaking subject in dialogue with the storm. Again, we see a speaking subject who is 'continually in danger of becoming immersed or overtaken' by a nature that 'possesses a capricious and unwieldy power' so that the 'human being is fragile and barely visible by comparison'.[295] In her association of a female speaking subject with the vast power of the tornado, Guest is deliberately unsettling the boundaries of gender and the human and the more-than-human and in doing so, she is deliberately courting a loss of self that will facilitate its re-imagining. Guest appropriates aspects of the sublime in order to reclaim and reimagine the gendered spaces of the nature and the domestic and in doing so, manifests an ecotone that encompasses aspects of each and imagines them anew, (re)claiming the gendered spaces of each. As she

[295] Lamm, p. 126.

did in her seascape poems, Guest deliberately associates women with a nature that is 'not designed for human purposes' and 'is vast, intimidating, inhospitable and overwhelming to the eye'[296] and so stakes a claim to the sublime of the American landmass and then draws it into the domestic spaces of the home. Guest's appropriation of the space then subverts Olson's statement 'I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America'[297] as in *Musicality* as she not only locates the female speaking subject firmly within that space but seeks to engage the space of the page in order to do so. In its narrow pages, *Musicality* explores Olson's compositional field, recasting it as a feminist space and refuting Olson's claim that 'man's job is to square the circle' on the 'fulcrum of America'[298] as she instead opens it out to include the female body and it's jouissance. Guest's poetry comes more closely into dialogue with Olson's field in the poems discussed in chapter three, but *Musicality* also manifests a dynamic space in which notions of gender, nature and culture interact and which Harriet Tarlo associates with ecopoetics.[299]

The poem describes a tornado as it passes over a house as well as the approach and moving away of the storm. This vast natural event is compressed into the comparatively minute space of the created domestic as everything moves towards, and around the event of the storm hitting the house; 'The wave of building murmur | fetid slough from outside', 'lightening held to a border of trees', and then 'the structure unfolds'. The white spaces of the page become part of the poem, representing the drives and rhythms of nature pushing through the linguistic and out on to the page in the same way that it pushes though and permeates human life. Through the visual pattern of the poem, Guest echoes that of the storm as it gusts and pushes against the house. The barrel cloud follows the 'building murmur' and 'notational margins' of the 'unfinished cloud burst' that is described on the poems first page and which seems crowded by comparison, suggesting the building, anticipation of the coming storm:

The wave of building murmur

fetid slough from outside

a brown mouse a tree mouse.

[296] Purdy, p. 102.
[297] Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*. (New York: Grove Press Books, 1947), p. 11.
[298] Ibid, p. 12.
[299] Tarlo, 'Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction in Context'.

two trees leaning forward

the thick new-made emptiness

Naturalism

Hanging apples half notes

in the rhythmic ceiling red flagged

rag clefs

notational margins

the unfinished

cloudburst

Guest textual replication of the natural rhythms of the storm and their pressure on the house and on the human brings together the semiotic of nature in the storm's rhythms, and the human semiotic. This unification and its replication in the text suggests Cixous' *écriture feminine* but while Cixous demands the replication of the body drives be present, she does not explicitly acknowledge their origin in the more-than-human natural. Susan Griffiths notes, that whilst 'language is shaped by the human body', it 'arrives from and is part of nature'[300] and in *Musicality*, Guest acknowledges and describes this association. The poem's replications of the body drives and their impact on the semiotic in the form of the scattered text, the role of the blank space of the page, Felter's drawings, and Guest's rejection of punctuation and regular syntax, are all suggestive of *écriture feminine.* However, Guest's representation of nature in the production of these drives pushes the scope of *écriture feminine* beyond the female body and out into the more-than-human other of nature. In *Musicality*, Guest represents the 'continuous passage of the natural into the cultural',[301] and cites women as the point at which these intersections occur. Her presentation of this connection in such an abstracted form, describes an increasing awareness of the limits of language, and a desire to push at them in order to more fully represent women and nature, anticipating her work in *Fair Realism* and *Quill,*

[300] Susan Griffin 'Ecofeminism and Meaning' in Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature.* (Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1997), p. 217.
[301] Irigaray, *je, tu, nous*, p. 13.

Solitary APPARITION. The italicised text, the short line lengths that are so suggestive of their content, '*the unfinished',* and the tension that Guest places on language, both linguistically and visually, depict tension and plasticity that arranges the poem's dimensions.[302] The poem then looks 'outwardly and inwardly' as the semiotic pulsions and flows of both poet and nature are manifest in the variability of rhythms and the moods, and modes, of expression.[303]

Guest's focus on the rural domestic locates *Musicality* alongside *Quilts* and continues her exploration of the community of nature and the domestic, and the fragility and tenacity of the domestic space in the face of the wildest of natures. Felter's line drawings heighten this fragility, describing rooflines lost in a scribble of trees and dwarfed by the stretch of the encircling line of the mountains. The sparseness of both Felter's drawings and Guest's text, describe the fragility of the human on the plains and echo the great expanses of nature between the small, measured utterances of the human on them. The poem's opening lines describe these expanses as a, 'thick new-made emptiness' as the approaching tornado bows trees before it, creating spaces and forcing the house's inhabitant to hide under a table. For Guest, this emptiness refers not to an absence or void but a human exclusion from nature, and describes a self that inhabits the natural space so fully, so intrinsically, that to be excluded from it renders her, and it, empty. The reciprocal relationship Guest describes between the human and the huge, wild landscape of the prairies and plains is so intrinsic to human existence that any exclusion from it leads to a void that can only be filled with a monster, in the shape of the storm, and one that cannot be adequately described with words.

Whilst I have recognised Guest's identification of nature as a feminine space in *Musicality* is positive, and as a means of empowerment, we also see that the interaction with that wild, more-than-human nature is tempered and mediated by a human space such as the domestic house or the car. Whilst assuming the wild, sublime nature as a female space by suggesting that the tornado is 'her imposing composition of cloud weight', and it is a 'she' that is 'watching big mountain thunder', that cloud weight is mediated by the house, and the mountain thunder is watched from the car. Whist this moderation of the proximity to this extreme weather is practical and you really are better off sitting under a Steinway than out in a field in a tornado, it serves to dilute the association that Guest is making between women and

[302] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 22.
[303] Ibid.

a raw, wild, more-than-human nature and again, we see the hesitance to fully inhabit nature that was evident in her earlier works. It is not until poems such as 'Atmospheres' that Guest merges her speaking subject with wild and elemental nature and the two become indistinct from each other.

The towering force of the sublime more-than-human nature Guest presents in this poem is both liberating and devastating and Guest's assumption of nature as a feminine space suggests that she sees them, and their agency, in the same way. By having co-located women and destructive nature by stating that 'the example of cyclonic creativity equally devastates', Guest is exploring this destructive other, and seeking to recognise it as an other that is a necessary part of the self. Guest describes this othering of nature as the poem closes and it is in this description that she most acutely anticipates Morton's concerns about nature as a cultural creation: 'you understand the euphemisms of nature | how the figure appears in still life | | and you understand the creation of orchards'. These lines describe the separation of nature from the human self and its creation as other. Like a garden, the orchard is not a natural space but one that is wholly manufactured and managed and that stands-in for nature and the natural. The still life painting is minutely posed and so too is the orchard, but it is these manufactured instances of nature that have become what so many of us see as nature but which is actually simulacra. This focus on the creation and representation of nature and the feminine self that Guest is alluding to in these lines, becomes the focus for her collection *Fair Realism*, published only a year after *Musicality,* and is particularly evident in the poem 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality' (*Collected Poems* 221). In this poem, Guest questions the notion of difference between a representation and the real, in a bid to understand the relationship between the subject-self and the other of the natural.

Kimberly Lamm describes *Fair Realism* as 'an extended poetic argument about the risks of turning everything into abstract forms and the value of tethering art to the contours of the recognisable world', with an emphasis on composing spaces in which 'images of domestic architecture serve as figures for artistic forms that make dwelling in the imagination imaginative, liveable and just'.[304] In these poems Guest counters her move towards the abstract in her poetry, by grounding the imagery in nature and the domestic home. This grounding then allows her to use modes of representation that disrupt language and form whilst still rendering the poetry accessible. In these

[304] Ibid. pp. 115 – 116.

domestic spaces, Guest questions the notion of beauty. Whilst Guest is clear that in these poems 'fair' should be taken to mean beautiful; 'fair is beauty, but also a shining object', she also describes it as 'an aspect of realism that presents a fair countenance if you want to look into it, into its fair aspect (…) it's a modifier'.[305] It is the transformative nature or changeableness of Guest's realism that underpins the poem 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality'. Rachel Blau DuPlessis discusses the multiple meanings of Guest's 'fair', noting that it 'begins by meaning beautiful, clear and sunny (...) re-evokes the "fair" or bazaar (...) [and] also denominates the "fair", that is, the fair sex'.[306] Guest's 'fair' also challenges the gendering of the gaze in modern visual art, describing it as representing passivity and a female body that is the site of 'aggressive struggles over the relationship between abstraction and figuration'.[307] Guest's own gaze is, of course, gendered but her representation of the gendered body and the semiotic provides a means of describing both the physical self and the speaking subject as a complete entity. In 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality', Guest locates the natural even closer to a female speaking subject that is situated in the domestic space of the home and further calls into question the actuality of each. The poem focuses on the construction of both nature and the human domestic, and in it we again see Guest making comment on the created, unreality of the feminine mystique. The poem represents the shifting nature of reality, of realism, and Guest locates her speaking subject between these constantly shifting perspectives and is seen to be constantly shifting in her own narrative perspective. In this poem Guest explores the 'unstable synthesis'[308] between lived and imagined realities as cloud fields change into furniture, furniture into fields and sunrise is wished an apparition.

In the opening lines of 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality', Guest immediately sets up the relationship between nature and the domestic space and points to their interdependence:

> Cloud fields change into furniture
> furniture metamorphizes into fields
> an emphasis falls on reality.
>
> "It snowed towards morning," a barcarole
> the words stretched severely
>
> silhouettes they arrived in trenchant cut

[305] Guest, Barbara. Interview with Charles Bernstein.
[306] DuPlessis, *Blue Studios,* p. 175.
[307] Ibid.
[308] DuPlessis, 'Flavour of Eyes', p. 24.

the face of lilies . . . .

I was envious of fair realism.

I desired the sunrise to revise itself
As apparition, majestic in evocativeness,
Two fountains traced nearby on a lawn . . . .

The clouds, the furniture and the fields are interchangeable and described as one in the same. Guest's emphasis on this changeable, mutual reality demands that we recognise the unreality in each. The statement, 'I was envious of fair realism' is open to multiple readings; fair meaning beautiful, fair meaning equitable, fair meaning true, all of which have relevance in the poem. However, when read in the context of the lines that follow it, I suggest that Guest is using both 'fair' and 'realism' ironically and that she is referring again to the feminine mystique, implying it is portrayed as a beautiful reality, when it is neither. Whilst Friedan demonstrated that the reality of the feminine mystique is entirely manufactured, she also shows us how it is continually presented as real; as how women are, or should be. Guest has repeatedly exposed the counterfeit of the feminine mystique in her poetry and in this poem, she returns to the fountains and lawns of 'Dido and Aeneas' through which she sought to expose the constructed nature of the mystique more than twenty years earlier. In this poem, Guest codifies 'fair realism' as the mystique, seeing it as the supposed beautiful reality that women are subject to, and one that is created by, and created of, the furniture that changes into clouds and fields. Guest uses the natural images in the opening lines to suggest that under the pressure of the mystique, women move from a states of nature into a state of the domestic and then back again as the mystique is exposed. The image of the lilies represents both a lush sexuality and a purity that describes women's duality as the virgin bride and the sexualise women. Guest's association with sharp, trenchant cut suggests an abrupt severing from, and a painful realisation of, the unreality of the mystique. Again, Guest draws attention to the starkness of the duality that she sees for women, offering them either the domestic, replete with the mystique and 'majestic' in its fountains, or the sharp split that is a cold, snow filled life outside it. Guest pushes us towards neither pole, asking only that we see them. It is this drive to describe rather than guide that Maggie Nelson refers to when she describes Guest's feminist consciousness as 'understated', and as one 'which generally stands in the shadows but [which] from the start of her career onwards occasionally stepped out to mock – however faintly – the kind of

access to the transcendental or intangible traditions offered women'.[309] Guest is showing us both the mystique as a creation, and as the poem progresses, the seeming void that is the alternative.

Guest alludes to this void in the poem's midsection:

> These metaphors may be apprehended after
> they have brought their dogs and cats
> born on the roads near willows,
>
> willows are not real trees
> they entangle us in looseness
> the natural world spins in green.

The entangling willows that are 'not real trees' echo William Carlos Williams' 'cylindrical trees' that are 'bent, forked by preconception and accident',[310] and represent the isolation of life outside of the mystique and the constructed nature of the more-than-human natural, particularly when it is viewed as being other to culture rather than, as Irigaray describes it, the space from which culture is created. The natural world spins in green; loose and shapeless beyond the window of the speeding car, and Guest renders this image of the unformed natural as a contrast to the reality of the dogs and cats that are imagined as part of the domestic ideal. The 'darkened copies of trees' in the poem's closing line, so reminiscent of Nell Blaine's dark ink and watercolour sketches of the trees around her studio, describe nature as simulacra. The trees are wholly formed by culture as the more-than-human nature is lost, there is no original, and all that remains is the symbolic manifestation of 'trees', the cultural copy that is endlessly replicated. To ally women with this nature is to wholly subsume it into the cultural and so the dominant, masculine discourse. Guest, however, uses this simulation of nature to draw attention to and describe the feminine mystique as the 'costume taken from space'. Guest's 'necessary idealising' describes the lack of an appealing alternative to the mystique and, as in 'Wave' and 'Dido and Aeneas', there is no definitive movement away from the cloud fields and furniture. Mark Silverberg writes that Guest's unreal, dark, copied trees, provide a 'counter-discourse, returning a naturalness (which is either unlimited or silent) to trees by denaturalising them, moving them out of what Victor Shklovsky calls the

[309] Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 41.
[310] Williams, *Paterson*, p. 7.

"automation of perception"'[311] so that they become subject to new, alternative discourses. Silverberg's statement suggests that Guest's representation of the trees as copies draws attention to the manifest constructedness of nature and, as such, invites new readings of it even whilst she does not suggest one herself: 'rather than offering *another* discourse, another version of trees which is still ultimately a subjective version Guest offers an opening – a white space in which trees are never fully formed or finished' (emphasis in the original).[312] This space that Guest offers speaks to Morton's claim that 'there is no such 'thing' as nature, if by nature we mean something that is single, independent and lasting'.[313] Guest's space describes the symbiosis through which nature and culture manifest each other even as they exclude each other and offers an alternative that is seemingly both of and beyond the usual discourses. As Morton goes on to say; 'Even as it establishes a middle ground "in between" terms such as subject and object, or inside and outside, nature without fail excludes certain terms, thus reproducing the difference between inside and outside in other ways'.[314] Guest's darken copies of all trees speak to this exclusion and to the 'comfortable distance' that nature establishes between it and us, us and them even as it bring us into proximity with the 'non-human "other"'.[315] As Guest refuses to let her trees be 'hemmed in as "real trees"', she 'invite[s] a mystery behind or within trees – a mystery or otherness which the poet can never fully capture, and thus manifests itself as *something more* or *something else*' (emphasis in the original).[316] Guest's denaturalised trees, and by extension her shifting clouds and furniture, call us to (re)consider representations of and our relationships with nature, and in doing so, also calls us to do the same with notions of femininity, feminism and the domestic spaces, encouraging us to imagine alternatives and to reject notions of closure and static definition. In this poem, Guest starts to unsettle our notions of nature as an object that can be firmly located or represented and of a human subject that can be defined in relation to it.

In her poems of the prairies and plains, Guest rejects the restrictive domestic of the feminine mystique and reclaims the space of the home, and the work of women within it, as a site of liberation and of feminine power and authority. Guest's continued co-location of women and nature in *The Countess from Minneapolis* and

[311] Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic*. (New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 71.
[312] Ibid.
[313] Morton, p. 19.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid.
[316] Silverberg, p. 71.

Quilts reclaims the domestic space of the home and the positive foregrounding of the role of women in the rural domestic space manifests nature and the domestic as sites of female authority and autonomy. Guest's identification of nature as simulacra in 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality' and *Musicality* problematises the co-location of women and nature and challenges the positivity of the association. The simulacra cannot be rooted in nature and this suggests that both nature and women are only culturally created. Irigaray anticipates the circularity of nature as copy in her description of language and culture, as 're-producing (from) nature' with her parentheses allowing for the simultaneous inclusion, and exclusion of nature as the bedrock of each. Guest's 'darkened copies of all trees' can be read as a recognition of the duality of nature that describes nature as simultaneously that from which culture is generated, and a cultural generation. Even whilst Guest recognises aspects of nature as simulacra, this is countered by the vast, wild nature of the storm and the mid-western landmass in which she locates these poems.

Chapter 3.

The dark under text: representations and realisations in Barbara Guest's later poetry.

Moves outside the text into the dark *under text*

'In Slow Motion'

So far my discussion of Barbara Guest's work has focused on the way in which she has sought to establish nature and domestic spaces as places of female autonomy and authority in her poetry, particularly in poems relating to the city, the garden, the sea and shore spaces, and then the American prairies and plains. I have discussed the symbiosis that Guest sees between women and nature and her creation of ecotone spaces where this symbiosis can occur. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how, in her works from the 1990s, Guest's innovative poetry particularly seeks to explore representations of a corporal female speaking subject that realises the relationship between that body, language and nature and recognises each as a site of liberation, autonomy and authority. These poems are a means of 'creating feminist artistic practices […] that exceed struggles with and against male dominance'[317] and in doing so, seek to (re)write the relationship between the female body, nature and language so as to claim each as a site of female authority. In these poems from *Defensive Rapture, Quill, Solitary APPARITION,* and *If So, Tell Me,* Guest's continued location of women in nature and domestic spaces describes a continued desire to

[317] Lamm, p. 115.

present these spaces positively for women as she continues to write from a feminist perspective that does not demand that women seek to assume the places and roles of men but that they take authority in other spaces and demand that their authority there is recognised in an equality of difference. My analysis of these poems will consider Guest's expression of the semiotic which Kristeva describes as being before language, through which Guest accesses the drive rhythms and pulsions of the female body and nature, replicating them in her poems. Describing how her engagement with language production brings the body and nature into language, this chapter will demonstrate that in doing so, Guest's work is part of a contemporary (re)integration of the body and nature and that in that, such poems are at the forefront of eco- or material feminism. Guest's work from this period anticipates a later ecopoetics where the limits of the human and the more-than-human are blurred and which explores what it is to be both subject and object.

