

# The Horrors of Ecofeminism: Exploring the Hidden Depths of Ecophobia in Evie Wyld's *The Bass Rock*

*Kristy Strange*

## **Abstract**

Through the lens of ecofeminism, the permeability of the Scottish coast in Evie Wyld's novel, *The Bass Rock* (2020), explores the ways in which feminine corporeality relates to contemporary Female Gothic and how this is intertwined with humanity's exploitation of nature. The fears and anxieties experienced by feminine bodies within the coastal environment are juxtaposed against Simon C. Estok's theory of ecophobia – an idea rooted in the anthropocentric and androcentric fear of a threatening and vengeful nature. Instead, Wyld draws on the Scottish Female Gothic to reflect the blurring of boundaries between women and ecology and explores the permeable borders of both human and nonhuman through the incorporation of the haunting feminine – shown in the merging of past and present narratives in the context of continued oppression and violence towards feminine bodies by men. It is the overwhelming presence of an anthropocentric and androcentric desire for domination that results in the production of fear for feminine bodies within these ecological spaces rather than as a direct consequence of the environment.

In the twenty-first-century, headlines across the globe declare an alarming progression of climate change due to the consequences of the Anthropocene – humanity's impact on the geology of the Earth.<sup>1</sup> This stark reality acts as a strong reminder to humanity of its ecological responsibilities. Simultaneously, women's rights are seemingly under constant attack by a patriarchal culture that seeks to reclaim absolute control over the female body – a counteraction to the loss of control over nature as the environment becomes unpredictable. These prominent issues signal a tipping-point in history and are deeply personal concerns for all environmentalists and feminists, and arguably for all of humanity. These are concerns that we all directly face as a gothic reality penetrates our daily lives due to the negative human impact

---

<sup>1</sup> View examples of headlines here: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/nov/14/still-on-the-road-to-hell-what-the-papers-say-about-cop26>.

on the environment, consequently resulting in threats such as the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>2</sup> The past two years have been riddled with uncertainty, bringing the liminality of the current relationship between humans and the environment into sharp focus. To observe the liminality and permeability of this unnatural, unsustainable human dependency we can look to ecofeminism for insight on how this relationship has become an increasingly toxic and violent one. Now more than ever, an understanding of gothic ecofeminism is needed to shine light on this dark reality.

Published in 2020, *The Bass Rock* by Evie Wyld is a timely novel influenced by the #MeToo movement of the twenty-first-century and expresses the rising anger of women regarding the historically oppressive treatment of feminine bodies by men. Set in the Scottish coastal town of North Berwick, *The Bass Rock* is a story of three women across three different timelines. The novel tells the stories of Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane. Sarah is a young, sixteen-year-old girl accused of witchcraft in the eighteenth-century, while Ruth's narrative progresses forward and is set following the second World War, centring on her recent marriage to a formerly widowed man. Finally, Viviane, the step-granddaughter of Ruth, brings the novel into the twenty-first-century. These narratives flow into each other, showing shared experiences of female subjugation and subsequent male violence that spans across the centuries and continues in the modern-day. In this study, I examine the permeability of the Scottish coast in *The Bass Rock* and explore the ways in which this relates to feminine corporeality in contemporary Female Gothic. Through the lens of ecofeminism, I argue that Wyld engages with the environment, specifically the fluid space of the coast, to queer normative binary constructs of gender, challenging the categorisation of Othered bodies. This article demonstrates that the fear and anxieties of feminine corporeality within the environment differs from Simon C. Estok's theory of ecophobia, which focuses on the androcentric fear of a threatening and vengeful nature. Instead, I argue that the overwhelming presence of an anthropocentric and androcentric desire for domination results in the production of fear for feminine bodies within ecological spaces.

---

<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to studies theorising that SARS-CoV-2 originated in bats before 'jumping' to human hosts. The forced proximity between bats and humans is suggested to result from habitat destruction. This is outlined further here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/17/pandemics-destruction-nature-un-who-legislation-trade-green-recovery>.