Guest's association of the (female) body and nature in these poems leaves the work open to critiques of essentialism. In the 1990s when these poems were first published, ecofeminism was beginning to be widely being critiqued as essentialist and was to be effectively disregarded in feminist circles.[318] Emerging in the 1960 and 1970s from the intersection of feminist research and various movements for social justice, environmental welfare, and health, ecofeminism sought to expose the links between oppressions based on gender, race, species and nation, often linking the physical health of women and the environment with the recuperation of woman-centred language and thought.[319] Guest's feminist ecopoetics is concerned with the realisation of a female speaking subject that is inextricably linked to a wider environment and the role that that environment plays within the manifestation of that female speaking subject. By the late 1990s, the accusations of essentialism had made ecofeminism a difficult term with which to be associated[320] and many scholars sought to move away from the stigma it carried in feminist academic circles, preferring to refer to their work as ecological- or material feminism. Material feminists seek to overturn accusations of essentialism, noting that the more feminist theories are distanced from nature and the body, the more they become implicitly or explicitly

[318] Greta Gaard, 'Ecofeminism Revisited: Rejecting Essentialism and Replacing Species in a Material Feminist Environmentalism' in *Feminist Formations,* 23.2 (Summer 2011), p. 26.
[319] Ibid, p 28.
[320] Niamh Moore, 'Eco/feminist Genealogies: Renewing Promise and Possibilities' in *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*, Mary Phillips and Nick Rumens eds, (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 20.

reconfirmed as sites of misogyny.[321] They also seeks to reconceptualise nature so that it is no longer imagined as a pliable resource or social construction, but as 'agentic', recognising that 'it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world'.[322] Guest's work from this period places the (female) body in concert with its wider environment and in doing so, re-establishes the connection that is lost within a (feminist) charge of essentialism. Guest's work is contiguous with an ecopoetics that seeks to recognise and assert the reciprocal relationship between bodies and their environments. Marcella Durand is at pains to situate the poetic within the wider ecosystems, stating that 'poets work in a medium that not only is in itself an art, but an art that interacts with the exterior world – with things, events, systems', noting that 'through this multidimensional aspect of poetry, poets can be an essential catalyst for increased perception, and increased change'.[323] Guest's poetry seeks to interact with the exterior world, with the events and systems within it, and in doing so, deconstructs notions of boundaries and binaries between the human and the more-than-human.

Whilst continuing to work collaboratively, Guest published a further three solo collections in the 1990s and won a number of significant awards for her work. Her prolific creativity showed no signs of slowing, and there was a revival of critical interest in her work that continues into the new millennium. Now in her 70s and following the death of her third husband, Guest moves with her daughter back to California. Almost in contrast to the Californian sun, the images of nature that Guest presents in these three collections are increasingly dark and violent. Whilst her earlier poems did not shy away from describing the strength and violence of nature; the strong arms and fists of the rivers and waves, the storms of the Florida coast, the tornadoes that swept across the prairies, the images she presents in these collections are significantly darker. These poems are concerned with feelings of being hunted, of abandonment, of depression and death. In these poems, Guest seeks to confront these darker emotional places and in doing so, she confronts the abject.

[321] Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Introduction: Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory', in Stacey Alaimo and Susan Hekman eds, *Material Feminisms*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). p. 4.
[322] Ibid, p. 5.
[323] Durand, p. 124.

Julia Kristeva describes the abject 'not as an ob-ject facing me, which I name or imagine', nor as 'an otherness ceaselessly fleeing'.[324] It is instead the 'jettisoned object'[325] that is both a part of, and apart from, the self but that is intrinsic to it, and which is 'quite close but cannot be assimilated'.[326] Kristeva cites the absent body of the mother, and the 'violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be',[327] as the source of the abject. It is in this violence of prohibited longing that Guest recognises the abject and which is then represents in her poetry. Whilst Guest does not use the term abject, in these collections she represents the violence and loss that is intrinsic to the abject as well as recognising its necessity in the manifestation of the self. Guest's linking of the abject with nature renders it as the other body that we have been separated from, and in doing so draws attention to the separation of contemporary culture from its wider, sustaining environment even as she demonstrates our proximity to it. As Guest reaches 'into the dark under text' that is the space of the abject, and of the semiotic, there is increasing emphasis on the role of the reading other in the creating of meaning in her poems, which become progressively more demanding as the words on the page become fewer. Guest draws the reader into the 'dark reaches' of these challenging poems in order to have the poems 'succumb and shine with a clarity projected by the mental lamp of the reader'.[328] Guest has the '[p]oet and reader perform together on a highwire strung on a platform between their separate selves'[329] as these poems create a symbiosis between reader and writer in order to realise meaning.

These three collections are among Guest's most difficult poems to read. Guest's formal use of dashed breaks, italics, and ellipsis describe an 'insistence on the primacy of reinventing language structures'.[330] Guest uses these reinvented language structures to create spaces in the text into which the reading other is invited. These poems demand a dialogue between Guest and the reading other and, as such, a 'realm emerges in which the book is a three dimensional proposition'.[331] Guest states that 'in what ever guise reality becomes visible, the poet withdraws from it into invisibility'[332] and her withdrawal from these texts creates space for the reading

[324] Kristeva, *Powers Of Horror*, p. 1.
[325] Ibid. p. 2.
[326] Ibid. p. 1.
[327] Ibid. p. 10.
[328] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 21.
[329] Ibid.
[330] Kathleen Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable,* p. 31.
[331] Susan Gevirtz, 'Belief's Afterimage' in *Jacket* 10, October 1999.
[332] Barbara Guest, 'Mysteriously Defining the Mysterious', in *HOW(ever)* Vol III, No 3, October 1986.

other. Mark Silverberg notes that Guest offers readers 'a new kind of authority and autonomy in the construction of meaning', finding that in her poems, 'meaning must be co-created'.[333] Guest's poems demand that the reader take on the role of co-creator through her use of reinvented language structures and the spaces that they realise. These poems are, as Catherine Kasper notes, concerned with 'what 'understanding' means [and] what the possibilities are for an art that reaches beyond the comfortable and well-worn spaces'.[334] The spaces that these poems inhabit are neither well-worn nor comfortable and instead, are demanding, dangerous, difficult and exciting. Guest states that 'there's something being understood and felt between the lines'[335] in these poems, and Anna Rabinowitz notes that Guest's 'use of space' and her 'unconventional arrangement of the lines' demands we see 'the text as a visual entity' that asks that we attend to 'the placement of [the] words, their movement, sounds, dichotomies, ruptures, confluences, shifts' as 'ideas wander in the whites'.[336]

Particularly in the poems from *Quill, Solitary APPARITION,* the visual presentation of Guests poetry most markedly comes into dialogue with Charles Olson's field poetics and in doing so, it also opens a dialogue between Olson and Cixous' *écriture feminine.* Kathleen Fraser acknowledges Olson's 'Projective Verse', as an 'immense, permissions-giving moment' as 'poets entering literature after 1960 gained access to a more expansive page through Olson's own visual enactment of 'field poetics'' [337] and Guest's poetry certainly follows this trajectory. The consistent development of an open form in Guest poetics that explores the 'spatial invitation [of the page and] play[s] with typographical relations of words and alphabets, as well as their denotative meanings',[338] seems to shift up a gear in these later collections and the poems become even more expansive as Guest's 'ideas wander in the whites'. The importance of the 'pressure of [the] breath' in Olson's field poetics and of the 'part breath plays in verse'[339] in the composition of the line shares a recognition of the importance of the body rhythm with Cixous' *écriture feminine.* This privileging of the rhythms of the body in verse as a formal structure over traditional, inherited

[333] Silverberg, p. 32.
[334] Catherine Kasper, 'Barbara Guest's Career: Defensive Rapture' in *Jacket* 36, late 2008.
[335] Barbara Guest quoted in Anna Rabinowitz 'Barbara Guest: Notes Toward A Painterly Osmosis' in *Women's Studies*, 30:1. (2001), pp. 100 -101.
[336] Ibid.
[337] Fraser, *Translating The Unspeakable*, pp. 175 - 176.
[338] Ibid, p. 175.
[339] Charles Olson, 'PROJECTIVE VERSE' in Donald Allen, ed. *The New American Poetry 1945 – 1960.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). p. 388.

structures liberates the speaking subject, allowing it room to explore cadence, syntax, meter, rhyme and the page itself as a means of enunciation. Whilst Olson's field seems singularly opposed to Cixous *écriture feminine*, speaking directly as he does to his 'boys' and 'brothers' and with women conspicuous only by their absence, their shared recognition of the importance of the body as the seat of language facilitates a (female) subjectivity that might be considered missing from more formally traditional poetry. Both Olson's field poetics and Cixous' *écriture feminine* engender writing practices that 'foreground the investigation and pursuit of the unnamed', using 'visual apparatus as scaffolding on which to construct formally inarticulate states of being'.[340] As such, In these collections, Guest's poetry can be described as focussing on 'the visual potential of the page for collage, extension, pictorial gestures and fragmentation – language and the silence that surrounds it, constellations of words and phrases that embody and signal the poem's range of intention [and] extending far beyond a mere clever manipulation of signs'.[341] What is also important to note in these collections, is the increased proximity of nature to Guest's speaking subject.

Jonathan Skinner describes a reciprocal relationship between the emerging visceral ecopoetics of the 1960s and Olson's field,[342] noting that 'ecology and environment begin with the body, at the depth of its viscera'.[343] With this relationship in mind, I argue that in her work from the 1990s, Guest is seeking to re-establish that connection as her poetry draws the speaking subject into even closer concert with its wider environment, and at times, attempts to render them a single entity. Mary Phillips notes that Cixous' vision of an 'embodied writing represents a move to resist the ways in which women/nature are linguistically, historically, and sexually confined', finding that this type of writing 'opens up the possibility of a writing the body differently, particularly women's bodies, to undo binary hierarches'.[344] Such writing is necessarily feminist in its refusal to be subsumed by binary thinking. By engaging an 'ecological model of interconnection' through collage, asyntactic, disjunctive poetic construction, such poetics encourages readers to think in terms of the interconnection between the human and the more-than-human[345] and in doing so

[340] Fraser, *Translating The Unspeakable*, p. 175.
[341] Ibid.
[342] Jonathan Skinner, 'Visceral Ecopoetics in Charles Olson and Michael McClure: Proprioception, Biology, And the Writing Body', in Angela Hume and Gillian Osborne eds, *Ecopoetics: Essays in the Field.* (Iowa City, Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2018), p. 78.
[343] Ibid, p. 66.
[344] Phillips, p. 64.
[345] Lynn Keller, *Recomposing Ecopoetics: North American Poetry of the Self-Conscious Anthropocene.* (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2017), p. 20.

Guest's poetics offers a means of (re)establishing and (re)inhabiting a (female) speaking body that is wholly situated within its wider environment and which is engaged in a relationship of reciprocal shaping. The body then becomes what Donna Haraway describes as a material-semiotic node or knot,[346] where matter and meaning are constantly shaped by one another. By the same token, the materiality of the poem, happening on and off the page, is informing of and informed by the semiotic,[347] further establishing the speaking female body in a dialogue with the world around it and with the language that is manifest. As in the work of ecopoets such as Juliana Spahr, Evelyn Reilly and Mei-Mei Bressenburgge, Guest's speaking subject is embodied in its wider environment, fluid within it as both subject and object, interchangeable and interconnected. In these poetics the speaking body, as Haraway suggests, becomes a nexus in which the 'biological and literary or artistic come together with all the force of lived reality' and where 'bodies and meanings co-shape each other'.[348] Haraway sees an inherent reciprocity in the relationship between the speaking body and its wider environment and it is reciprocity that poets such as Guest and Reilly particularly demonstrate through their formally innovative ecopoetics. Harriet Tarlo argues that dynamically formal poems such as these are 'more capable of reflecting and engaging the landscape' and that they 'engage with the flow, the breath, the body and the sound of the landscape, intelligent thought and emotional response (of writer and reader) though their dynamic spaces'.[349] This engagement then describes the (re)establishment of the reciprocal dynamic between the language and landscape, poet and place that moves beyond mimesis and into symbiosis. Guest's poetry from this period speaks to this engagement of body and landscape in the dynamic space of the poem and that her (re)imagining of the relationship between them is both generated by and generative of her formally innovative poetics.

[346] Haraway, *When Species Meet*, p. 4.
[347] Pauw Vos 'Entangling the World: The Connective Poetics of Juliana Spahr's 'If You Were A Bluebird'' in Mary Newell, Bernard Quetchenbach and Sarah Norton eds, *Poetics for the More-Than-Human World: An Anthology of Poetry and Commentary.* (New York: Dispatches Editions, 2020), p. 485.
[348] Ibid.
[349] Harriet Tarlo 'Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction in Context'.

Released cloud cuttings: nature and the speaking subject.

Defensive Rapture was the first published of these challenging collections and in it, as Sarah Lundquist states, Guest is 'writing poems built of burning imagistic fragments whose "subjects" are extremely elusive even for an elusivist'.[350] Whilst Guest does not describe herself as an elusivist, and whilst the poems are immediately recognisable as being by Barbara Guest, the speaking subject in these poems is elusive, mobile and subject to 'multiple erasures'. These poems are full of gaps, long dashes and indentations and Guest's visual presentation of the text is fundamental to them. These poems unsettle our sense of the sentence and its structure so that we become aware of the word itself as the unit of thought[351] and the intensity of communication that that brings. As the number of words on the page decreases and the space of the page around them increases, Guest's speaking subject, becomes all the more elusive and mobile. Guest' speaking subject is no longer firmly located at her desk, watching leaves as she was in 'The Location of Things', but is now spinning through the air with them, and only occasionally distinguishable in the swirl. By sharing the space of the subject with the reader, the poems in *Defensive Rapture*, and across this period as a whole, become concerned not only with representation and ways of seeing, but with who is seeing and making that representation. Guest's continued emphasis on the role of nature in these poems, and her continued representation of that space as a positive space for women, co-locates the reader with women and nature. Guest's expression of the semiotic in these poems, as a means of manifesting and replicating body drives, aligns with Cixous definition of *écriture feminine*. However, as Guest co-locates women and nature in these poems through her use of the semiotic, she extends Cixous project of *écriture feminine* beyond the drives of the body and includes those of nature. In her introduction to the anthology *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry,* Harriet Tarlo states that 'writing about the body in and of landscape is a particular strength of women poets,' finding that they have 'only relatively recently thrown off and objectified position as part of an idealised landscape in favour of a speaking one'.[352] Guest's poetry is part of this move to represent a speaking landscape that is not idealised nor objectified in the same way that she is seeking to represent female speaking subjects that are neither idealised

[350] Lundquist in Rankine and Spahr, p. 206.
[351] Welish, 'On Barbara Guest', p. 565.
[352] Harriet Tarlo, ed. *The Ground Aslant: An Anthology of Radical Landscape Poetry.* (Exeter: Shearsman Books. 2011), p. 15.

nor objectified within the human-made spaces of the home, garden and city. Tarlo also points out that not all nature or landscape poets are motivated by environmentalism[353] and I would place Guest in this category. Whilst Guest sees and describes a direct relationship between women and nature, it is a relationship that is intrinsic to the fact that we as humans, all have a direct, reciprocal relationship with the natural. That women might have a 'particular strength' in writing about nature and corporeality must surely stem from a position of parallel oppression and a refusal to see the reciprocity of human relationships with nature and the environment on the part of the oppressor. It is not that women are really any closer to nature, but that they have been designated it as a space and have also had the good sense to see the relationship that exists. Whilst we might tend to read Guest's speaking subject as female, even as a manifestation of Guest herself, it is only rarely indicated. The speaking subject across her poetry is, as Lundquist suggest, elusive, but it is particularly so in these poems as it increasingly merges with the natural.

This elusive nature of the subject in *Defensive Rapture* is evidenced in its first poem, 'Paulownia' (*Collected Poems* 259). In this poem, the speaking subject is almost everywhere, but also nowhere as there is no I, and only one 'you'. The omniscience and absence of the speaking subject allows them to inhabit the poem fully as one who sees, and records, but is impossible to locate and identify. Alluding to Auden's rider[354] and echoing Sylvia Plath's 'Words',[355] the poem is 'riderless' (writerless) and Guest's 'knifed tree' echoes Plath's 'Axes | After whose stroke the wood rings'. Guest's 'vowels inclement' and her 'lisping blot' resonate with Plath's 'Words dry and riderless' but Guest's riderless, or writerless poem, engages the reading-other who is drawn into the process of its production through her use of the long dash, the replicating long sounds; glaze, splash, strokes, gravure, that contrast with the violent stab of the knifed tree, and the visual presentation of the text:

> ravenous the still dark a fishnet —
> robber walk near formidable plaits
> a glaze — the domino overcast —
>
> seized by capes — budding splash
> whitened — with strokes —
> silvertone gravure.

[353] Ibid, p. 11.
[354] 'Five Songs'. W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems.* Ed Edward Mendelson. (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 60.
[355] Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*. (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 81.

knifed tree.

straw beneficence —
ambient cloud. riderless.

This ‘riderless’ poem necessarily draws the reader in to the process of its creation as Guest suggests that she, as the speaking subject, is not the only creator of meaning even though she is still present in the repeated images of her earlier poems; a storm, figures, grain, trees and the sea. The long dash and the shape of the text suggest pauses and breaks, but the unsettling syntax and lack of punctuation demand that the reader take part in the process of the poem’s production and direct the text. Through this demand on the reader, Guest builds formal tensions in the poem as she replicates her breath rhythms and we as readers then overlay our own as the enjambment of lines describes both the break and continuity of its flow. As Rosemarie Waldrop states, the poem’s rhythm is ‘determined by the rhythms of my body, my breath, my pulse. But it is also the alternation of sense and absence, sound and silence. It articulates the difference between, the difference in repetition’.[356] Guest’s log dashes, gaps and line breaks visually enact these alternations of sounds and silence and draws attention the repetition of sounds and shapes in language and the difference that that repetition draws out. Guest’s lines them become plastic, stretched by the long dash but made brittle by the stops that the turn of the line describes. Guest unsettles the sense of the sentence and structure in this poem, reminding us that the unit of thought lies in the word,[357] and making us work to build the image from the fragmented phrases. Referencing the use of paulownia wood in boat building, Guest describes a monochrome seascape where the waves are formidable plaits. The land seizes and grasps at the water, causing it to break against it and the white water to shoot up, in a budding splash. The grasping, predatory dark of the sea at night is claustrophobic and ensnaring, a fishnet, concealing in its domino cloak the headlands and capes. ‘Riderless’ now suggests fragility, an unstable ship without its strengthening wooden or metal riders, a poem without a writer to hold its timbers in place against the white water as it strokes against the hull.

[356] Rosemarie Waldrop, ’Thinking of Follows’ in *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*. Ed Mary Margaret Sloan (New Jersey: Talisman House, Publishers, 1998), p. 617.
[357] Welish, ‘On Barbara Guest’, p. 565.

As in 'Borrowed Mirror, Filmic Rise' (*Collected Poems* 280), which describes the act of reflection and focuses on the 'borrowed' nature of the image rather than that which is actually reflected, Guest's description of the sea as a 'silvertone gravure' draws attention to the notion of the object as image. The sea is presented as a copy or reflection rather than as the actual object, rendering its monochrome waves both like a photograph, and in the poem, as an image. The dashed pauses in the text replicate the body drives in the poem; they are the movement of the eyes darting to different parts of the image, the long breaths, missed heartbeats and stretched muscles moving between the words, the rhythmic flow of blood. That they should be so prominently used in the opening strophes where Guest describes the seascape, again, sees Guest draw the rhythms of the body and the water into her poetry. Not only is she drawing on the jouissance of her own body drives and pulsions, but those of the sea and the waves, as 'formidable plaits', are echoed in the shape of the text on the page, and that in turn, echoes the rhythms of the body. Guest's formal replication and inclusion of the body drives in the poem renders it an example of *écriture feminine* as she heeds Cixous' call, either consciously or unconsciously, for women to 'write through their bodies'[358] and then extends it by including the drives of nature. In doing so, Guest writes from a 'bodily immediacy that is in touch with the world around [it]' so that it 'challenges domains bounded and limited by rationality which [Cixous] conceives as a sort of translation that separates and excludes'.[359] Guest's formally innovative poetics refuses exclusion and separation in her realisation of a speaking subject as she seeks to root language in the body and its wider environment and to draw the reader into that same space.

The boat, made from the wood of the paulownia tree of the title, stands out from the waves; it has 'pierced the risen sea' and is 'monument', and there are parallels between the 'plaits' of the waves, and the cracking of the tree's 'knifed' bark. The boat is 'a solace' in the darkness of the night sea and the images of the 'tossed off' and 'running figure' describe the insignificance of the human on the water as it tosses the ship about in the tide. Guest's descriptions of the tree in a 'quagmire', of its 'foot sink' and 'rindswift heel' are violent and threatening, suggesting a ship wrecked, pulled into the water and sunk. The sea in this poem has become foreboding and dangerous and so, by association, do women. Where, in her earlier poems, Guest's women did not step off the porch and out into the waves and the farthest reaches of nature for fear of the danger that they might find outside the of the home, in these

[358] Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', p. 886.
[359] Phillips, p, 66.

later poems, Guest presents women who have taken that step and have embraced it. Whilst in poems such as 'Garment', which I discuss below, nature is not presented as a hospitable place in that it is dark, violent and often full of sadness, the women that Guest presents in these later collections are infused with the strength of this violent natural. As she did in *Musicality*, Guest appropriates aspects of the sublime in order to (re)claim and (re)imagine the gendered spaces of the nature. Guest's deliberately associating women with the raw power of nature is then set along side the 'lisping blot' and 'inclement vowels' of language that suggest both its generation and destabilisation. Guest's speaking subject, with its 'virginal wail' is again in danger of becoming immersed or overtaken by the capricious and unwieldy power of nature. Whilst Guest's virginal wail can be read as a cry or sob, suggesting perhaps one without or beyond speech, it can also be taken to mean the sound of the spinet; a small, square, legless harpsichord from the sixteen and seventeenth centuries with one string to each note. Both images have an equally appropriate fragility and language-less-ness in the face of the storm with its 'threaded sky | burnt' and '*quaking sun*'.

Guest's return to images of a tree and stormy, violent weather, is intrinsic in her description of the natural and her, and so our, relationship with it, as the storm threatens both equally. The tree and the human figure are allied as the threat and indiscriminate nature of the storm's violence is levelled against both of them. Guest makes a powerful connection between nature, and the human by naming the tree that the wood for the ship comes from, rather than describing it as a ship; a human made object. 'Atmospheres' (*Collected Poems* 272), is in sharp contrast to Guest earlier storm poems in which the human subject is separated from the elemental violence by being wholly recognisable in the poem as the speaking subject. In 'Atmospheres', Guest almost completely removes the speaking subject from the poem in an attempt to realise a subject that is both a part of, and apart from, the other. In this way, Guest is representing the duality of the abject in that, that which is abject is both of, and other, to the subject. Kristeva states that in the concepts of the abject and abjection, 'the distinction between "subject" and "object" is not clear', and noting that 'these two pseudo-entities exhaust themselves in a dialect of attraction and repulsion'.[360] This indistinction between subject and object is bought to the fore in both 'Atmospheres' and in the poem 'Geese Blood', discussed below, and the dialect of attraction and repulsion is manifest in the formal tensions of the poems that

[360] Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, p. 12.

Guest creates through both the language she uses and the visual presentation of the poems on the page. This then also manifests a tension between poet and reader as the meaning is fluid and the dialectic responsibilities of each are in a state of flux. Whilst Guest seeks to unify the human and nature, she falls short of wholly becoming 'one-with-nature' as she retreats from full immersion in favour of a symbiosis that allows for difference and, for a distinction, albeit a blurred one, to remain.

Unlike earlier poems such as *Musicality*, Guest removes the human from 'Atmospheres' as either a figure or as the speaking subject. Instead, Guest pulls us up into the air to face 'domination by modal', to lack substance, and become part of the storm:

—— burst with imaginary shadowless

crawls —— ;

domination by modal

alliance of moves —— sculptured

weighting —— the tube circuits slicked ——

out of sky.

Guest's use of the long dash in this poem again replicates, as it did in 'Paulownia', the drives of nature and the body in the text; the gusting of the wind and the roll of thunder that is then echoed in a quickening of the pulse and a fearful flutter of the heart as the storm builds. These long dashes draws the text across the page and, coupled with Guest's use of indents, creates spaces within the doubled spaced lines, whilst the left justification is used to denote the relationship, and the grounding, of the storm with the land itself. Guest is embracing the open field of the page in this poem and uses its surface formally as the page becomes a 'canvas or screen on which to project [nature's] flux'.[361] Such poetry then projects an 'immense necessity to *make* as well as to express' (emphasis in the original)[362] and Kathleen Fraser notes the parallel influence of women associated with the New York abstract and expressionist movements, specifically Helen Frankenthaler, Nell Blaine, Elaine DeKooning, Grace Hartigan, Agnes Martin, Jane Freilicher, and Joan Mitchell, as artistes who, with their

[361] Fraser, *Translating The Unspeakable*, p. 176.
[362] Ibid, p. 177.

'innovative paintings', were 'helping to shape and advance the 1950s/1960s graphic imagination'.[363] Fraser locates a direct line between Guest, Olson and the female visual artist of mid-century New York as she states, 'Guest brings us back to Olson *and* to the parallel vanguard community of women visual artists whose originating graphic sense made a subtle but pervasive impact on America Poetry'.[364] The strongly visual nature of Guest's form in these poems speaks to both the influence of the visual arts and manifests the slashes of colour and instability of the subject in the abstract expressionism that Guest was so involved in. The mobility of the subject in these poems speaks to the same in mid-century visual arts as Guest lines draw kinetic arcs across the page that echo those of Grace Hartigan and Joan Mitchel. Whilst this is among many of Guest's storm poems, there is no 'I' or 'they' here as there was in 'Hurricane' (*Collected Poems* 50) and 'Timor Mortis, Florida' and no 'she' hiding under the piano with her notebook as in *Musicality*. It is through this removal of a wholly identifiable the speaking subject that Guest merges nature and the speaking subject and in doing so, Guest has the reader position the subject in the text. As such subject, reader and storm all become 'cloud cuttings'. The shared drives of the human and nature that the long dash describes draws each together in 'the common dark' and 'the imaginary shadowless'. Guest, however, never completely merges these entities and each remains distinguishable from the other whilst still remaining part of the same whole. In doing so, Guest describes an other that is part of the self; the 'disease pattern —— mirror particle ——; | | under the skin'. This disease pattern under the skin represents the abject in that it is both other to, and a part of, the self. Whilst Guest describes it as that which we seek to jettison and reject, the disease pattern, the mirror particle reflects that which we are and remains under the skin. This image of the abject refers not only to the aspects of the physical body, but also to the body drives we seek to refuse.

A refusal to ignore the harsh, violent aspects of nature is a constant in Guest's work, however, these later poems are more brutal and violent than her earlier work and lack the distance of an event remembered, as in 'Hurricane', or the exuberance and spiritual tone of the evanescent 'bather in the pool' that closes *Musicality*, neither of which seek to represent the abject self. These storm poems flow in and out of the violence of nature, and in 'Atmospheres' in particular, Guest focuses on these violent drives, describing them as 'lightening giblets —— after the | burning —— the crossfire' which brings to mind the Puritan witch burnings and the racial violence of the gallows

[363] Ibid, p. 178.
[364] Ibid, p. 198.

tree as well as images of war that refer back to 'A Handbook of Surfing'. The duality of the self is then compounded by the poems final image of the 'conjured —– | diamonds into the hand'. This many-layered image, suggests both the titanic forces of earth and sky, and those of a romantic love and marriage. Guest's co-location of women and wild nature, seeks to place women beyond the social and cultural regulation that the drives of the female body are subject to. Where in *Musicality* there was a fear of the raw wildness of the tornado, and a description of it as something to be hidden from beneath the piano, in 'Atmospheres', Guest embraces it and unites the speaking subject with the storm in an 'alliance of moves'.

As she did in *Musicality*, in 'Atmospheres' Guest manifests a speaking subject who is 'continually in danger of becoming immersed or overtaken' by a nature that 'possesses a capricious and unwieldy power' so that the 'human being is fragile and barely visible by comparison'.[365] However, this comparative invisibility is a source of liberation, as again, Guest is deliberately unsettling the boundaries of the human and the more-than-human and in doing so, deliberately courts a loss of self that will facilitate the re-imagining of the subject and the object. Guest appropriates aspects of the sublime in order to reclaim and reimagine nature and the human and in doing so, manifests an ecotone that imagines them anew. 'Atmospheres' speaks to Kristeva's statement that 'the abject is edged with the sublime'[366] as the 'disease pattern – mirror particle' is co-located with 'collective ritual' and 'unshakeable granite'. Guest's poetry, but perhaps particularly 'Atmospheres', continues the abstract impressionist's project of the enlargement of the meaning of nature and which saw art move from mimesis to describing a reciprocal relationship with nature that encompassed the human. Guest's poem speaks both to Pollock's statement, 'I am nature',[367] and to her own pronouncement on the art of Helen Frankenthaler, as 'she forces Nature to copy Art'.[368] Guest's poetry attempts to realise Timothy Morton's assertion that 'there is no such "thing" as nature, if by nature we mean something that is single, independent and lasting'[369] as she manifests a dialogue that seeks to realise the multiplicity and interdependency of both. 'Atmospheres' sees Guest create a multiplicity of symbioses between the human and the nature, and the poet and the reader. In these symbioses, whilst the poet and reader each layer their

[365] Lamm, p. 126.
[366] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 11.
[367] David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets.* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 3.
[368] Barbara Guest, *Dürer in the Window, Reflexions on Art.* (New York: Roof Books, 2003), p. 8.
[369] Morton, p.19.

own cultural references and limitations into the images, the poem maintains the potential to be a site of the kind of liberation that Kristeva and Cixous sought, through Guest's expression of the semiotic. Guest's use of the long dash, refuses easy interpretation and engages the reader in the process of the poetry as its repetition leaves silences and openings that denote both absence and an opportunity. As Rosemarie Waldrop suggest, the poem then 'set[s] off vibrations in the reader, an experience with language – with the way it defines us as human beings'[370] as the reader is able to slip into the Guest's language and both define and delimit it through the process of symbiosis. In the essay 'Wounded Joy', Guest states that 'What we are setting out to do is to *delimit* the work of art, […] *so that it overruns the boundaries of the poem on the page*' (emphasis in the original).[371] Through Guest's expression of the semiotic, the poems in *Defensive Rapture* achieve this project of delimitation and insist that the meaning be derived not only from the words that are on the page, but the spaces between, and under them.

'Geese Blood' (*Collected Poems* 268), builds on the suspense, violence and threat seen in 'Atmospheres' as Guest locates the gaze alternately between that of the stalked goose, the stalking men, and that of the poet and, by extension, the reader. The poem also opens a dialogue with the abject self as the alternate positions of the hunter and hunted merge and violence and fear become shared. 'Geese Blood' is exemplar of what Margaret Ronda describes as poetry that is acting as an 'essential archive of ecological reflection and response'[372] as it engages in 'ambivalent ways with the problems of human agency and the limits of individual perception and ethical response'.[373] In the fluidity of her viewpoints, Guest's poem demands readers reflect on and respond to the hunters and the hunted as she manifest their shared environment and, in particular, the shared nature of their physical responses to the hunt itself. Furthermore, 'Geese Blood' places men in a position of violence against nature and this opens the poem to an ecofeminist reading. The gendered position is clearly defined as it is men that are stalking, and when this is set against the social and cultural context of a tradition of co-locating women and nature, the poem then becomes gender charged and can be read as an ecofeminist piece. Erika Cudworth notes that 'ecological impacts are often experienced most directly and pertinently as effects on human bodies' with ecofeminism acknowledging our 'embeddedness

[370] Waldrop, p. 613.
[371] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 100.
[372] Margaret Ronda, *Remainders: American Poetry at Nature's End.* (Stanford, California: University of Stanford Press, 2018), p 1.
[373] Ibid, p. 6.

within the "environment" [and] our embodied position as human animals'.[374] Guest poem acknowledged this embedded and embodied position in the constant shifting of the gaze between the stalked, the stalking and their inseparability from the landscape of their location. Just as Waldrop writes of her own poetry, in 'Geese Blood' Guest challenges the ridged subject-object relation and this has feminist implications. The poetry of both women 'proposes a grammar in which subject and object function is not fixed, but reversible' [375] and linguistic, gender and material boundaries are opened. Even whilst having defined gender in the poem, Guest resists the male/female binary by manifesting a multiplicity of selves and others across the poem through the switching of perspectives, and a refusal to state from which of them the eye is seeing. She achieves this through the repetition of phrases and the echoing of key words in similar phrasing: 'fallow lining' is echoed in 'The empty lining' and 'The bird in fallow sky', 'the height of trees' is repeated, 'outer motions' and 'the stalking men' become 'the outer motion' and 'men stalking' as the perspective changes and the 'ruffled leaves | held with cotton – gloves', is chillingly echoed in the 'cotton gloves' that hold the hunting knives that spill the ' "red geese blood" '. This switching of perspective unifies the men, the geese and the poet, drawing them together into a sharp image that is at once repellent, frightening and exciting. In this way, Guest also describes the abject self in that it is both repellent and compelling, and has the duality of both the perpetrator of violence and the victim of it. Coupled with this rendering of the abject self, Guest is also suggesting a feminism that is based in this unity, one that is derived of the recognition of self-likeness in the other and manifests an ecotone. Guest expression of the semiotic space to draw attention to very specific images within the greater whole:

height of trees

the papered chamber —

a breathy click — low volume —

the stalking men —

Though this spacing, the sparseness of the words, and the use of the dash, Guest replicates the movement of the eye as it rests on parts of a wider image and in doing

[374] Erika Cudworth, *Developing Ecofeminism Theory: The Complexity of Difference.* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). p. 3.
[375] Waldrop, p. 613.

so, she draws the body into the text as the gaze moves from that of the omniscient poet to that of the stalking men:

controlled surface

seizures —– the fallow lining —–

a bird interrupts —–

and then to the gaze of the goose itself:

exits into forest shelter —–

the lighter than expected —– height of trees —–

aware the figure

The wide spaced lines and the dashed breaks both separate the elements of the image, so that they can be recognised, and then draws them together on the page. The pace of the poem replicates that of the stalking men, slow and controlled, watchful, and once the bird is flushed, it changes as Guest blocks the text and aligns it tight with the left margin:

continues a secondary

reliance on ledge —– the nearest forest —– reversed

kilometres —– a brusque rim —– the outer motion —–

as figurative —–

This change from the wavering text to blocked lines, describes a new urgency in the poem, in the events, in the direction of the gaze, and a quickening of the pulses. Guest now needs us to see much more, and quickly and the visual representation of this need is fundamental to the semiotic nature of the poem. Words alone are not sufficient to describe these events, they are not capable of reaching the very elemental places of the hunt, the instinct to flight and the desire for the kill, and Guest uses the visual presentation of the text on the page as a means of describing that

which words can not. Again, this replication of the drives of the body, the tension of adrenalin, the held breath the of the stalk, the rapid beating of the heart in escape, engages the body in the process of the poetry, and the semiotic. This replication describes the shared nature of the human/bird body rhythms, drawing attention to the energetic principle that is common to the human and more-than-human and manifesting a poem that troubles the commonly perceived hierarchy between them.[376] Guest draws on these shared rhythms in order to dismantle the binary of hunter/hunted and to situate the reader in a position of uncomfortable fluidity as the speaking subject switches between each. The repetition of the phrases 'men stalking' and 'height of trees' and words such as 'motion', 'fallow', 'cotton' and 'gloves' all replicate the rhythm and repetitive, measured nature of the stalking hunt and lend to a feeling of its inevitable, deadly outcome. The flurry of the final lines then replicates the kill; at once both an action and an ending that stretches across the page:

cotton gloves —

two hunting knives —

the dried up glint —

spirit guide —

under three arches — green hand. sunken bowls.

"red geese blood."

Guest's refusal to indicate whether the experience described is that of the hunter or the hunted, through the sharing of lines and the mirroring of images, unifies the each with the other and refuses the separation of human, animal and landscape. However, whilst this is empowering, it does not offer redemption for either. This refusal of separation incorporates the other with the self and, in 'Geese Blood', Guest recognises the necessary place of an abject other within the realisation of the self. Guest's poem suggest that there is an inability to accept the other of the natural, and by extension the female, as part of the self on the part of these hunting men and demonstrates the violence that that refusal brings. In her earlier poems Guest has rendered a limitless self that incorporates the natural other. In these later poems, however, the rendered self is required to recognise and incorporate the other and,

[376] Ronda, p. 72.

particularly in the case of 'Geese Blood', she describes the refusal of this integration in violent terms. These poems then become unsettling and uncomfortable to read as, in 'Geese Blood', the gaze shifts between polarities until we realise that they are one and the same; violence, fear and blood.