In the context of the Gothic, consideration of ecofeminism is imperative to better understand twenty-first-century society; particularly, the rapidity and severity of the current climate crisis alongside the emergence of fourth-wave feminism. Examples of the importance of this topic are demonstrated in modern-day movements such as the Women's March protests, the #MeToo movement, the United States' brief withdrawal from the Paris Agreement, climate strikes sparked by environmental activist Greta Thunberg, and in various panels and protests during COP26 – the UN Climate Change Conference. Ecological disasters are also rampant such as increased forest fires, rapid animal extinction, destruction of biodiversity, the recent eruption of Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano in Tonga, and the current global pandemic caused by the outbreak of COVID-19. The prevalence of ecofeminist attitudes in twenty-first-century society is clearly demonstrated in Thunberg's speech delivered to the European Economic and Social Committee during February 2019:

'We need a whole new way of thinking. The political system that you [the patriarchy] have created is all about competition. [...] [We] need to cooperate and work together and to share the resources of the planet in a fair way. We need to start living within the planetary boundaries [and] focus on equity [...] for the sake of all living species' (p. 37).

To live within the planetary boundaries – real boundaries based on the sustainability of resources and its impact on both human and nonhuman life – humanity must acknowledge its ecological responsibilities and deconstruct the anthropocentric and androcentric ideals that have imposed the false, dualistic categorisations of hu(man) versus Other. Ecofeminism challenges these dualistic perspectives by focusing on the shared realities of abuse and exploitation experienced by women and nature at the hands of mankind. The theoretical lens of ecofeminism highlights barriers and biases that limit our current solutions for the climate crisis, which are 'too often' associated with 'unquestioned masculinist and technonormative [approaches]' that 'rely on many of the same masculinist and human-centred solutions that have created the problems in the first place' (Grusin, 2017: Introduction). Instead, ecofeminism offers a new outlook of hope for the environment by exposing, understanding, and challenging the systematic, androcentric ideals that have overwhelmingly contributed to the degradation of both women and the natural world. If we only focus on anthropocentric impacts on nature, then we are dismissing the critical patriarchal structures within our society that enable continued abuse.

Theoretically, it is important to understand the dichotomy between cis men and women and how this is presented in the Gothic. Before a binary can be broken, it must be recognised. The Female Gothic, especially in western societies, has largely been attributed to themes of (domestic)ated horrors and the overbearing power and control exercised by men over female bodies. As society has progressed throughout the years, so has the Female Gothic. In ‘Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic’ (2009), Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith provide a detailed outline of the progression and development of the term Female Gothic. They argue that the Female Gothic has largely moved beyond the original confinements of the domestic space (e.g. the home) to reflect a wider scope of experience that is influenced by the politics of a patriarchal culture. Wallace and Smith point out that the Female Gothic is – and always has been – a ‘politically subversive genre’; it challenges the normative beliefs of the patriarchy and gives voice to the dissatisfaction, fears, and anxieties of women, who are oppressed within patriarchal society (2009, p. 2). Although these critics point out the difficult task of defining the Female Gothic, they postulate that this term’s fluidity presents ample opportunity for future research. Wallace and Smith argue that by ‘retaining the term “Female Gothic” as a broad and *fluid* category – while both interrogating it and acknowledging its many mutations’, this term will continue to provide the necessary foundation to better understand and critique the evolution of this wide-ranging topic [emphasis added] (2009, p. 11). This is particularly important to consider in parallel to subsequent waves of feminism and how this impacts society’s thinking. The foundation laid by Wallace and Smith demonstrates the movement of Female Gothic studies away from traditional theory – as defined by Ellen Moers in the mid-1970s – of confined, domestic spaces and encourages the development of another branch of theory focusing on the expansive wilderness and how domestication is strife within natural spaces (2009, p. 1). This is, of course, where ecofeminism plays a significant role as mankind continues to domesticate nature, exploiting the environment for hu(man), capitalistic profit, mirroring the patriarchal domestication of women. It comes as no surprise then that a new direction of study that continues to grow in popularity is ecofeminism in the Gothic.

The term *ecofeminism* was coined in the early 1970s by French activist Françoise d’Eaubonne. A core principle of this theory is that all human and nonhuman entities are regarded as equal; thus, disputing anthropocentrism – the belief that humans are the most important component of life. In ‘Feminism-Ecology: Revolution or Mutation?’ (1999), d’Eaubonne briefly outlines her main hypotheses regarding ecofeminism and argues that patriarchal dominance over feminine characteristics, such as reproduction and fertility, has led

to the oppression of both women and nature. Women and nature are viewed as exploitable resources that the patriarchy seeks to dominate and control, especially for capitalistic gain, which has led to present-day issues of ‘overcrowding and [the] exhaustion of resources’ (d’Eaubonne, 1999: p. 176). Ecofeminist theory proposes that to resolve the ecological crisis, the liberation of women must be addressed alongside the environment. Albeit the term *nature* must be recognised as being, in and of itself, a loaded word. The phrase expresses an essentialist perspective that harks back to anthropocentrism due to nature’s connotations of *human nature* and the natural, establishing socially constructed ideas of the opposite – the unnatural Other.