Defensive Rapture walks the line between the self and the other, moving constantly between a position of the upheaval of the self being undermined, and of the point of its realisation. It is in this way that this it is one of the collections that most markedly describes the symbiosis of the human self and the natural other that Guest sees as necessary for a speaking subject. This recognition and rendering of the self and the other in these poems, further describes an understanding of the duality of the human self, of the need for it to include the other in order to be whole, and Guest's understanding that a separation from nature, forms part of the disjunction that makes that unity impossible. Guest's expression of the semiotic and the visual presentation of these poems as a means of representing these dialogues, both allows the reader space to engage in this processes of realisation, but it also destabilises the process as these points of reference that mark Guest's meaning are so few and far between. Here, Guest's poetry is exactly the type of writing that is able to generate the kind of liberation that Kristeva, Cixous and Irigaray all see as being possible through the expression of the semiotic, but for every liberation of the semiotic that is represented, there is also a restriction that the reader must work though in order to realise the meaning that either Guest, or they themselves, are attempting to convey. Tarlo notes that work in which the 'symbolic is infused with the semiotic, to use Kristeva's terms, might help us untangle [the] intricate threads'[377] that are spun between language, the environment, the human and all things in between and Guest's poems, if not untangling them, certainly pull at these threads. The open form of these poems speaks to the notion that 'the more dynamic, open form styles of writing, which make use of the whole page-space to create, is more capable of reflecting and engaging the landscape, that the open form page-space is closer to an open field or a moorland or a hillside than closed forms of poetry'.[378] The dynamic space of the page in these poem then 'engage[s] with the flow, the breath, the body and sound of the landscape, intelligent thought and emotional response'[379] of both Guest and her readers. In poems such as 'Geese Blood' the notion of silence is very important as it is in that space that the relationship between the hunters and the hunted, nature and

[377] Harriet Tarlo 'Women and Ecopoetics: An Introduction in Context'.
[378] Ibid.
[379] Ibid.

the human, male and female, exists, and in a very fundamental way, can only exist as there is no common language by which they can communicate. Guest's somewhat enigmatic statement 'the poem begins in silence',[380] then describes the process of her poetry as starting in the silent space of a communication between the human and nature. What Guest does in *Defensive Rapture* is offer us as readers, the opportunity to inhabit that space with her and nature, and to join them in a dialogue; a dialogue she continues in *Quill, Solitary APPARITION.*

That other surface: representing the intrinsic other

Marjorie Welish describes Guest's textual spacing as an engagement of the 'semantics of the blank' and *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* as a collection that 'foregrounds [the] intertextual usage of space'.[381] Guest describes the lines in this collection as having 'something between them that doesn't need to be said', but also that 'you could say anything you liked between those lines, within the subject of the lines themselves'.[382] Guest's careful, eloquent line spacing is not silent but structural,[383] communicating visually and layering the poems textual signification so that is extends beyond the words themselves. Welish is careful to describe the intertextuality she sees in this collection in the Kristevan sense; as the 'passage from one sign system to another' so that 'a new signifying systems may be produced with the same signifying material'.[384] The poems in this collection are among Guest's most elusive and she again draws the reading-other into the process of the poetry, in order to join up with 'that other surface'. Images of nature weave throughout the collection but are much less apparent than in *Defensive Rapture* and, the predominant images are those of the self and the process of writing. As we have seen in *Defensive Rapture*, the silent space of the poem, the blank page, represents a key site of intertextual dialogue between Guest and nature and as she fills these spaces with vast skies and storms that roll across the plains. The female figures in these poems are both of and other to the speaking subject, and Guest's repeated association of women with images of nature, as a place where these selves and others can be explored, marks nature as a female territory. This territory, however, is

[380] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 20.
[381] Welish.
[382] Barbara Guest in Catherine Wagner, 'Freedom, Confinement and Disguise: An Interview with Barbara Guest'. *How2* 2.4 (Spring/Summer 2006).
[383] Ibid.
[384] Kristeva, *Revolution In Poetic Language*, p. 59.

one of few words, and is most marked by their lack and the spaces that that lack manifests.

As in *Defensive Rapture*, the blank spaces of the poems in this collection are a place of signification. Guest states in interview that:

> there is something being understood and felt between the lines... In *Quill* I was venturing into a territory that was very astringent in the selection of words, and demanding, physically, by the position of the words on the page. It looks as if there's a lot of freedom in all those spaces, but it's not freedom at all. And there was an intensity in the space that was almost vocal.[385]

In the poem 'Garment' (*Collected Poems* 333) this astringent selection of words and their location on the page, demonstrates this intensity, and as in *Defensive* Rapture, asks us to read, seek, and make meaning between the lines. As it did in her earlier poems such as 'The Location of Things' and 'Les Réalités', the window space acts as a thetic or ecotone space where meaning is negotiated and generated. Guest mirrors this thetic space with that of the tree and plays on the 'plane' of the plane trees, referencing the very specific plane trees of the University of California's Berkeley campus,[386] but also describing the plane of the window, the plane of the tree and the plane of the garment interchangeably, rendering each a surface on, and through which, the feminine is negotiated and thus, are thetic. With each of these planes she moves between the inside and the outside spaces as they are viewed in concert with each other, giving the image a fluidity that is furthered by the textual spaces and the fleeting nature of Guest's images. The formal spacing of the poem 'proposes a different visual encounter, powerful in what it leaves *un*said, as in a line drawing where the minimal number of strokes may open to immensity' (emphasis in the original).[387] Guest strips back the language she uses and leaves vast spaces between words, insisting that the space itself signify and that meaning is drawn from both her words, and the absence that surrounds them. The following lines stretch down two pages with the page break following the line 'and caparisoned':

[385] Rabinowitz, pp. 106 – 107.
[386] Wagner.
[387] Fraser, *Translating The Unspeakable*, p. 198

*Broderi*e;

the rolled

garment;

window (ed) tress (of)

and moonlight

not in mourning

and caparisoned.

Garment (*itself)*

interior of

and even the exterior plane trees.

The flow of the left alignment is very specific with only new sentences being fully aligned. The slight, almost imperceptible drift of others, such as ‘window (ed) tress (of)’ and ‘not in mourning’, creates the confined and controlled spaces that Guest is referring to in the interview quoted above. These spaces replicate the body drives of the drift of breath, or an agitated heartbeat, and as the reading-other engages with the poem, this replication is furthered. Guest speaks of these spaces as ‘forms of silence’ but sees them specifically as structural and as a way in which to ‘write only

certain words that defined what I was writing about' without elaboration.[388] Waldrop too, describes the structural nature of such spaces in her poetry, noting that 'when the smooth horizontal travel of eye/mind is impeded, when the connection is broken, there is a kind of orchestral meaning that come about in the break […] that both connects and illuminated the gap, so that the shadow zone of silence between elements gains weight, becomes an element of the structure'.[389] The long gaps in Guest's poems serve then to situate language on the page, acting structurally so that the reader is drawn to notice their specifics, their counter points and similarities without their being mired in linguistic superfluities. The poem is reminiscent of *Quilts* in that it presents images of domestic artistry, such as embroidery, spinning and the making of clothes, and locates the jouissance of the female speaking subject alongside them. As with *Quilts*, Guest renders nature as a site where female body drives are articulated, allying them to the trees and to the seasons. This extends the domestic female space outside of the house to the larger, wilder territory beyond, and brings that same largeness and wildness into the female space of the domestic house as in,' window(ed) tress (of) | *and moonlit*' and 'Garment (*itself*) | | interior of | | and even the exterior plane trees'. The window space facilitates this exchange but it is not limited to it, and thus Guest blurs the space of the thetic, extending it both out of, and into, the house, and rendering each, sites where meaning is formed. The white space between the words and lines of the poem describe this expansion, slowing the pace of the poem, and encouraging the reader to make meaning in these thetic spaces. The stretches of physical space on the page are echoed in the absences of the stranger and are coupled with fleeting descriptions of lovemaking where they are 'entwined', and 'flushed with vocal soothing | | *and with touch* | | tenderly between the lines'. Guest describes a sexualised feminine as she did in 'Red Lilies' (*Collected Poems* 99), but one that has a 'miniature' that apes the strangers shadow as the stretch of time lengthens between his visits. As time stretches, so does the female territory, as it becomes the domain of the woman who is 'not in mourning'.

Guest's refusal of the 'I' or the gendered pronoun in this poem, except in relation to the male stranger, unifies the female with the nature, and the speaking subject becomes one with nature, with the trees, with the moonlight, and with the '*thumbed aster*', and the 'RED SAND AND ITS NARRATION'. Guest links these images of nature with those of language; the 'desired caesura', the touch that is 'between the

[388] Wagner.
[389] Waldrop, p. 614.

lines' and the '*cedilla*', describing women as something that of both of and between the spaces of language and of trees, plants and the moonlight. This is not a void but a rich space that makes from each of the things that it touches something new. It is a place where symbiosis occurs and so is ecotone. The image of the plane tree repeated throughout the poem, describes this ecotone space as Guest plays on the word 'plane' to indicate the trees themselves and the spaces around them. Their singularity also echoes the image of women in the poem as one who is waiting, who is still and singular in the expanse of the rural space, and who is also isolated in the social space as she is unmarried. This isolated female figure echoes those of her earlier poems, such as 'Dido and Aeneas' and 'Wave'. Guest unifies the images of the waiting woman and the trees by allying them both to the turning of the seasons and suggesting a religiosity and passivity before natural seasonality:

> spinning turns it lightens as gleamless —– changes into dull
> green an idea of *quietism* dark puddle —–

Through her choice of language and her use of spacing within the lines, Guest describes seasonality, loss, and depression. Through her expression of the semiotic in the gaps and dashes in these lines, Guest realises 'an intensity' of emotion in a way that is 'almost vocal' where words alone would be insufficient. These lines make visible the body drives and physicality of the emotions, and Guest's very precise spacing, the long space between 'spinning' and 'turns', the short, double space between 'lightens' and 'as gleams', couples these corresponding phrases. Whilst allowing space for the reader, Guest is minutely controlling of the incursion so that the links that she wants made occur, and the dialogue between the spinning light of the first part of these lines is contrasted with the 'dull green' passivity, and the depressive 'dark puddle'.

Whereas *Quilts* is a poem littered with strong women and images that celebrate domestic success, in 'Garment' there is only the one, single, woman. There is none of the community that we saw in *Quilts* and instead, the ambiguity of the plane trees and the great weight of the silence the void that the stranger leaves in his wake. The poem harbours a darkness that ends with the burial of the dead child, the miniature, in the 'furred whistle | *of this garment*' in an '*unknowing site*' beneath the plane trees 'where they may belong, | or pretend', and which is more akin to the darkness and violence of the poems in *Defensive Rapture*. The poem then assumes the darkness, and perhaps the violence, of 'Geese Blood', and Guest, once again, links this to

women. Across her poetry, Guest has allied images of trees to melancholy or subjugated women; the tree lined lovers walk that is too much for the loveless woman in 'Les Réalités', the trapped poet who looks out on the trees in 'The Location of Things', and the 'Voice Tree' that is made of woman's anger and sorrow. There is a sinuous connection between the 'spinning' that 'lightens' but is 'gleamless' as it 'changes into dull | green' and the trees that are simulacra in 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality'. These images describe the depth and stretch of female abjection. These trees are rooted deep in the soil and stretch high above the ground and crucial to this image, is the notion that these trees that Guest allies the 'dark puddle' of the abject feminine to, are not natural, but planted and controlled. It is this control and lack of agency that Guest identifies as the seat of this depressive, dark and violent state and to the abject. Whilst her work also recognises the abject in nature, it does so as a means of describing the other that renders the speaking subject whole, and not as something that manifests oppression and control, or that renders the orchards in *Musicality* no more than 'euphemisms of nature'. For Guest the abject space is wholly necessary and is recognised as fundamental to the manifestation of the female self in her work and she repeats these relationships, (re)presenting and reinforcing it further each time. Where that abject space is viewed as ecotone, as a place of symbiosis and as a point of the thetic, the abject can be realised positively and the self, and its necessary other, achieve symbiosis. Guest's continued representation of the natural as a space in which the abject is visible, also becomes positively realised. Whilst the alliance could still be read negatively by feminists seeking to assume the rights to culture in the nature/culture binary, Guest demonstrates that she is instead interested in an alternative to that binary, one which includes both sides and is a symbiosis of nature and culture as well as the abject, other and self. It is this amalgamation that is sought in 'Pallor'.

In 'Pallor' (*Collected Poems* 346) Guest returns her female figure to the ocean and beach spaces, but also draws her inland into the lived spaces of the built environment of the town and its houses. Like so many of Guests poems, 'Pallor' draws on images from her other works, but also from the work of other poets, specifically Marjorie Welish from who's 'Design, with Drawing'[390] she takes a whole line, and again from classical music and from classical mythologies. In this poem particularly, Guest engages with Kristeva's notion of intertextuality and in doing so,

[390] Marjorie Welish, *Casting Sequences*. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 1993). p. 6.

realises an ecotone where new meaning is created and symbiosis occurs. Guest describes this intertextuality as 'magical rites' stating that

> In that creative atmosphere of magical rites there was no recognised separation between the arts. Those of us who shared in that atmosphere [...] considered ourselves part of a hemisphere where all the arts evolved around one another, a central plaza with roads which led from palette to quill to clef. One could never again look at poetry as a locked kingdom. Poetry extended vertically, as well as horizontally. Never was it motionless within a linear structure.[391]

Guest creates motion in this poem not just through the images of the waves, or the fountain, or in the movements of clouds in the sky, but also through the visual presentation of the text on the page. This motion is also manifest in the intertextual exchanges between classical music, painting, and other poetries, and Guest's own work. The poem speaks to the reciprocity of the arts and language and the role of the reader or viewer in their representations. Welish's poem enjoins that we should 'Ask the art', and directs questions to its 'Addressees'[392] and it is this relinquishing of an authorial authority in Guest's work that facilitates the fluidity of subject and object as a constituent of her innovative poetics. This movement between spaces renders the poem an ecotone where symbiosis then creates a new intellectual and artistic space. Guest creates a 'feminist artistic practices […] that exceed struggles with and against male dominance',[393] as her work draws on and references that of the wider artistic community.

The silence of the female figure in 'Garment' is echoed in the silence of the woman in 'Pallor'. Having defined the mutuality of women and nature in 'Garment', Guest uses this image of the silent woman in 'Pallor' as a metaphor for the land as she did in 'All Grey-haired My Sisters'. In 'Pallor', the female figure and the land for which she stands, are entirely seen through the male gaze of the boatmen; she is silent, 'reviewed', 'observed' and is 'a portion | of the view | | a (mere) portion'. This rendering of the female figure as viewed object speaks to issues of female objectification and the male gaze, and as Guest associates the land and women in the poem, so it also then suggests an objectification of nature as each takes on the characteristics of the other and nature also becomes the observed object: the 'observable water'. This association of the land and women renders that which is

[391] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 51.
[392] Welish, *Casting Sequences*, pp. 6 – 7.
[393] Lamm, p. 115.

other, an object separate from us, rather than something that is intrinsic to our being human, and that we are part of. Guest's rendering of this relationship as the poem develops is increasingly complex and women and nature are without agency as they are both rendered as 'the view'. However, through Guest's image of the sea, they are violent and powerful and the boatmen are at the mercy of the waves, the tide and the silts that it carries. This complexity in the relationship between women and nature again describes the fluidity of notions of each. Guest's choice in Welish's line, 'And slowly. And somewhere other than observable water', speaks to this process and to the speed with which women are able to (re)negotiate spaces for themselves, and to the reality of where those spaces might actually be: somewhere other than observable water, somewhere else, somewhere new. Guest's feminism engages in the process of symbiosis and seeks to manifest an ecotone. In this poem however, that space is not realised and women and nature are, instead, wholly othered and specifically represented as such.

This othering of women and nature is prominent in Guest's use of the image of the dissonant 'fourth cord' in this poem. This type of intertextuality weaves through Guest's work and in this case draws lines back through it to classical myth and music and links this poem to her other works such as 'All Grey-haired My Sisters', 'Wave' and *Musicality*. Musically, an augmented fourth is also known as a tritonus and Guest plays on the association with Triton, the messenger of the sea and son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, who is represented as a merman who calms or raises the waves by blowing into a conch shell. The poem's opening image is one of a calm sea dominated by the masculine boatmen:

> Withdrawal from the conceptual line –– joined
> that other surface –– afloat ––
>
> (water is missing the fourth cord
>
> the boatman's shout
>
> "another wave!")

Guest opens the poem in the liminal space of the beach and the shoreline as 'withdrawn from the conceptual line', the boatmen are setting out to sea. Guest

associates this liminal space with women as she describes both as shifting, fluid and changeable:

they took themselves elsewhere
to review her embarkation and destination?

what she was “mixed up in”

what... the silt built up —;

and they are more gentle; she is a portion
of the view —

The changeable nature of the shore with its shifting silts and the sandbars that change the shape of the beach with the tide, is both empowering for women in that it is not fixed by the male gaze, it cannot be plotted, mapped or charted and so avoids the ownership of description, but it is also destabilising in that it renders women fleeting, insubstantial and without recognisable substance. Whilst Guest not only renders the image of the shifting, liminal shoreline and the feminine as other, she places it not in the binary position of the land in relation to the sea, but in a further space between. This third space, however, is not a positive ecotone space but one that is othered on two sides and has no fixed point from which to manifest. As a collection, *Quill, Solitary APPARITION* sees Guest identifying the liminal space positively and as a place of female power and subjectivity ‘Pallor’, however, undermines this positivity and when read as a feminist piece, suggests that Guest sees only violence and a desire to constantly (re)conquer and obliterate the alternate, third space of the ecotone that she has carefully, quietly, populated. In ‘Pallor’ Guest moves away from the previously positive space of the female domestic and troubles it by presenting it as part of the view and part of that which is owned. Guest’s writing of the drives of the body and nature into these poems and her production, albeit subconscious, of a form of *écriture feminine*, further describes these poems as sites of liberation and thus, the process of Guest’s poetry becomes an increasingly prominent site of female liberation. Guest’s next collection *If So, Tell Me*, focuses attention on the process of poetry as a means of female liberation. It returns to the positivity of the domestic space, and an alliance of women and nature, as a space of positive symbiosis that is without the violence and darkness of the poems in *Quill, Solitary APPARITION*.

This elaborate structure: realising the poem's other(s)

In *If So, Tell Me* Guest again situates the speaking subject in the day-to-day minutiae of the domestic space, and women within it, in order to further claim that space as a place of women's intellectual autonomy and empowerment. In these poems, published after her work had started to receive considerable recognition, Guest describes a domestic space that is positive for women and for the production of poetry, again situating herself in a tradition with Emily Dickenson but also finding kin in the work of writers such as Alice Notley and Bernadette Meyer whose poetics are rooted in a feminine and feminist daliness. Guest also deliberately represents nature as a positive space for women. These spaces become the structure around the text of the poem through which Guest explores the process of her poetry both in terms of its means and location of production. Guest's statement that 'all poetry is confessional',[394] takes on multiple meanings in this collection as we see her describe not only her relationship to nature and the domestic space of the home, but to her poetry itself. Susan Gevirtz states that in this collection, 'Guest elaborates a relationship to language and writing that is more than "poetry" or "poetics"', and that 'it is an interrogation of the structures of making, of meaning, and of the conduct of the writer in writing, towards language'.[395] By situating women in such proximity to nature in these poems, Guest draws on nature for that language and for the means of the poem's making, manifesting a dialogue in which each one co-shapes its others. Guest states that 'the structure of the poem should create an embrasure inside of which language is seated',[396] and in these poems, Guest focuses on the structure of poetry as a means of realising a female speaking subject. In all of Guest's poems but, perhaps, in these four poems in particular, 'Space is charged. It permits the words to make their formulations, to *be*... It is silence filled with memory and possibility. Words among the spaces are not simply reference-making gestures; they function' (emphasis in the original).[397] I have already talked about the importance of Guest's visual presentation of the text across her poetry but in these particular poems which were published during a prolific period toward the end of her life and when her work was gaining considerable recognition, it is of particular significance. In these poems, Guest is still exploring what it is to write, what it is to use language and what it is to do so as a woman. The poems are spare and dark,

[394] Guest and Hillringhouse, p. 23.
[395] Gevirtz.
[396] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 22.
[397] Rabinowitz, p. 107.

and although short, none are longer than two pages, they have a great depth, engaging the reading other in their process and demanding not only a response to the text of the poem, but also to the space and the structures around, and under the texts that might function as 'embrasures' in which not only 'language is seated'[398] but the reader as well.

In 'Valorous Vine' (*Collected Poems* 369), Guest returns to the garden space in order to represent the process of her poetry, and in doing so, not only describes the individual, private space of both poetry and garden, but also acknowledges the wider space beyond them. Presented in two parts, in the second Guest makes a reading of her own poem, (re)presenting the process of the poem and interrogating the parts played in its production by herself as poet and the reading other. The first part of 'Valorous Vine' focuses on a single image, that of the violet vine. The speaking subject is removed from the piece as there is no 'I' and seemingly no eye through which we see the plant:

Lifts a spare shadow
encircling vine,
does not tarnish bauble
from overseas and out of silver mine,
drop in clamour and volume.

Along the footpath
returned to mourning a lost stem,

gauzy the stem-like saving, or ruled
over stone to develop muscular difficulty.

In the wind
and overhead, held back by lightning. Did
not surrender or refuse visibility and pliancy obtained.

Or confuse VIOLETRY with stone
or dissipate the land land unshackled,

[398] Guest, Forces of Imagination, p. 22.

budding in another country
while dark here.

Italicising the opening lines as a means of indicating the object of her view, and rather than naming the vine or flower, Guest is the observer that is ‘mourning a lost stem’. This absence of specific naming creates an ambiguity as to what is being viewed and who views it, closing the gap between Guest and the vine, the observer and the observed, and women and nature. The visual nature of the text is necessary in this section where the subject and object are indistinct from each other. This image of the vine can be read as an image of Guest as a female poet, one who casts only a small shadow and who is mourning poorly received works as the storm passes overhead and she is left in the dark. By the time of the publication of this collection, even though Guest had outgrown her roots in the New York School and her sphere of influence was expanding, it is still safe to suggest that the analogy rings true. In 1999, when *If So, Tell Me* was published, Guest also published three other collections and received the Frost Medal for Distinguished Lifetime Work from the Poetry Society of America. The dialogue between Guest’s work and that of other poets such as Marjorie Welish and Kathleen Fraser and many associated with Language writing was also becoming increasing recognised and documented and there was growing critical interest in her work. But even after these successes, the vine that is ‘budding in another country’ suggest that Guest stills sees a gendered distinction between her work and that of her male peers, that they are discrete from each other and that the canon, it still ‘another country’. The land of the final lines is not yet ‘unshackled’ from the gender based bias and that as a female poet, it was, and still is, ‘dark here’ as she ‘lifts a spare shadow’. Again, as in ‘Pallor’, we see Guest creating a female space and the images of women and nature that she presents are always those of subjects who are shadowed by an other that they can neither fully reject nor wholly embrace and as we have seen, the liminality of the subject in these images is a theme that runs through Guest’s work.

In the poem’s second section Guest describes the process of the poem:

> It can be seen she encouraged the separation of the flower from the page, that she wished an absence to be encouraged. She drew from herself a technique that offered life to the flower, but demanded that flower remain absent. The flower, as a subject, is not permitted to shadow the page.

By using the third person, Guest describes the continued absenting of the poet from the poem as the reader takes on the production of meaning. Guest is describing herself as the flower that is separate from the page and whose absence is to be encouraged. It is in this image that Guest encourages the reader to be immersed in the process of the poetry and to not have its production end with the poet. The image describes the influence of the modern arts on Guest, chiming with the 'painters' advice to 'let the poem find its subject'.[399] By the poem's close, however, Guest is suggesting that, even in absentia, the voice of the female poet, her voice, is still to be found in the poem:

> its perfume is strong and that perfume may overwhelm the sensibility that strengthens the page and desires to initiate the absence of the flower. It may be that absence is the plot of the poem. A scent remains of the poem. It is the flower's apparition that desires to remain on the page, even to haunt the room in which the poem was created.

In these closing lines, Guest is describing the impossibility of the reader wholly assuming the role of the poet and maintains a space in the poem from the poet's voice, the apparition that haunts the room and the page. The image of the overwhelming scent of the flower strengthening the page, the poetry, describes the intertextuality of poetries, not just by women, but by all poets in dialogue with each other, where the scent of each is faintly visible in the work of the others. Guest's exclamation, 'VIOLETRY', in the first section echoes then disrupts the image for the shrinking violet and instead, suggests strength and a desire to be heard. Guest's use of the page and the visual presentation of the text further describes the sections, and the passage of the semiotic in each; recognising its push and drawing on the semiotic in the first section and then abruptly switching to blocked text as she starts to suggest that the flow is stemmed. Even as it is stemmed, Guest still describes the semiotic as a constant presence in poetic language as the scent remains, and haunts the room. Guest's describes the difficulties of creating and inhabiting the positive liminal space that she perceives existing outside of, or perhaps in between, the binary gender positions, and which can be described as an ecotone. Like that of the poems in *Quill, Solitary APPARITION*, the semiotic nature of the poems in *If So, Tell Me,* makes visible the point of the thetic, and as readers, Guest asks us to render meaning along with her, and to join her in the liminal, ecotone space where the poem is formed.

[399] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 103.

The ecotone space of the garden mediates between the domestic home and that which lies beyond the fence in 'Doubleness' (*Collected Poems* 372). Guest contextualises her poetry, placing it within the wider natural spaces and describing the influence, and representation, of that space and the separation from it that the poem creates. Guest locates her speaking subject in nature and in doing so, manifests a symbiosis between the text, the space around it on the page and the wider physical, geographical space that it describes and physically inhabits. Guest seems to anticipate Morton's description of the gap between the landscape and our representations of it 'that generates a fantasy of nature',[400] and the poem's title describes the doubling that Guest sees occurring in her representation of nature, and the separation from it that is necessary for the creation of the work. This representation of nature makes it other, and so renders that which is part of the self other, both for Guest, and for us as readers. In this realisation we move further away from the reality of nature and into simulacra as the image becomes the reality and the original space is lost. Guest's description is filmic, echoing 'Borrowed Mirror, Filmic Rise', as she describes the 'distancing unrolling' and a 'continuous reel' at the poems opening, contrasting it with the very small image of the robin's egg and then using that colour to describe the changing blue of the vast sky:

> Robin's egg blue passes into darker color placed its head,
> fluid blue ascends, Distance unrolling.
>
> Continuous reel, as in allegory.
>
> Another landscape,
> darkly hinted,
>
> *rupture* of distance.

The spacing between the words in the opening lines and then between the lines themselves, lends to the feeling of distance unrolling as Guest uses the space around the text, the visual presentation of the text on the page, to manifest the image. The robin's egg blue of the sky stretches out and she draws out the unrolling view only to draw it up short with the other, hinted at, darker landscape that ruptures

[400] Morton, p. 77.

the distance and defines the perspective. The poem's second page then pulls us into that closer perspective as it contrasts the garden with the wider, wilder nature beyond the fence:

Body in the field —– beyond uneven brick,

meaning in advance of itself.

Tree —– bronze birds —– sitting in it.

Imagined brick

Landscape toy.

Doubleness

This elaborate structure around the text.

Guest locates meaning in this garden, the other landscape that ruptures the flow of the distance and that is 'meaning in advance of itself' or an image of nature seen before the real, wider, wilder nature beyond it. Here, language is fixed and Guest sees no new way to describe things within the existing language structure and so, she has to look outside the text, to the elaborate structure around it, and to the space of the other, wilder, wilder nature beyond the fence. This creates a landscape that is other to the actual landscape that she sees, it creates a doubleness, and renders both the represented and the original landscape imagined and a toy. With the final line, Guest locates the process of her poetry in the landscape and draws that landscape, and the process of its representation, on to the page. However, she locates this representation not in the words of the poem, but in the spaces around it, in the spaces and structures around the text, in 'the dark under text', and in the 'depth of poem'.

Guest's representations of the space around the poem, 'the dark under text', in which the semiotic is located develops 'In Slow Motion' (*Collected Poems* 371), as she continues describes nature as the foundation of the semiotic and in the formation of meaning in the thetic space. Likening the process of writing to the melting snow, Guest describes it as a slow, drawn out process that involves vast change over time and as the water, and words, change from one form to another:

> Melting, the melt of snow into midnight,
> preoccupied, half alive, an activity in slow motion
> still attached.
>
> Moves outside the text into the dark *under text*
>
> with closed eyes, detached, unmodified.
>
> A starry adultness
> took other means
>
> to lengthen the text,
> by emotion,
>
> and arguably noise
>
> wooed in this chapter and
>
> each page of,
> *O real life.*

The poem is spare in its rendering of the writing process. Guest's representation of the semiotic that underpins this process is important, as it evidences her recognition of that which is 'outside the text', and the 'dark under text'. The image of midnight with the snow melting into it represents the semiotic space of the *chora* where the other necessarily acts on the self and enables that self to form. In the *chora*, the self and the other are 'half alive' and 'still attached' suggesting a symbiosis that facilitates something new. The image describes Guest as having embraced these dual sides, recognising them as intrinsic to her as a whole and thus she has achieved symbiosis. Guest is able to move outside the text and access the semiotic flow that moves through and beneath it, 'detached, unmodified', and bring it into the language, finding new relations to the thetic and so making new meaning. Guest describes the need for duality in the 'a starry adultness' that requires 'other means' to realise itself. Here she is describing the limits of understanding and access to the semiotic and specifically the limits of using it as a means for women to find their voices and represent their experiences. The positive images associated with the semiotic in the

opening of the poem are then replaced by ‘noise’ that is ‘wooed in this chapter | and each page of, | *O real life*’. By italicising ‘real life’, Guest makes it into an exclamation and associates it with nature and the italicised ‘dark under text’ of the semiotic, suggesting that it is the semiotic that is ‘real’ rather than the simulacra of language and culture. Guest’s acknowledgement of the role in the semiotic in the manifestation and representation of women’s experience is important and again, Guest presents images of nature to describe the place of contemporary women, especially those who write. Their writing is hidden, taking place ‘at midnight’ and is a drawn out process and a change of state, ‘as snow melt’. In this poem, Guest can be seen to be wrestling with the same issues of representation of validity, and of emancipation, that she was at the start of her career. Although she seems closer to a realisation of the type of liberatory text that Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous seek, Guest describes an acute awareness of the limits of such a text in its lack of conformity to norms, its unintelligibility, and so, its otherness. Again Guest is drawing attention to the limits of language in realising her experience but finds herself, not so much without the means to voice that experience, but without an audience that is willing, or able, to listen to and understand it. By refusing to site meaning only in the language of the poem, and instead moving meaning out into the space around the text, Guest develops this liminal space as a potential site of symbiosis but also leaves it open to a refusal that simply renders the poem ‘noise’. Symbiosis requires mutuality in order to realise it and in ‘In Slow Motion’ Guest describes the consequential void of space when it is not in evidence.

Guest echoes the suggestion that ‘real life’ is to be found in nature rather than culture in Deceptions’ (*Collected Poems* 381). Returning to that which is ‘in depth of poem’, Guest describes it as having soundings that are ‘relevant | yet unpredictable’. Guest uses the image of a cloak in the poem’s first section, describing it as something taken and then replaced with a double that becomes simulacrum:

> In the long ago days he might
> take her cloak
> and place it upon
> a hidden arm, and things
>
> before our eyes work out. She would
> find the cloak
> near her cloak,
> and walk
> as if supernatural.

This ghostly, supernatural likeness of the replaced cloak echoes the doubling of the landscape through language that Guest sees in the poem 'Doubleness', pointing to the illusion of language and to the way in which we have constructed reality based on that illusion:

> This Art and the long ago Art,
>
> become a comparison with Reality.
>
> Remain only themselves,
>
> if she does not reveal the cloak.
>
> She shall disclose herself (herself still pointing)
> essential to the hidden
>
> possessiveness in back of a throat,
>
> *the double S of the word.*
>
> *In the twilight a blue-throated bird*
> *finishes his song, and Nature is hushed.*

As this second section closes at the end of the page, the image of the woman who knows the secret of the deception of language, and who is both forced to both keep and expose it in order to signify, is powerful. The physicality of the trebled double 'S' sounds in 'possessiveness' are redolent of the hiss of a snake and suggests that Guest is then taking on the role of a bringer of knowledge which will then lead to the fall. Guest notes that the feminine is complicit in the continued restriction through language, that she is 'does not reveal the cloak' and is 'essential to the hidden', and that women maintain the illusion of power and subjugation by continuing to use the forms and languages that oppress them. In the final lines, both the bird, an image that Guest consistently associates with women, and Nature, are hushed in the twilight that surrounds them. Guest's 'N' nature sets it apart from the bird and associates it with the 'R' reality and the 'A' art suggesting that she sees all as cultural constructs. Guest describes the conflict in realising of women's voices; 'repercussions, *soundings* turn a corner | meaning the poem may despise, and conflict begin', describing it as a conflict within the wider social structures of language and within the speaking woman as she tries to arrive at her own valid self. Guest identifies the role of women in the perpetuation of this conflict, seeing that we take

part in our own regulation and, identifying the role of language in this regulation. Guest then identifies poetry and poetic language as the means of realising of a fully represented self, saying, ‘By what *soundings* does one arrive at the interior? *Deception’s* use of | deception, a scale to its size. *Soundings relevant*, | *yet unpredictable, in depth of poem*’.

In her exploration of the ‘depth of poem’, ‘the dark under text’, Guest confronts the abject and recognises the necessity of the other in the manifestation of a speaking subject. In these dark and challenging poems, Guest describes the violence and loss inherent in the abject and locates the abject in women and nature. Guest’s expression of the semiotic in these later poems and her manifestation of the drives of nature and the body through the visual presentation of her text, exemplifies *écriture féminine* and extends Cixous’ premise beyond the female body and into the space of the natural so that it too is written. These poems demand the reading other take part in the process of making meaning and in doing so, Guest seeks to have the reader inhabit nature and female spaces, but particularly seeks to place them in the space of the abject and, to realise a symbiosis between her and the reader in the dark under text.

Chapter 4.

Coming from outside: Subversion and transformation in Barbara Guest's millennial poems.

She is not so silly

as they thought in her mantle,

coming from outside

Symbiosis

In my first three chapters I have discussed the ways in which Barbara Guest positions women in her poetry in relations to nature and domestic spaces and how she seeks to manifest these as positive spaces for women and sites of their autonomy and authority. Whilst the poetry that Guest wrote right up to her death in 2006 continues this endeavour, this final chapter focuses on *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature*[401] and *Symbiosis,*[402] and analyses how Guest, now in her late 70s, represents the aging women and looks back on her life in literature and the arts. These two poems draw on and share images with Guest's previous work and I have chosen them as the focus for my final chapter in order to chart these repeated images. These poems are seemingly autobiographical in nature and provide an insight into Guest's relationship with the literary canon, and the role of women in it. Alice Ostriker states that at the heart of women's poetry there 'is the quest for autonomous self–definition', and that 'shaping that quest is a heritage, external and

[401] Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature.* (Hanover, New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1999).
[402] Barbara Guest and Laurie Reid, *Symbiosis.* (Berkley: Kelsey Street Press, 2000).

internal, which opposes female autonomy'.[403] In these poems, Guest positions herself adjacent to the heritage of the literary canon, myth, music, art and philosophy, and describes their shared qualities in her work. These poems are subversive and transformative, supporting Ostriker's claim that 'where women write strongly as women, it is clear that their intention is to subvert and transform the life and literature they inherit'.[404] Across her work, Guest draws on the life and literature she has inherited, but perhaps especially in these two poems, exemplifies what it is to writing strongly as a woman. Once again, Guest is seeking to create 'feminist artist practices […] that exceed struggles with and against male dominance'.[405] In these poems, Guest subverts and transforms life and literature in order to (re)establish the position of women, and nature and domestic spaces they inhabit, within them. Both *Rocks on a Platter* and *Symbiosis* were published during the period in which ecofeminism was struggling against charges of essentialism and somewhat before the rise of the new domesticity that saw traditional homemaking as a potential site of women's anticapitalist, environmental activism.[406] Guest's ecofeminism embraces the (female) body, nature and the domestic as empowering spaces, refusing to place them in binary opposition with culture and instead co-locates them within a new feminist aesthetic. Guest's feminism is tightly bound within the mantle of home, family, motherhood and refuses a radical feminism that insists on their rejection and therefore, perpetuates binary thinking.

Cultivated outside us: Subverting the literature women inherit

The back cover notes to *Rocks on a Platter: Notes on Literature*, describes the poem as 'deftly allusive', as 'revealing the range and depth of [Guest's] cultural knowledge', and describes her work as 'saturated in the visual arts and music'[407]. The imagery and sources of the poem are hard to pin down. Guest describes the poem as a 'mock epic', alluding to the fantastical setting of *Orlando Furioso* and its unreality[408] from which she 'borrowed the title' to include in the poem. The fantastical nature of the imagery and the intertextuality, both obvious and hidden, make the work both exciting and challenging and one that refuses any definitive reading. Guest's pared

[403] Ostriker, p. 59.
[404] Ibid, p. 211.
[405] Lamm, p. 115.
[406] Carroll, p. 52.
[407] Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter,* Back cover notes, author unidentified.
[408] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 107.

back quotes and references to art, literature, myth and music are such that only the merest sliver is left, rendering them almost unrecognisable. Once recognised though, the depth and breadth of Guest's cultural knowledge comes to the fore, and the poem describes the wide range of influences that Guest draws on here, and across her poetry, from the seventeenth century epic poem, classical myth, philosophy and music. 'Innovative, intimate and erudite', *Rocks on a Platter* articulates 'a feminist aesthetic that seeks not to dispel mystery but to elaborate and perpetuate it'.[409] Guest appropriates aspects of art, literature, myth, philosophy and music, and then subverts them by co-locating them in the traditionally female spaces of nature and the domestic home, in order to elaborate a new feminist aesthetic that forces us to (re)consider these relationships.