In her 2017 study, Caroline Goldblum reasons that these othered bodies – both human and nonhuman – must be nurtured out of the exploitative, oppressive societal structures established by anthropocentric and androcentric beliefs. Goldblum argues, ‘that to save humanity, we must bring together the two struggles – ecological and feminist – because the patriarchy is simultaneously responsible for ecological disasters (by overproduction and capitalistic logic) and the enslavement of women (by the appropriation of women’s bodies) [translation my own] (2017: p. 194). The plight of both ecology and women is one and the same because women’s bodies are subjected to the same oppressive abuse and exploitation as that experienced by the environment. This sentiment of converging these struggles and moving away from hu(man) rationality is reiterated by Mary Phillips, who argues that the material body must be embraced to deconstruct the androcentric association of the masculine, rational mind as being superior to the feminine, emotive body. Phillips echoes the foundational work of Val Plumwood’s (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* that argues ‘reason in the western tradition has been constructed as the privileged domain of the master’ wielding power and control over a ‘subordinate [Other] encompassing and representing the sphere of materiality, subsistence and the feminine which the master has split off and constructed beneath him’ (Introduction). It is this binary categorisation that continues to enable patriarchal culture to deem feminine bodies as Other and, thus, inferior. Instead, Phillips suggests that by writing the body in a creative context, the disconnect between body and nature can begin to heal. Phillips relates this idea to the work of Hélène Cixous, whose writing Phillips views as ‘[representing] a move to resist the ways which women/nature are linguistically, historically and sexually confined’ and how this contributes to the ‘undoing of binary hierarchies’ (2017, p. 64).

Based on Phillips’ research, the term *feminine* will be used throughout this study to emphasise the socially constructed idea of femininity and how this expands beyond the

confinements of the female body but remains crucial to the overall material body. This usage is further supported by Danielle Roth-Johnson (2013), who suggests it is the social constructs of femininity that enable bodies to be deemed as Other in comparison to male masculinity. These othered bodies subvert the imposed binary gender norms established by the patriarchy as well as reveal the erroneous concept of femininity being equated solely to the female and masculinity to the male. Plumwood theorises that an inclusive feminism beyond the female body is critical to ecofeminist theory noting that ‘forms of oppression from both the present and the past have left their traces in western culture as a network of dualisms, and the logical structure of dualism forms a major connection between forms of oppression’ (Introduction). Feminine corporeality viewed through the lens of ecofeminism highlights the organic fluidity of humans and nonhumans and demonstrates a material fear of anthropocentric and androcentric beliefs. Nevertheless, *female* corporeality is still a crucial component of historical oppression by the patriarchy. The female body helps build an understanding of how the othering of bodies has expanded to include many diverse groups that are significantly threatened and harmed by a dualistic, patriarchal culture – predominantly a culture governed by western, white, cis men.

This definition of feminine corporeality is preceded by Paulina Palmer (2012), who offers an important exploration of a fluid, nonbinary corporeality in *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Like many terms in the Gothic, *queer* is also a contested one. Palmer describes different ideas surrounding the queer and what it means; she explores both *transgressive* forms of sexuality and identity that still categorises these bodies within the realm of the Other in juxtaposition to heteronormativity, while also deconstructing these binary social constructs of gender and sexuality to suggest a fluid corporeality and identity (2012: p. 4). In my study of Wyld, I consider the latter position in direct opposition to a heteronormative, androcentric, and anthropocentric society. I examine this position beyond human boundaries and consider the uncanny queering of human and nonhuman bodies, specifically in the context of feminine corporeality that challenges the patriarchy’s dualistic beliefs. Anyone who exists outside of androcentric social constructs queers normative expectations and is categorised as Other. Palmer notes the significance of the Gothic mode in drawing attention to socio-political issues and suggests ‘the ability of the Gothic to transgress, in both the “itinerant” and “unorthodox” senses of the term, is particularly apparent in its encounter with the queer’ (2012: p. 11). The expression and critique of such socio-political issues is at the very heart of *The Bass Rock*, demonstrating that this discussion remains critical to twenty-first-century Gothic texts.

Rather than dismissing sensitive topics such as the abuse and exploitation of women and nature, Wyld shows that we must face these socio-political issues head on. If we do not acknowledge the othering that occurs between the rational, hu(man) mind and feminine bodies than we will forever be consumed by fear.

The domineering desire to categorise feminine bodies as the fearful, threatening Other seeps into various areas of Gothic theory, many times unnoticed. In the study, 'Theorising the EcoGothic' (2019a), Simon C. Estok's theory of ecophobia is described as the crux of ecoGothic texts; Estok claims 'no ecophobia, no ecoGothic' (p. 39). Estok further describes ecophobia as 'the imagining of nature as a menacing threat [...] bent on vengeance' (2019a: p. 41). He notes the disconnect between humanity and the environment and argues that this disconnect is rooted in anthropocentrism, but there is little to no ecological awareness, generating no impactful actions to reshape this destructive relationship between humans and nonhumans. Despite the focus on the Anthropocene, Estok fails to delve deeper into the impact of androcentrism in the production of problematic anthropocentric beliefs and how androcentric attitudes alter sources of ecophobia for othered groups. By ignoring the shared, gendered experience of feminine bodies such as women and nature, a well-rounded understanding of ecophobia is impossible. Androcentrism must be considered and criticised. Although I agree that ecophobia is a crucial component to the ecoGothic, I argue that nature itself is not the root source of horror for othered groups, especially in the Female Gothic. The idea that the environment is something to be feared, something to be conquered, only acts as justification for the abuse humanity enacts upon it and dismisses humanity's ecological responsibilities. As argued by Sharae Deckard in 'Ecogothic' (2019), the Gothic mode centres on an idea of excess and the ecoGothic is no different. Within the context of this idea of excess, *The Bass Rock* suggests an organic sense of belonging experienced by feminine bodies in the environment that is only disrupted by an overwhelming, excessive presence of toxic masculinity and its subsequent aspiration for domination. The infiltration of masculine logic for dominance – defined by Katey Castellano (2009) as 'a web of oppressive conceptual frameworks' that rationalise the establishment and maintenance of othered bodies as exploitable resources – within these fluid spaces invokes fear and anxiety (p. 82). Thus, this overbearing and controlling idea of masculinity is responsible for producing fear in these environments as it transforms the organic, nonbinary existence of nature.

Estok identifies a gap in his theory of ecophobia in relation to a feminist perspective and asks, ‘how might a feminist ecoGothic respond to essentialist co-locations of women’s bodies with the natural world and its rhythms?’ (2019a: p. 45). This question is later investigated in his additional research, ‘Ecophobia, the Agony of Water, and Misogyny’ (2019b) and ‘Corporeality, hyper-consciousness, and the Anthropocene ecoGothic: slime and ecophobia’ (2020), that explores the association of the female body with the environment through the representations of slime, mud, and polluted waters – dark, murky, and mutated bodies of water that connote a negative, feminine ecological space. I aim in this study to move beyond an androcentric association of the female body with dense, disruptive, and negative ecological spaces. In contrast, *The Bass Rock* explores the vast fluid space of the Scottish coast and reveals the power women have over their own bodies and actions, as well as the expansive freedoms available by eradicating binary structures. Without consideration of the ways in which nature and women share socially constructed gendered realities, ecophobia fails to acknowledge the root problem of androcentric structures. These binary social constructs not only point to the masculine fear of a lack of control and mastery over othered bodies, but also the fear this engenders in those deemed Other and, thus, feminine.

The fear experienced by othered groups is not an unwarranted one, but one rooted in the very real danger presented principally by men towards feminine bodies. In her review for *Financial Times*, Catherine Taylor (2020) writes that when Wyld was writing *The Bass Rock*, she drew inspiration from Australia’s death map – an online mapping of ‘locations of murders of women, many unidentified’. In choosing the iconic Scottish coast of North Berwick rather than the Australian coast, Wyld draws on the Scottish Female Gothic to reflect the blurring of boundaries between women and ecology. The coast is an important point of discussion because of the permeability of its borders and the ways in which Wyld relates this to feminine corporeality. Although the coast is typically viewed as a dividing line between land and sea, Jimmy Packham (2019) describes the coast as an ‘ecotone, a term that denotes the overlapping of two ecological zones’ (p. 206). Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland (2019) argue similarly that rather than being a stable border, the coast does not exist in a fixed state because its topography is constantly changing (p. 4). Land shifts beneath water to form the base of the sea and, just as easily, sea-levels can rise and spread to cover more of the land, subsuming the presumed permanent landscape. This coastal space exists *in-between* ecological zones; the simultaneous material and fluid physicality of this environment ‘speaks to contemporary preoccupations with the porousness and instability of supposedly fixed and firm borders and



identities' (Packham, 2019: p. 206). The idea that the coast acts as a dividing line is revealed as a social construct that denies the hybrid reality of this ecology. North Berwick is a prime example of this fluidity because the titular, iconic landmark of this coast is one of several small, uninhabited islands that jut out of the sea just off the shore.