Rocks on a Platter exemplifies Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality as Guest draws on myth, medieval history, literature, aesthetic theory and art as well as her own poetry. Kristeva defines intertextuality, or transposition, as 'the passage between one sign system to another', that results in 'a new articulation of the thetic'.[410] The intertextuality of *Rocks on a Platter*, results in a new 'enunciative and denotative positionality'[411] as Guest co-locates canonical texts and philosophical thought with nature and the domestic spaces traditionally associated with women. This deliberate co-location of these traditionally disparate spaces and practices, leads to a new articulation of the thetic and manifests an ecotone. The same is true of the late century intertextual work of writers such as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Rosemarie Waldrop, and Joan Retallack whose work seeks to elucidate and articulate the multiplicity of their intellectual, lived experiences through the melding of poetry, prose, and critical rhetoric, found and new, in order to realise a new (feminist) conception of each, and that of Susan Howe who's intertextual work draws from archival materials. Guest's own poetry, essays and criticism describes the same intersections, writing an 'experimental feminine' that is 'shaping history conceived not as fateful adumbration, but as dynamic coastline where past and present meet in the transformative rim of our combinatory poesis'.[412] Intertextuality offers a textual (re)imagining that is generative as it insists on an articulation that results in a new denotative position and that engages with notions of difference in order to realise a dynamic, combinatory textuality. Guest appropriates aspects of traditionally male dominated high culture and intellectuality, and co-locates them with women in the

[409] Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter,* Back cover notes, author unidentified.
[410] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 60.
[411] Ibid.
[412] Retallack, p. 96

domestic and in nature and in doing so, redefines our notions of both, manifesting a new denotative positionality. This intertextuality speaks to Donna Haraway's notion of 'sympoiesis' which she describes as 'a word proper to complex, dynamic, responsive, situated, historical systems. It is a word for worlding–with, in company'.[413] Guest's intertextuality challenges boundaries between aspects of gender, arts and culture and seeks not so much to redraw them, but to erase them, creating new generative spaces. Haraway encourages a 'becoming-with'[414] that allies to Guest's desire to have women's authority and autonomy recognised within traditionally female spaces, as 'sympoiesis enfolds autopoiesis and generatively unfurls and extends it'.[415] *Rocks on a Platter* is generative and inclusive, opening itself up to repeated reading re-reading as the imagery, language, intertextuality and visual presentation of the poem weave and re-weave themselves into something that 'generatively unfurls and extends'. Haraway's statements that 'we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations', that we 'become with each other or not at all' and that 'alone in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much and too little, so we succumb to despair or to hope and neither is a sensible attitude'[416] describes the kind of dissolution of binary thinking that underpins Guest's feminism as she seeks to become-with on her own, equal terms, not to be the same as.

The rocks of Guest's title shift between a multiplicity of meanings but the root of the image is that of women coming from its archaic meaning: the spinners distaff, women's work and the female branch of the family.[417] From the very first, Guest associates women with the construction of the poem, intertextuality, and language: 'words, words…'. The polyvalency of Guest's 'rocks' unsettles the reader and calls for a constant (re)evaluation of the word as it appears in the poem. Just as Kristeva describes, this multiplicity 'unsettles naming', and builds up a 'plurality of connotation' that offers readers the chance to imagine both 'nonmeaning', and 'true meaning'.[418] Caroline Williams describes the poem's title as a 'small Guestian joke', suggesting that Guest 'would have been well aware of the difficulties that her text would present

[413] Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, p. 58.
[414] Ibid.
[415] Ibid.
[416] Ibid, p. 4.
[417] All these definitions of the word 'rock' come from the *Oxford English Dictionary.* Caroline Williamson notes the archaic meaning 'distaff' and suggests that 'it would be interesting to pursue an analysis of gender in the poem from this staring point'. This is comment has focused my reading of this poem.
[418] Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia.* Trans, Leon S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 97.

to the reader'.[419] Whilst it might be instinctual to read 'rocks' as a noun, Guest's rocks might not be objects at all but a motion – something rocking side-to-side, front to back, to and fro, rhythmically. If Guest's 'rocks' is a verb, we are still none the wiser as to what it is that is on the platter. Whilst Guest's rocks can be read as stones that, as the back cover describes, are offered for the poem's construction and represent the building blocks of the poem, to read the rocks as women, places Guest, women writers, and the female speaking subject, at the heart of the construction of the poem and of language, meaning and literature.

Guest's choice of Hölderlin, 'to live is to defend a form' as epigraphy to the opening poem in the sequence, describes her continued preoccupation with form and particularly with an avant-garde or experimental feminine that might play to a negative tradition of women's writing with its being seen as 'distracted, interrupted, cluttered, out of control'.[420] Guest's work is of course none of these things and is instead, the amalgamation and then distillation of a lifetime appreciation and consideration of art, philosophy and language that seeks to realise itself. Guest's epigraph for the second section, Johnson, 'To invest ideas with form, and animate them with activity has always been the right of poetry', particularly seeks to (re)claim experimental form as a right of women's poetry, both within a feminist poetic canon. Joan Retallak notes that there is a 'dark side' to the feminist literary establishment where 'women writers whose projects are dedicated to something other than therapeutic exposures … are lumped together with male writers who produce "inaccessible" texts and dismissed', going on to state that 'it looks very much like a replica of the standard patriarchal treatment of non-confirming women'.[421] Retallack's observations also speak to the experiences of ecofeminists who found their voice muted if not silenced by a feminism that refuses the material aspects of human existence. Guest's epigraph claims the abstract and active forms as the rights of women's poetry not because of an association with the feminine, but because they are the very function of poetry itself, and Guest is a poet. Guest's refusal of binaries and boundaries is reasserted in the epigraphs she choses for the final two sections as she moves into the realms of aesthetics, citing Hegel's observations on the unreality of a difference between the imagination and real, between an inner and outer world, and Adorno on the fluidity of limits. Guest's poetry has always blurred the boundaries of the observable real and the reimagined representations of the real

[419] Caroline Williamson, 'Working Methods: Painting, poetry and the difficulty of Barbara Guest'. *Jacket* 36, Late 2008.
[420] Retallack, p. 94.
[421] Ibid, pp. 116 – 117.

that form the nexus of abstract art. Limits are, Guest is suggesting, ephemeral, transitory, shifting things that are made, not found and are in a constant state of absorption and (re)creation. Guest's refusal to accept limits on her work, both external and of her own making, resulted in a life's work that is innovative both in its poetics, and its politics as it explores (female) subjectivity.

Rocks on a Platter might well be considered the culmination of a lifetime of formal exploration but it particularly speaks to an exploration of form and feminism that engages with Irigaray's proposal of a 'heterodox subjectivity and writing practice whose elliptical, seductive, riddling and riddled inventiveness speak from that subjectivity'.[422] DuPlessis' description of a 'hybrid, critical' speaking subject who 'desires amphibious modes of writing that no longer formulate in authoritarian, universalist fashion', but that 'investigate and return to complications, that enact provisionality, slippage scepticism and randonné'[423] particularly describes the shifting nature of *Rocks on a Platter* with its intertextuality, its formal and linguistic shifts and complications that engender a feminist poetics a that 'cut(s) way beyond language-business-as-usual' and that seeks a cultural change that is 'revolution not revision'.[424] The intertextuality of Guest's feminist poetics 'invites readers to interpret a text as a crossing of texts',[425] and to see that which is created anew in that crossing, not to simply revise the existing and put a new dress on it. That the intersection of Guest's texts places women in focus, demands that they are complicated, provisional in ways that refuse traditional stereotypes even whilst they might seem to perpetrate them. By placing the rocks on a platter, laying them out like a fancy lunch, Guest means to display them, and in doing so, Guest demands women's work in the home, as spinners, cooks and carers be recognised as well as their role in the creation of language and literature in that it refers 'metaphorically to the act of arranging words on a page'[426] but specifically, words that have a multiplicity of meanings. Guest's image of the 'three racing women' in the poem's final section, draws on the definition of rock as distaff, the race being the channel along which a loom's shuttle moves, and alludes to the Three Fates, who spin and weave the thread of life. This image is repeated in *Symbiosis*, and references the domestic skills of the women in the home, echoing those Guest depicted in *Quilts.*

[422] Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, pp. 133-146 in Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*. p. 8.
[423] DuPlessis, *Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work*. p. 8.
[424] Ibid, p. 28.
[425] Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, p. 10.
[426] Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions*, p.37.

The poem's first page describes the origination of ideas in nature, co-locating women in the same space, whilst drawing on images from Guest's earlier poems:

Ideas. As they find themselves. In trees?
To choose a century they are prepared to inhabit. Dreams set by typography. A companionship with crewlessness – – shivering fleece – –

Ship

shoal rocks

to approach this land raving!

Rocks, platter, words, words …

mammoth teeth.

Mobility interseamed with print: "a small car beside the porch and wind with a harsh caress…" another STORY BEGINS:

[…]

I heard the wolf.

Guest's question in the first line returns to the trees of the city and the leaves that she watched though the window in 'Location of Things', to the overwhelming trees of the autumn walk in 'Les Réalités' and, to the darkened copies of all trees in 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality'. It is also a return to the Cedar Tavern and the ideas shared there between poets and artists, whose imagined spaces would be laid out in their typography. Guest's referencing of her own poetry places *Rocks on a Platter* within the canon of her own work and describes it as its culmination. This is a canon that Guest cannot be excluded from and that should be recognised as contiguous

with the wider canon of the New York School. The relationship between Guest 's work and that of the New York School is critically ambiguous as, having been excluded from several early anthologies and critical studies, she is somewhat dislocated from the group that she was, socially at least, so much a part of. Both Guest's 'ideas' and her rocks, acknowledge William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*, and his later poem, 'A Sort of Song'[427] which identifies the relationship between language and nature and reintroduces Williams' call for 'no ideas but in things'. Williams' poem seeks, 'through metaphor to reconcile | the people and the stones', proclaiming that, 'Saxifrage is my flower that splits | the rocks': in Latin, Saxifrage literally means 'breaking rocks' and it is used medicinally in the treatment of bladder stones.[428] As he did in *Paterson,* Williams is seeking to reunite readers with language and to make 'things', rocks, words, mean again by reconnecting them with the lived environment. Like Williams, Guest is seeking to liberate language, freeing it from its grammatical and syntactical strictures and opening it up to multiple meanings, and it is telling that both locate this liberation in nature. Williams' phrase originates in his long poem *Paterson*, which locates these 'ideas' in urban America with the 'blank faces of [its] houses | and cylindrical trees',[429] and which Guest echoes in poems such as 'The Location of Things', *The Countess of Minneapolis*, and 'An Emphasis Falls on Reality'. Both poets are seeking to liberate language but Guest goes a step further than Williams as she seeks not merely to split the rocks, but to shatter them. Guest's shattered rocks seek to realise the place of women in literature and represent the spaces that they inhabit, particularly, the domestic home and nature.

Guest reinforces the reading of the rock as distaff in the image of the 'shivering fleece'. Using it to represents women and the domestic, Guest reaches back to *Quilts* in which she celebrated women's domestic skills and described the home as a place of women's autonomy and authority. That this fleece should be shivering, however, recalls Guest's representation of the feminine mystique throughout her poetry, as she describes the impasse that she sees suburban women subject to in domestic spaces that are unfulfilling but where the alternative of leaving the home is equally unappealing. The shivering then takes on the quality of rocking, a back and forward between points, neither of which offer liberation and from which 'we may work our way through to the pitch of the art before us, then centre where the writing rocks

[427] William Carlos Williams. *The Collected Later Poems of William Carlos Williams.* (Connecticut: New Directions, 1963 Revised Edition), p. 7.
[428] Grieve, p. 720.
[429] William Carlos Williams. *Paterson*, p. 6.

back and froth before taking its plunge into space'.[430] Guest's rocking and shivering seeks to construct 'the undoing of any hierarchical binary, certainly of gender but also asymmetry of valuation and power that distorts mutuality'.[431] Guest's rocking seeks to destabilise and in doing so, to make things new. Guest's introduction of wild nature, that which throughout her poetry has rendered the human fragile and barely visible by comparison,[432] now takes the form of the wolf whose howl is both call and caution; a wolf in sheep's clothing. The image of the fleece can, however, also be read as a symbol of authority, and as the Golden Fleece that Jason and his Argonauts sought, and which Guest associates with women through the image of the rock as distaff. The Golden Fleece came from the ram sired by Poseidon, sacrificed to him, and then hung in a tree that is guarded by a dragon. Guest references this myth later in the glittering scales of Neitzche's dragon, 'Thou Shalt', and in doing so Guest associates women with aspects of high culture. Guest's appropriation of aspects of the mythic and philosophy when coupled with her formal presentation of the poem, decontextualises them, 'moving language or observation out of the site in which it is naturalised to a new site'.[433] Guest's intertextuality renders this work as collage but her interest is 'not only in the edges and fissures of collage practice, but rather in a unifying vision of the poem that recontains and binds fragments without losing their suggestive qualities'.[434] Particularly in *Rocks on a Platter*, Guest is seeking to draw attention to a unified space, intellectual and gendered, that recognises difference and celebrates is fragmentary quality whilst sharing a mutuality that renounces binary thinking. This is the 'becoming-with' of intertextuality that is realised as the ecotone.

Thinking about the intertextuality of *Rocks on a Platter* as collage describes the roots of Guest's poetry in the visual arts and indeed her own practice as a collagist. Daniel Kane describes collage in poetry as most often meaning 'the use of found materials, lines and phrases literally lifted from other people's work and grafted on to one's own'.[435] Guest's craft, however, is more subtle and nuanced than this. Guest's collaged pieces are pared back, thinned down to their essential parts so they become almost unrecognisable, a 'bafflement' that calls us to 'GLOSS GLOSS',

[430] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 41.
[431] Rachel Blau DuPlessis, ''The other window is the lark': On Barbara Guest'. *Jacket* 36 (late 2008).
[432] Lamm, p. 126.
[433] DuPlessis in Diggory and Miller, p. 195.
[434] Ibid.
[435] Daniel Kane, *What is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde.* (New York: Teachers and Writers Books, 2003). p. 12.

but that 'point[s] to the Mix' rather than its separate ingredients. Guest's collage is 'both subversive and democratic' as it 'prompts us to think about the very nature of language and identity'.[436] Guest's poetic collage describes 'both the exterior experience [she] has of the world and [the] interior choice [she] makes to determine and shape [her] relationship to that world'[437] as she seeks to reject binary notions of assumed authorities in favour of an equality based in a recognition of the value of difference. The layering that is inherent in collage and its formal realisation in Guest's poetry speaks to Denise Levertov's statement that 'content and form are in a state of dynamic interaction: the understanding of whether an experience is a linear sequence or a constellation raying out from and in to a central focus or axis, for instance, is discoverable only *in the work,* not before it'.[438] The formal layering in this poem then, is driven by the dynamism of its intertextual content, the formal process of which, as Levertov suggest, is realised only in the interaction between the poet, the text, the reader and the page. The intertextuality of Guest's poem manifests visually in the text as it stretches across the pages, harrying at the margins as it 'resist[s] the prescription of authorship as an exclusively unitary proposition – the essential "I" positioned as central to the depiction of reflectivity'[439] and instead insists on a 'becoming-with'.

The image of the sea in the poem's first lines recalls many of Guest's earlier poems: 'All Grey-haired My Sisters', 'The Hero Leaves His Ship', 'Cape Canaveral', 'Dido and Aeneas', and, in particular, 'Pallor' where Guest first presents the image of the dissonant tritonus which she associates with Triton; merman, messenger of the sea and son of Poseidon and surely the 'Dolphin God' who swims through the poem's fourth section. Whilst Ramez Qureshi describes the image of the Dolphin as 'a trope of the sign' and as a 'symbol for the sign transposed by imagination',[440] he makes no comment on the very specific male gendering and elevation of the sign that is inherent in Guest's image of the 'Dolphin God'. Guest is describing male dominance in language and in the canon, but counters it with the 'throne [that] disappears' in the poems fourth section, and the 'Mix' that precedes the dolphin sliding into view. Guest's image of the dolphin represents the male logos that Irigaray describes as 're-producing (from) nature',[441] and so the mixing the masculine and feminine, necessary

[436] Ibid.
[437] Ibid.
[438] Levertov, 'Some Notes on Organic Form', p. 314.
[439] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, p. 176.
[440] Ramez Qureshi, 'Review of Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter*'. *Jacket* 10, October 1999.
[441] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 77.

in order for language to signify. With this in mind, the sign is less transposed by imagination and than by an exposure of the influence of nature and the feminine on it. Guest's representations of language in *Rocks on a Platter*, resolutely locates it in nature, and specifically, in the sea. The sea carries messages, language, 'words, words…'; is it the platter that the rocks are on? If so, Guest is describing the wildest, the most untameable nature as the origin of language, as that which we re-produce (from), and a wild nature that she has already reclaimed as a space of female liberation by associating it with the sublime. Further reinforcing the links back to her earlier seascape poems, the 'small car beside the porch' recalls the seaside suburban house of 'Dido and Aeneas', the 'wind with a harsh caress' the storms of Guest's Florida poems and *Musicality*, and the pressure of the feminine mystique felt again as 'another STORY BEGINS'. Read in this context, the 'words, words…' that are (re)telling the stories of the women from Guest's earlier poems, become the 'mammoth teeth' – long dead and fossilised – not because their lives have changed, but because they have not. The women approach 'this land raving' and furious, but Guest's use of ellipsis and the extra line space suggests that they are ignored, and are silenced as they sink into the sediment. Reading *Rocks on a Platter* as a poem concerned with making, with writing, however, their comes a duality to Guest's use of images from her earlier works and we start to be reminded of Guest's early and continued exclusion from the contemporary canon. Guest's early, and now almost infamous, exclusion from the 1970 Ron Padgett and David Shapiro edited *An Anthology of New York Poets*, seemed to consign her to the literary margins until she was (re)discovered and started to receive the critical attention her work deserves in the late 1980s. Kathleen Fraser maintains that it was Kenneth Koch who, after Frank O'Hara's death rose as the promoter of the New York School, in advising Padgett and Shapiro left Guest out as, as Fraser states, she was seen as a threat.[442] Whatever the reason for the exclusion, Guest must have been hurt by it and so the furious, raving approach to the beach that opens the poem takes on a new significance. So too might the baked apples, jonquil tales, and the 'donated 25 white Palace chairs' of the poem's early prose section. And the wolf.

This silencing is reflected in Guest's italicised '*Passivity*'. Whilst Guest links this passivity to the feminine mystique and in it, describes the passive attitude that the suburban housewife is expected to exhibit, it can also be read in the context of Guest's writing. Whilst she did not rail against her excommunication, she did not

[442] Hadley Guest, 'Kathleen Fraser Interviews Hadley Guest about Barbara Guest'.

simply go away but continued to write and to create an influential, complex, varied and exciting body of work. Guest the juxtaposes this passivity with the act of digging and with women's speech and their narration:

Passivity…

pollen indoctrinated AND fragrance.

She digs with her fingernails into the earth while speaking and

weeping. Her face also

introduced into the story:

a fragrant narration.

Echoing Cixous' images of women's 'mouths gagged with pollen',[443] Guest presents a female speaking subject who is pollen indoctrinated, gagged by the male element of the flower, taught only by it and without reference to their female aspect. The textual presentation of this italicised passivity, exemplifying Cixous *écriture feminine*, suggests either, a sigh, a noise of resignation that indicates Guest is weary of this narration, this same old story, or, a hiss that is the angry sound of a reprimand. The image of the woman who digs the earth with her fingernail whilst speaking and weeping, however, counters this passivity, as do the left margin aligned lines even whilst the line spacing remains the same. This visual presentation of the text creates a formal tension between the lines with the line breaks acting as punctuation and drawing attention to specific words and phrases. John Wilkinson describes syntax in Guest's poems as 'returning to its Greek root as 'arrangement', without its subsequent connotation of *regulation*', noting that the 'verbal element of a Guest poem are disposed more as the materials of collage than discourse'.[444] Guest's careful arrangement draws attention the reader into the process of the poem, as an active listener or reader who must engage eye and ear in order to catch the nuance of Guest's craft. Wilkinson goes on to describe Guest's poems as demanding

[443] Cixous, 'Laugh Of The Medusa', p. 878.
[444] John Wilkinson, 'Couplings of such sonority': reading a poem by Barbara Guest'. *Textual Practice* 23:3 (2009). p. 485 – 486.

'deferential work from a reader which has little to do with bringing his or her own *experience* to the poem's aid' (emphasis in the original).[445] Without naming it as such, Wilkinson suggests a reading experience linked to the semiotic as he states that 'there exists in a reader a level of consciousness prior to retrievable experience, answering the emergent poem and contributing to its consolidation', noting particularly that 'it is the poem's arrangements which elicit this answer'.[446] The opening up of the page and its role as a surface and then retrieves this consciousness as much by the meaning and ordering of the words on it. Guest draws attention to the visceral nature of the act of the woman digging with her fingernails, her clawing at the earth, by placing the lines at the left margin and juxtaposing them with the indented and italicised passivity. This juxtaposition speaks to the body drives of *écriture feminine* which is coupled with the fecundity of the earth and the notion of earth as a repository of women's suffering as she speaks and weeps. Alice Ostriker describes women who identify with the earth as not only celebrating fecundity, but also creating a link to a 'critical and subversive intelligence or with the creative imagination'.[447] This association offers an ecofeminist reading of the poem in the image of earth as repository for women's suffering, with the fragrant narration of the woman's face a metaphor that returns us to the garden's of Guest's early poems where women tempered and negotiated the domestic home and the wilder nature beyond the fence. In the act of her speaking whilst digging, Guest draws an association between women's critical and subversive intelligence, and the creative imagination that Ostriker describes.

Guest refers to *Rocks on a Platter* as her 'mock epic'[448] and in doing so describes an appropriation and reimagining of form and of the canon that facilitates the inclusion of women and specifically, women writing innovative poetics such as Guest's. The 'implacable poet' seeks to find that which is 'hid in the rock', to open language, poetry, up to those skilful and impassioned voices:

[445] Ibid, p. 487.
[446] Ibid.
[447] Ostriker, p. 111.
[448] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p. 107.

Shattered rocks

hid in the rock?
Deft, vehement. Amulet cast from the pocket.

And wind over red-tiled roof and we grow closer
to the moss of subjectivity guarding an old iron basin
limed, old stars.

Both the words and the visual presentation of these lines describes the breaking-up of language, not into nonsense but into a deft, skilful talisman that can be cast to (re)name and (re)imagine. This desire to unsettle, describes the 'urgency towards naming [and] bringing voice to off-the-record thought and experience'[449] seen in women's contemporary innovative poetry and that is characterised by a visual presentation of the text that describes the breath and the body in the formation of thought, experience and language. By isolating phrases, Guest draws attention to them and makes it an exclamation. The indented question, 'hid in the rock?' is almost hidden in the text as the eye is drawn first to the line that follows it, and which can be read as equally descriptive of the act of shattering the rocks, or the casting of the amulet from the pocket; skilful, yet passionate and impetuous. The shape of the lines that describe the wind, echo both its flow over the red-tiled roof, and the separation and protection of the human from the wind that the roof provides. Guest represents time passing in the long gap of the final line, co-locating the very human measure, in the gentle, rhythmic drip of water as it limes the basin, and the incomprehensibly vast time of the universe and its old stars. Guest use of gaps and textual groupings not only replicate the drives of nature and the body, but are redolent of Irigaray's 'blanks' that 'recall the places of [women's] exclusion',[450] alluding again, to the woman-shaped gaps in the canon. The female influences in her own work can be said to have been largely been from the world of painting and Guest herself, notes the dearth of female poetic influences in her work. Citing George Eliot as a 'pious example towards which I could strive by never reach', and 'H.D. of course I read', but as to women poets, Guest 'is really at a loss', stating that she had been vastly

[449] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, p. 176.
[450] Irigaray, *The Speculum of The Other Woman*, p. 142.

influenced by French poetry but noting wryly that 'there are no women there'.[451] In her 1995 interview with Charles Bernstein, Guest states that 'I truly believe that women are writing almost the best poetry today, in America today', noting that even while she identified with her early male contemporaries, 'because we were involved in the same attitude to poetry', how lonely she had felt until 'newer generations, younger women came along with whom I could identify, as they could identify with me'. [452] This loneliness and feeling of isolation is perhaps at the core of Guest's poetics and fundamental to the elusive nature of a speaking subject that at once both is and is not Barbara Guest. Mark Silverberg finds that 'Guest has built a poetic out of a particular kind of self-deferral, silence or invisibility' in which 'withdrawing (…) radically from subject matter and subjectivity as traditionally conceived, Guest has created a poetics whose goal is to remain half-hidden, to gesture to what can't be read or seen'.[453] The intertextual collage of *Rocks on a Platter* is both a part of this withdrawal and a description of it as the 'brokenness resembles | evasion'.

The potential for making a reading of *Rocks on a Platter*, at least in part, as a retrospective of Guest's work should not be overlooked. Whilst scholars have concentrated on the references to literature, art, aesthetics and music,[454] focusing their attention on these influences in Guest's work and chasing down the origins of the poem's oblique references and quotes, they have paid scant attention to the presence of Guest's own work in the poem. Ramez Qureshi does state that 'the book is full of repeated or self-referential twists and turns',[455] but he is speaking in terms of the poem's own self-reference, and does not trace the images back through Guest's previous work. Sarah Lundquist describes *Rocks on a Platter* as 'a goldmine of Guestian self-reference'[456] and I have already identified a number of images from previous poems in the first few pages of *Rocks on a Platter* so with this in mind, the poem becomes less about 'its own assemblage',[457] as Qureshi suggests, and much more about the assemblage of Guest's work as a whole. Whilst the poem seeks to express and reflect on Guest's poetic process, it is also seeking to place it within the

[451] Barbara Guest, Interview with Susan Howe. Susan Howe's Poetry Program. (WBAI-Pacifica Radio April, 1978) PennSound
[452] Guest, Interview with Charles Bernstein.
[453] Silverberg, p. 63.
[454] see in particular Caroline Williamson, 'Working Methods'; Sara Lundquist, 'Dolphins Sightings: Adventures in Reading Barbara Guest', and Ramez Qureshi, 'Review of Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter*'.
[455] Qureshi.
[456] Sarah Lundquist, ''Hers and Mine / Hers and Mine': H.D. and Barbara Guest'. *How2*, 1.4 (September 2000).
[457] Ibid.

wider canon, and in doing so reimagine it. Guest does not want to create an alternative, female canon, but to have the recognition of the existing canon. In section three, Guest places women's writing and writing by women, the 'belles lettres', H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt*, alongside that of Rainer Maria Rilke, Byron, Keats and Shelley. Guest is the 'Implacable poet' who is unyielding, revels in the 'noise of shattering', and whose rocks 'jingle in your pockets', and are 'HEARD ON THE PAGE', demanding our attention. The place in the canon that she seeks is not based on a desire for her work to be the same as those already in it, but to have it take its place along side them on its own terms; to have the value of its difference recognised. Susan Howe and Joan Retallack are among those who have written about the double bind of innovative or experimental poetics for women, with Howe noting that in addition to its wider exclusion from the literary canon, women are often excluded from its own canon and histories.[458]

Guest describes the absence of women's writing as 'lost paper' with the image of the knuckle echoing that of the empty knuckle that attaches itself to the Countess/Guest in *The Countess from Minneapolis*:

> Skin of the lost paper
> Knuckle smooth (touched the writing).
>
> Nietzschean thumb on
> the trout
> and they disappear.

Guest's 'Nietzschean thumb' is a reference to scholars who do 'little nowadays but thumb books' and who 'lose entirely their capacity to think for themselves. When they don't thumb, they don't think'.[459] The lost paper, knuckle smooth, describes the lack of women in the canon and so the loss of women's writing and voices from wider culture. Guest has repeatedly used images of the hand and arm to describe waves and river water, imbuing them with strength, as in the river's 'smokey old fist' in *The Countess of Minneapolis* and the sea's 'strong wrist' in 'The Hero Leaves His Ship'. These scholars' thumbs, however, are weak and disappearing with each page they turn. Guest describes 'Frail sentence[s] | […] under a shaken tree' recalling, once

[458] Frost, p. 109.
[459] Neitzsche's *Ecce Homo* as quoted in Williamson.

more, images from 'The Voice Tree', and suggesting that such sentences are 'cultivated outside us', and are not the sentences spoken by women. These words, are 'inflammable' but 'lie in bricks', describing both the elemental energy of women's, language and its restriction. These regimented, created bricks contrast sharply with the organic, elemental rocks of the poem's opening section that approach this land raving. This ridged, shaped, female speaking subject recalls that of the feminine mystique, describing an image of women that is 'cultivated outside us' and is other to the actuality of women. With her Nietzschean thumb, Guest seeks to counter notions of the canon and the primacy of culture, in favour of an engagement with nature. Whilst Guest does not wholly reject indicators of cultural and intellectual worth, she draws careful attention to that which is excluded from them and in doing so, questions their right to act as indicators of such value.

Guest continues to question this value as she returns to the fleece of the poem's opening lines and the dragon that guards it. Guest's '*glitter*' evokes Nietzsche's dragon, 'Thou-shalt': [460]

> The rule of thumb under *glitter*
> is that *glitter* disturbs, and
>
> paled, finds painting
>
> a wild grape loosens
> glitter
> from the *rock platter.*

In Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra,* the sprit of the wilderness becomes a lion and faces the dragon, 'Thou-shalt', who scales glitter with 'All the values of things', and who states, 'All values have already been created, and all created values – are in me. Truly, there shall be no "I will" any more!'.[461] Guest's oblique reference suggests that the scholars who thumb their pages are disturbed and paled, fenced in, by their inability to create anything new, by their lack of 'I will'. Guest is suggesting that language; scholarly language, traditional language, the language of canonical texts, is restrictive and will be loosened by a new 'glitter' that is linked to wildness and wine, painting and the rock platter. Guest's italicising of glitter in the first lines, and then not in the final lines marks a distinction between them. This new glitter is

[460] Williamson.
[461] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by R.J. Hollingdale. (London: Penguin, 1969), p. 55.

associated with women and to the Nietzsche's lion, and whilst it is unable to create new values, it can 'create itself freedom for new creation'.[462] The lion is 'lord in its own desert', and his spirit says, 'I will!'.[463] Guest's representation of the lion that can 'create itself freedom for new creation' does not suggest a subversion of the canon but its expansion or transformation to include women. Guest's glitter suggests that whilst for the scholars that thumb, the boundaries have been set, for women there will be an 'I will', and that there is a different set of freedoms to be found. The page closes with a quote from Ovid that Guest translates as '" Earth, painted with flowers, that *shone brightly,*"'. Guest contrasts the scholarly readers that thumb with the wild grapes and the earth and flowers of nature, which is the traditional territory of women, and which glitters and shines brightly. In this respect, Guest's writing and painting women are lion-strong and unafraid of a dragon that would tell them that they cannot speak, that they had no agency of their own.

This strong speaking woman is realised in the poem's final pages as Guest returns to the sea and beach spaces to realise a liberated, writing women. This liberated women is located in the ecotone space of the seashore, identified in earlier poems such as 'Wave' and 'Sand', and which describes a space of symbiosis. Guest again, associates women with trees as the new palm trees replace the old, fanatical order:

> An episode with new palm trees.
>
> Words in magnetic order
>
> Words in natural order.
>
> Vulnerable Dolphin skin
>
> and magnetic skin.
>
> In the new part about palm trees
>
> *stumbling* to multiply
>
> tall palms, to replace

[462] Ibid.
[463] Ibid.

a fanatical order (*Orlando*

Furioso or *Dolphin Empire)*

and near the sea basin

rustle of the palm trees

introduce (and a similar movement among their leaves) then the Dolphin slow.

These palm trees are in contrast to the contrived and controlled city trees in Guest's earlier work. They represent a more liberated woman that is located in the ecotone space of the shore, and which Guest describes formally in the visual presentation of the text as it waves down the pages. Guest juxtaposes 'words in magnetic order' with those in 'natural order'. Describing first words that follow a specific path, suggesting navigation and the charting of the seas and land, Guest suggests the delineation of language and the control and ownership through naming. 'Words in natural order', however, suggests a lack of ownership and a freedom, but by linking the vulnerable dolphin skin with the magnetic skin, Guest recognises the difficulty of communicating from outside of the dominant language system that names and owns, and describes the restrictions and difficulties of a (female) language. In the image of the new palm trees, Guest represents women's writing and describes how, as it is set against that of the male dominated traditional canon, it stumbles and is vulnerable, much in the same way as Cixous described women called to speak publicly in 'Laugh of the Medusa'[464]. Guest describes the stumbling steps of women writers to 'replace | a fanatical order' that is represented in the canon, and which she alludes to in the reference to the Italian epic poem *Orlando Furioso*, noting as she does, the continued influence of the work and the difficulty of securing a place in such a long lasting and tangled series of interconnections. Guest is, however, seeking to broaden the reach of the canon, to 'multiply' and include the 'tall palms' of women's writing and is seeking its subversion and transformation, rather than its destruction.

[464] Cixous, 'Laugh Of The Medusa', p. 880.

The desire to realise subversion and transformation rather than destruction, is described in the question that ends the poem, as it echoes the question in the poem's first line:

> Where are they, *wood nymphs and the glittering*
>
> *Beings* ——do they overstep each other … ?
>
> *The Dolphin God* —— does he swim on the page?

These wood nymphs and glittering Beings are the ideas that Guest looked for in the trees in the poem's opening line in their female form. The single space that indents the first line suggests a pause and, perhaps, a 'but' or a 'so', as Guest reaches for the means of realising linguistic liberation and the double dashes of the lines that follow describe two short breaths and an urgency. The *Collected Poems* however, reprints with one long dash in their place, and the tone of the lines changes as it suggest a single long breath, a sigh, and consideration rather than agitation. To this end, the visual presentation of the text epitomises both Olson's composition by field and Cixous' *écriture feminine* as the breath and the (female) body are manifest in the text as fundamentally generative of meaning. Her question, 'do they overstep each other…?', describes the commonality in language as the nymphs and glittering begins who would stretch language into new shapes, are using the same language as the dolphin god of the canon and who are, in turn, changing and evolving language themselves. Guest's final question can equally be read as asking if a liberated, natural, feminine, language already exists in these canonical texts and, as a desperate plea for it to come into existence. Irigaray states that 'to play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of exploitation' and to 'resubmit herself' to 'ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make "visible", by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible'.[465] The intertextuality of Guest's oblique references and quotes plays with mimesis in *Rocks on a Platter* in order to recover the literary spaces that

[465] Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, p. 76.

the women have been excluded from and, to make visible, and ascribe authority to, nature and domestic spaces that have been attributed to them.

Through the rippling: realising women's transformation and liberation

Symbiosis brings together many of Guest's most prominent themes and images from across her work. Although not by any means her last poem, Guest published two further collections of new poetry as well as anthologies of both her essays and reviews on art and literature before her death in 2006, there is a finality to *Symbiosis.* The poem presents a sense of closure as Guest realises a female speaking subject that can finally step off the porch she first described in 'Wave', and who has, at last, 'pushed her leg though the rippling' and is following herself and nature to its farthest. The liberation of the female speaking subject that Guest so ardently seeks is realised in this poem through Guest's continued location of that female speaking subject in nature and the domestic home. Continuing the weaving imagery from *Rocks on a Platter*, Guest locates women's autonomy and authority in their domestic skills as she did in *Quilts*, celebrating it rather than subordinating it and we see a female speaking subject who 'write(s) her own script' and push her way through, into 'those parts that overlap'. In *Symbiosis*, Guest is concerned with the realisation of the ecotone as a positive space for the female speaking subject, one where she can realise multiplicity and authority and one where there is 'harmony, despite but also because of difference'.[466]

Symbiosis is a collaboration between Guest and the Bay area painter Laurie Reid. The founders of the Kelsey Street Press, which had already published a number of Guest's books, introduced Guest and Reid and the women discovered a connection in the remembered smell of Oregon pavements after the rain[467]. Rena Rosenwasser of the Kelsey Street Press describes this as 'just the kind of sensuous detail that opened a personal connection and creative bond for Barbara.[468] At the age of 79, Guest was less able to go out of the house, so the pages were bought to her at home. Rosenwasser states that 'Barbara's friendships with women came out strongly in her collaborations. A productive working and living together is the way she

[466] Lamm, p, 134.
[467] Patricia Dienstfrey and Rena Rosenwasser, 'A Conversation on *Symbiosis*'. *Chicago Review* 53.4 (Summer 2005), p. 144.
[468] Ibid.

mentored and supported them'.[469] This supportive, nurturing aspect of Guest's personality is also noted by Kathleen Fraser who remembers that Guest's 'curiosity extended to the lives and works of persons younger and less sophisticated. Her genuine interest in one's thought and fragile beginning poems provided a ground of encouragement', noting that 'her friendship was offered in dignity [and] assumed reciprocity of value and complementarity of interests'. [470] The ethos of this collaborative and productive environment is encapsulated in the poem's opening statement; 'A writer and an artist working together establish a symbiosis, as in Nature, where dissimilar organisms productively live together'. Guest and Reid found points of similarity in their interests and work, particularly in the poetry of Mallarmé, but the work celebrates their difference and the new ways of seeing and making that that difference brings. In this type of collaboration, Guest succeeds in creating 'feminist artistic practices among women that exceed struggles with and against male dominance'[471] as it realises a new, ecotone space.