*Figure 1: Strange, K. (2020) Small, uninhabited islands off North Berwick's coast.*

The Lothians and Borders RGIS Group (2020) explains that all of these 'offshore islands are composed of igneous rocks formed as molten rock (magma) cools and hardens underground'. This geological phenomenon is known as an *intrusion* and adds to the uncanny nature of North Berwick's coast because these once hidden land masses are only revealed after years of erosion. They slowly transform the once familiar land and seascapes and are both literal and metaphorical intrusions within the fluid space of the sea. There is a blurring of the feminine bodies of this text with these intrusive islands, both bodies seemingly an intrusion – a defiance – against mankind's desire to claim and define.

In Wyld's novel, an explicit comparison is made between Ruth's female body and the Bass Rock, which becomes a character in and of itself – a permanent witness to the violence carried out against women over the centuries. The animism projected onto the Bass Rock is telling in that the Bass Rock itself is a result of a sudden, violent volcanic eruption. This intrusion is particularly unique in that it forms an 'ancient plug', which is defined as large 'bodies of magma that solidified in the neck of a volcano' (Lothian Borders and RGIS Group, 2020). Ruth is afflicted with an inability to look at the Bass Rock because she fears facing the ways that its violent history mirrors her own volatile narrative. Looking out to sea, Ruth muses,

'Something about the Bass Rock was so misshapen. [...] She often found herself drifting if she stared at it for too long, unable to look away, like the captivation she felt sometimes looking at her own face in the mirror, as if to look closely would be to understand it' (Wyld, 2020: p. 26).

She does not want to understand this reality – a reality governed by masculine dominance – nor the ways in which it has been maintained. The Bass Rock is like a rock lodged in a collective throat – a symbolic replication of the silencing of women's voices throughout continued historical periods of relentless oppression. Afterall, Wyld suggests that the violence exhibited towards women is deeply rooted in this silencing act, as a man looks down at his

murdered victim and concludes, ‘there was no other way and he had only meant to quiet her, but she didn’t understand that’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 115). Like Ruth, Sarah and Viviane do not want to recognise the vulnerability of their own bodies within a society domineered by men, and yet all three women remain weary ‘[expecting] to see something slinking after us’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 11). They must find their own voice and claim ownership over their own narratives or perish at the hands of (man)kind, while simultaneously each failure to act sends a warning to those who come after. As Phillips argues, ‘in a world dominated by rationality, the realisation that we are embodied and made of matter is threatening because the body reminds us of our material existence’, but humans must remember (2017: p. 65). It is only through the reconnection with our material, yet fluid and permeable corporeality that we can begin to understand the interrelationships between both the environment and humanity. *The Bass Rock* reminds the reader that avoidance does not prevent further exploitation and violence, only silences the voice of its victims and enables the cycle to continue. Silence does not protect us; it only isolates us.

*Figure 2: Strange, K. (2020) Bass Rock off North Berwick’s coast.*

Despite the Bass Rock’s seemingly silent, solid stillness amongst the ever-changing sea, there is a quiet reflection of anger too. An anger that Justine Jordan (2020), in her review of the novel, suggests is a pivotal emotion of all waves of feminism and is especially significant in the twenty-first-century when women are, rightfully and shamelessly, expressing that anger. The comparison between the female body and the Bass Rock also compares female corporeality with volcanic potential and points to the androcentric fear of an impending eruption in the feminine body; a fear that is reflected in Estok’s argument of nature being dangerous and vengeful (2019a). In blurring the boundaries between the feminine body of Ruth and the Bass Rock, this potential rise of anger, subsequently, exposes the androcentric anxiety of the feminine body – the Other – and its power to invoke overwhelming change, transforming the topography of the environment. Phillips argues that ‘the manner in which nature, femininity, emotionality and corporeality are cast and represented reveals a deep anxiety around the organic materiality of the body’ (2016: p. 62). This anxiety, rooted in the flesh, points out the androcentric fear of a loss of control over the material. Patriarchal culture deems the mind superior to the body; masculine logic regarded as rational to the irrationality of feminine corporeality and visceral emotions (Phillips, 2016: p. 60). Estok’s theory of ecophobia, unwittingly, subscribes to this idea. Estok aims to tackle the idea of a gendered ecophobia in his 2020 study, as previously mentioned, but he simultaneously suggests that the consciousness – the mind – is more

important than the body and that corporeality cannot exist without consciousness (pp. 34-35). Although this produces intriguing possibilities for future discussions, the placement of the mind over the body reiterates an androcentric idea of corporeality as inferior and upholds a distinctively Cartesian placement of the mind as superior and ultimately the core component to humanity. In doing so, mankind continues to rationalise its domineering behaviour and attitudes through the extra(ordinary) capabilities of the hu(man) rational mind versus the inferior feminine body.