In *Symbiosis*, Guest moves away from the violent, abject nature that she described in poems such as 'Geese Blood', and focuses instead on the mutuality supportive aspect of nature that might be found in the ecotone. This collaboration with Reid is productive and mutually supportive and the work becomes ecotone as artist and writer establish a new, productive space that is neither wholly art, nor literature. This intertextual work realises a new articulation of the thetic, and a new enunciative positionality through the manifestation of the ecotone, as art and literature mingle on the page, each drawing on the other; a becoming-with. Reid's pale grey-green lines wave across the cream pages of the book beneath the sepia letter pressed lines of Guest's poetry, each echoing and reinterpreting the shape and flow of the other. Lamm notes that 'despite their allusion to abstraction, Reid's lines also suggest a mimetic relationship to Guest's text', likening them to unravelling wool, grasses and roots, and describing 'their constant return to horizontality [as] keep[ing] the poetry's imaginative flight tethered to nature's horizon line'.[472] The book has an ethereal quality with its muted colours and strangely heavy, yet translucent, pages. Whilst, unlike *Musicality*, the reproduced text in Guest's *Collected Poems* has page breaks indicated, to read it only in that format is to only read half of the poem as the physicality of the limited edition original and the visual nature of the collaboration, the symbiosis, is fundamental to the work. The work is tactile as the letter pressed text is

[469] Ibid. p,149.
[470] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, p. 127.
[471] Lamm, p, 115.
[472] Ibid, p. 135.

sunk below the surface of the page, pushing through to the next and making shadows that echo Reid's waving watercolour lines. Reid's lines extend beyond the edges of the book as if each page were a fragment of a much larger whole and suggesting a work 'that does not enclose the imagination' but which 'points to its endless, difficult-to-grasp expanse'.[473] Guest's images of nature, particularly the sea, in this poem point to this endless expanse, as does the rhythmic, never-ending, hiss of spinning wool and the rhythmic pull of the ripple through flax; of the rippling.

The distaff and images of weaving that Guest introduced in *Rocks on a Platter* are also present in *Symbiosis*, the 'hiss in turning wool', and Guest's continuation of this imagery counters its ambivalence in *Rocks on a Platter*, allowing *Symbiosis* to be read as a sister piece. The images that *Symbiosis* shares with *Rocks on a Platter* are significant in that they describe, not only, a continuity of thought between the two poems but, a development of thought. Guest confirms her representation of the weavers as the Three Fates who spin and weave the thread of life, 'Hiss | the wool | fable, | close and away'. The image of the Fates is multi-layered and in it, Guest locates authority in both women and the domestic. The Fates have authority over birth, life and death and, because it places the means of realising that authority in the domestic as these women are spinners and weavers, that authority is located in the female space of the domestic home. As with the women in *Quilts,* in *Symbiosis*, Guest describes the women as strong and authoritative in the domestic home and through her representation of the Fates, identifies that space as the progenitor and foundation of all life, and death.

The images of layers, and of weaving, are prominent in the first pages of the poem:

Hiss in turning wool,

and envied the circle
and volume,

working in layers.

[473] Ibid, p. 136.

The visual form of these lines describes the rhythmic cycle of the turning wool going on to the distaff and its increase as the layers build. The envied circle and volume describe the positivity of the community of women as Guest did in *Quilts*. Whilst Guest often describes lone women, when she does they are in positions of trial, struggling to step off the porch, burying a dead child or unable to come to terms with the streets of Minneapolis and its surrounding prairies and plains. Guest's representation of communities of women, however, is nurturing as they educate and support each other, sustain households, and, above all, are creative. This circular group of spinning women, like the quilters, work in layers, they are multi-skilled and multi-taskers. Guest's lone women often struggle for speech, to find their voices and signify, but in this community of women, 'the spirit | sails along, | amid live speech', and a female speaking subject is realised through the symbiosis that the community, that ecotone space, creates. Guest both practices and preaches the value of female community in her work.

Whilst recognising the positive, ecotone space that symbiosis creates for women, Guest describes the difficulties of realising that space and the destruction of old, or traditional spaces, that is inherent in its creation:

Is symbiosis aflame stroked

each line power wound up in volume,
when spoken to, fear in place of the woven,

often, it says, in place of the line.
Thinned down, staggering looking up to the drawing;

bodies all the way up the hill.

Guest's image of fire in the first line unsettles the positivity of the symbiosis, suggesting that is alight, on fire, 'aflame', and in the processes of being destroyed even as it is being created. Guest plays with the polyvalence of 'stroked', spacing it at the end of the line and allowing it to be read as either beaten, and so further

destroyed, or as comforted and smoothed. This section describes the rejection of women's speech and writing as with each line, it is beaten back, and the powerful (male) voices increase in volume, drowning the women out, so fear takes the place of the women's woven words. Women's voices are thinned down, staggering, and their bodies left all the way up the hill. This image of breakdown is continued in the lines that follow; 'is symbiosis aflame each pine stroking, | symbiosis aflame, | each day autumn. Day awakens, no break in the | thread'. Guest describes the tenacity and longevity of the thread that does not break, suggesting that it is maintained by the longing for that symbiosis, by the women who pine for it, by their 'Needing, needing, needing'.

Guest's reference to autumn in these lines suggests that it is older women that achieve symbiosis, giving the poem an autobiographical undertone. Guest was forty when her first collection was published and eighty when *Symbiosis* went to print. Guest used the image of the 'tideless', post-menopausal woman in *Quilts*, who was 'secure in the rhythm | of stuffing and tying, edging and interlining' and suggested that women's liberation is to be found in age and maturity, and domestic knowledge and skill. In *Symbiosis*, Guest describes the changing, aging, female body as 'hidden' but 'in iridescence'. This colourful, changeable body has, 'no nerve blinding nothing | attached, | no weight, no thing to litter, | free as unusual', as Guest suggests that age is a liberation, a freedom from the responsibility of women to raise families, of their attachment. The spacing in these lines reflect women's gradual release of responsibility from children and family, the double space between blinding and nothing stretching into the wider spaces between no weight and no thing, with its internal space, to litter or birth. As Guest says, the freedom is unusual. In these lines, Guest exemplifies *écriture feminine* as her textual presentation replicates the freedom, both physical and emotional, from child rearing, and describes an emptiness in the body as it no longer bears the weight of children. In her early work, Guest frequently wrote about women who were unable to leave their suburban home and family and who were caught up in the lie of the feminine mystique that Betty Friedan described. These women were unable to step off the porch and into the wild nature of the sea and so they remained in their suburban homes, looking out on the plaster flamingos and fountains. In *Symbiosis*, Guest perhaps suggests that that freedom comes in time and that women need only wait for it.

Reid's paintings in *Symbiosis* draw attention to the visual rhythms of Guest's lines. As an exemplar of *écriture feminine*, *Symbiosis* counters the machismo of Olson's

composition by field with its 'territorial inclusive/exclusive boy talk'[474] in its representation of the ageing woman. But where Olson may have been seen to be engaged in 'an alchemy of colliding sounds and visual constructions, valuing *ir*regularity, counterpoint, adjacency, ambiguity' (emphasis in the original),[475] *Symbiosis* sees Guest take this alchemy and within the same irregularity, counterpoint, adjacency and ambiguity, manifest repeating patterns, both visual and auditory, that then drift along and through Reid's pale green lines like wind through grasses. Guest sets words and phrases in both conjunction and adjacency with each other, arranging its dimensions, placing its structure under tension through a variability of meter, moods of expression and sound but visually and aurally.[476] The textual presentation of repeated words vertically on the page draws attention the repetition of sounds *and* the image as in 'symbiosis aflame', as does Guest's manifestation of mirrored phrases as counterpoint as in 'Positioning the strophes' and then later on the same page, 'the strophes are positioned'. Guest's repetition of 's' sounds in the final pages of the poem; she, sensitive, pretense, dress, syllabus, else, echo those of the 'hiss in turning wool and fable' that opened the poem and those of 'symbiosis'. Again, we see that syntax for Guest returns to its root of arrangement but refuses the subsequent connotation of regulation.[477] These rhythmical undulations, both in their reading and their visual representation, are drawn from domestic work and the female bodies that do it and bring the speaking body of the aging woman to the attention of the reader from whence it is usually hidden; under a mantle of the double invisibility of age and gender. The rhythms of this female body are then set in concert with those of nature as an 'ancient site of accord | and priority'.

The wild nature of Guest's earlier poems, is once again tempered in the garden space which Guest describes as a liberating, ecotone space:

Plume of impatience the petal,

a clue to ensnare the undrawn,

O valley. O Wine.

[474] Fraser, *Translating the Unspeakable*, p. 176.
[475] Ibid.
[476] Guest, *Forces of Imagination*, p 22.
[477] Wilkinson, p. 485.

This is the point where the strophes meet,

one line interweaves with another,

room of liberal fountains,

a different speech and metabolism,

near an ancient site of accord

and priority.

Guest plays with the word impatience, using it to refer to both the desire of women for liberation, and to impatiens, the colourful flowering plant variously know as jewel weed, wild lady's slipper and wild celandine. At this point of intersection with nature, the strophes meet, the lines interweave and the gardens and fountains that were so restrictive in the suburban gardens of 'Dido and Aeneas' are now liberated and liberating. Guest recognises this as a new articulation of the thetic as she describes this new space as having 'a different speech and metabolism'. In these lines, Guest describes the relationship between women and nature as an 'ancient site of accord | and priority', lending it credence through longevity and primacy. This primacy suggests that this role is not driven by cultural prescription, but is inherent. Nature is intertextual and intrinsic in female speech, but Guest indicates the loss of that intrinsic link as she describes the position of women at the millennium:

Knitting or singing a song, hair let down

from the blue — ranging and tumbling the blue

magnolia nestled, the wild berry, also.

This is a strange way to tell a story being

where one does not wish, in the midst of a storm…

These women are no longer wholly constrained, as they were when Guest started to write, by the feminine mystique; their hair is let down and they are now roving, wandering and tumbling, but the image of the blue magnolia troubles this freedom. The pairing of the nestled, blue magnolia and the wild berry describes a multiplicity to women's situations; nestled, cultivated and created, but also wild. Guest notes the difficulty of this duality, describing it as 'the midst of a storm'. Guest describes the pressure on women at the start of a new century, seeing that they are expected, now, to be both the impossible blue magnolia of the suburban housewife and mother described by the feminine mystique, and the wild berry – to have a career and independent life very much of their own. Friedan herself exposed this pressure to have it all whilst still being expected to do it all in *The Second Stage*, where she explores the continued expectation for women to be responsible for the home even whilst they are working outside it as well as the inequalities they face in the contemporary work place. Once again, as Maggie Nelson says, we see Guest's understated feminist consciousness stepping out of the shadows to mock the 'transcendent or intangible typically offered to women'.[478] Guest sees that whilst women can take on the roles, freedoms and authority of the dominant masculine, they still have to maintain their old proscribed roles too, and that swapping one for the other was never an option. Guest describes the situation as, 'The difficult! the difficult!'.

As in her earlier works, Guest offers nature as the alternative to, if not the remedy for, 'the difficult' of women's negotiation of the mystique and the need to represent an authentic female speaking subject. Alluding again to aging, as 'the scene is more mature', there is a distinct feeling of autobiography to the end of the poem:

[478] Nelson, *Women, The New York School and Other True Abstractions,* p. 41.

She is not so silly

as they thought in her mantle,

coming from outside

studying to be someone else,

why not? And write her own script,

write it then she did

first learn about pretense the make-up and lounge dress,

authority and the syllabus.

This is Guest describing her own writer's journey into the world of the writers and artists of the New York School, and providing a how-to guide for women negotiating the pretence of the mystique. It is Guest representing what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls 'polygynous poetries – those in which a female writer works with a number of plural attitudes to femaleness, maleness, gender, femininity and sexuality' and in which the speaking subject 'is not dissolved; that wayward creature is multiplied' so that she becomes '*both* and *and*, to be viewer and viewed, insider and outsider, we and me' (emphasis in the original).[479] When read autobiographically, Guest is both the viewer and the viewed in this poem, the she who speaks and the she who is spoken of. Guest's opening image of nature is subtle. The mature woman in her cloak who is coming in from outside, suggests the herb Lady's Mantle, alchemilla, which is used in the treatment of excessive menstruation and to aid menopausal discomfort. Here, Guest's describes nature as intertextual as the female speaking subject writes her own script having first, studied to be someone else as she 'first learn[t] about pretence', about pretending, 'the make-up and the lounge dress', which she describes as authority and the syllabus. Guest then seeks to realise a female

[479] DuPlessis, 'The Flavour of Eyes', p. 23.

speaking subject that is drawn from nature and from the parts of the culturally constructed female of the feminine mystique. Guest acknowledges the duality of this position and the insubstantiality of the ecotone space:

A tendency to respond (lacquer) near the driveway, she was

thought not pliable or overtly sensitive. She is more fluid,

she is outside.

Coming from outside, fluid orange.

Rhythm

and festivity.

The ecotone space is fluid, and the female speaking subject is 'outside'. The vibrancy of the 'fluid orange' recollects the 'bird with a bright wing' Guest describes in 'The Brown Studio', the flame of symbiosis that she describes at the start of the poem, and the colour of the autumn leaves which she earlier linked to the aging woman. This aging woman is still 'outside' but this is realised positively with 'Rhythm and festivity', and as 'A sign of being gentle, plain orange'. In playing with the word 'gentle', Guest suggests tame or quiet, but also one of high birth; someone who wears a mantle. Guest describes this ecotone space as 'overlapping' and the woman who inhabits that space as 'pushing her leg though the rippling | image changes'. The physicality of the image of the liberated, older woman who steps through the rippling change, contrasts with that of 'Wave', and the young woman who didn't dare step off her porch.

In both *Rocks on a Platter* and *Symbiosis* Guest exemplifies *écriture feminine* by explicitly representing the drives of the female body and those of nature. This explicit inclusion of the drives of nature extends Cixous' definition of *écriture feminine*, which does not make the connection specifically. In these poems, Guest subverts and

transforms language and the literary canon, in order to (re)establish the position of women, and nature and domestic spaces that they inhabit, within them. Guest's millennial works are intensely feminist in nature and reiterate and re-evaluate themes from her earlier works. These poems confirm Cixous' statement that 'a feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive'[480] as they not only subvert language and the canon, but transform them by insisting on the co-location of women and nature within, and adjacent to them. In this co-location, Guest is seeking to realise a new, ecotone space predicated on a positive symbiosis that emphasises inclusivity, rather than exclusivity, and that consistently enables autonomous self-definition.

[480] Cixous, 'Laugh Of The Medusa', p. 888.

Conclusion.

From this porch to your farthest: feminism, nature and language in the poetry of Barbara Guest.

I would walk from this porch to your farthest

do I dare

‘Wave’

This thesis has surveyed Barbara Guest’s feminism and representations of nature and language, from her early urban and suburban poems, to the wild nature of her millennial works. Common across all these poems is Guest’s deliberate location of the women in nature and the domestic home as a means of realising those spaces as sites of female liberation, autonomy and authority. Guest seeks not only to walk from the porch to the farthest reaches of wild nature, but from a feminism that seeks to assume, or mimic, the dominant masculine position rather than realise liberation in the spaces already ascribed to it. Guest’s exemplification of *écriture féminine* in her poetry explicitly represents not only the drives and rhythms of the female body but of nature too, co-locating them, describing the shared nature of their relationship, and how each is an extension of the other. Through this representation of the intrinsic relationship between women and nature, Guest realises a female speaking subject that includes the self and the other through the process of symbiosis. Guest’s female speaking subject is both a part of, and apart from nature, and in representing this duality, Guest manifest ecotone spaces which are thetic and in which, new meaning is formed. In order to represent the duality of the female speaking subject in

language, Guest expresses the semiotic in her work through the visual presentation of her text, her use of ellipses and dashes, the incorporation of the pictorial through collaboration, and the refusal of traditional grammar, syntax and punctuation. Guest's poetry then, draws the work of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous together and becomes a point of social 'transformation and subversion' and 'the precondition for its survival and revolution'.[481]

In her early poems, Guest describes her profound disaffection with the feminine mystique as described by Betty Friedan, and the lack of an alternative to it that she sees. In her later poems, Guest realises an autonomous, liberated woman as she reclaims the domestic space of the rural home. In these poems, such as *Quilts*, Guest refutes the notion that the domestic space is restrictive and is able to recast it as a site of female authority and autonomy. Particularly in *Quilts* but also in her later poems, *Rocks on a Platter* and *Symbiosis*, Guest's poetry promotes women's achievements within the traditionally female domain of the domestic home and co-locates them with male dominated history and canonical structures. In doing so, Guest succeeds in creating 'feminist artistic practices among women that exceed struggles with and against male dominance',[482] and realising new ways of representing the feminine speaking subject.

Guest also seeks to reclaim nature as a female territory, co-locating the female speaking subject and nature and using it as a metaphor for language and the process of her poetry. Nature is intrinsic and fundamental to Guest's sense of self and to her writing. Guest's writing exemplifies Timothy Morton's definition of nature writing in that it seeks to, 'undo habitual distinctions between nature and ourselves' and provides 'a working model for a dissolving of the difference between subject and object'.[483] However, Guests' writing goes beyond Morton's ecomimesis, and acts not as an authenticating device or 'pressure point, crystallizing a vast and complex ideological network of beliefs, practices, and processes in and around the idea of nature',[484] but as a means of destabilizing them. Guest's poetry insists we (re)assess our relationships with nature and with language and in doing so, make us (re)consider what it is to, and how we might, realise a (female) speaking subject.

[481] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, p. 81.
[482] Lamm, p, 115.
[483] Morton, pp. 63-64.
[484] Morton, p, 33.

Guest's female speaking subject, with her representation of the semiotic and the shared and individual drive economies of both the female body and nature, exemplifies *écriture féminine.* Not only does she bridge the perceived gap between nature and language, and culture, but in doing so, seeks to remind us of our perpetuation of it. Guest's poetry recognises that 'the separation of nature from language and culture is a fiction […] which culture and language have authored',[485] and its intertextuality reminds us of the proximity to nature of the cultural structures that have been created and defined as its antithesis. Consequently, Guest's co-location of women and nature also reminds us of the proximity of women to those structures. In this way, Guest's feminist artistic practices exceed struggles with, and against, male dominance by describing the shared nature that is at the root of language as we each re-produce (from) nature and from the human body.

Guest's poetry acts as a boundary between, or a meeting point for, what are traditionally seen as the disparate spaces of nature, the domestic, and women, and the canon, philosophy, music and art. Through the process of symbiosis, Guest manifests ecotone spaces in her poetry that are thetic and facilitate the production of new, and alternate meaning as she draws on multiple texts, both cultural and natural. The feminist artistic practices that Guest realises in these ecotone spaces exceed struggles with, and against, male dominance and, it is through, and in them, that Guest represents a female speaking subject that recognises the other as fundament to the self.

[485] Griffin, p, 217.

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