Instead of this rigid, socially constructed division, Wyld embraces the coast's hybrid reality and relates it back to the feminine body; its fluid materiality reflects 'where the human body becomes a site of the overlapping of various states of being' (Packham, 2019: p. 217). The fluidity of the coast directly contrasts the Cartesian placement of mind over matter that Estok endorses. Instead, Wyld explores the various states of corporeality – past corporeal, present corporeal, and apparitions – that feminine bodies are presented in within the coastal geography. This is a space where liminality thrives and no one way of existing is deemed superior to another. Instead, the inhabitants within the coast must adapt to its ever-changing land and seascapes, becoming creatures of change themselves. Consider the comparison made regarding the Arctic ice caps by Andrew Smith and William Hughes (2013), who argue that the liminal, icy spaces presented by bodies of water such as the Scottish coast present an 'ecological dead zone' where 'nature fails to signify anything other than a type of blankness which demonstrates a crisis of representation' (p. 2). In contrast, Wyld's exploration of the liminality of the coast emphasizes the *in-between* space in which boundaries between the living and the dead, between fluid and fixed reality are unmoored, and the corporeality of humans and nonhumans is disrupted – provoking a point of transition and change. The coast is anything but dead, it's alive with possibility.

By setting the stories of these women in an unambiguously Scottish coast, Wyld explores the issue of authorship that Monica Germanà (2017) identifies as a core principle of the Scottish Female Gothic, arguing that there is 'a distinctive anxiety about boundaries and authenticity – both authorial and historical' that lends itself to 'the question of authorship exposed by contemporary Female Scottish Gothic' (pp. 222-223). Like the feminine body, Scotland itself is reflected in the liminal space of the coast. Scotland exists in an in-between state – existing both inside and outside of the United Kingdom; it is simultaneously a sum of parts as well as a whole (Germanà, 2017). The boundaries that cast the nation into the territory

of the Other are based in socially constructed ideas of authorship and ownership. Like the fragmented nation of this ethereal coast, Diana Wallace (2009) suggests that the female body is ‘depicted as “ghostly,” haunting in the sense that she is disembodied/disempowered through being subjected to “male man”’ (p. 26). This idea of the haunting feminine is theorised as the ghostly presentation of women within Gothic texts; female corporeality becomes uncertain because of the lack of authorship that women have over their own bodies – their narratives – due to the subjugation enforced by patriarchal culture (Germanà, 2017). There is no greater lack of authorship over one’s own body than physically losing it or giving it up to the hands of another – just as Scotland lost its independence, its land, its ‘body’ to the ownership of another. This loss of authorship is a reality that Wyld’s characters eerily speak directly to through the acknowledgement and recognition of the women abused, exploited, and killed by men on the edge of the Scottish coast.

The dead bodies and rotting corpses that wash up along the coast show an uncanny revelation of the horrors once hidden within the depths of the sea. In Ruth’s narrative, a basking shark washes up dead; in Viviane’s narrative it is the dismembered body of a woman – both corpses, the human and nonhuman, rotting with decay. The choice of a basking shark is particularly poignant. As described by Eddie Johnston and Lisa Hendry (n.d.), basking sharks feed exclusively on plankton and are generally passive in behaviour, posing no threat to humans. Nevertheless, the simple categorisation of being within the species of the shark – arguably one of the biggest sources of fear for humans in relation to the ocean – invokes unwarranted fear.

*Figure 3: Unknown. (2017) A basking shark feeding.*

Wyld’s decision to include a basking shark – one of the largest sharks alive – emphasises an irrational fear of the Other. The basking shark can be considered a gentle giant; they do not bite their prey and will not attack humans. However, the sheer size of a basking shark is seen as frightening and potentially dangerous in juxtaposition to the small stature of a human, especially within the unfamiliar, vast expanse of the sea. Thus, the anthropocentric fear of ‘so many big things right under the water that we can’t see’ is subverted by the female corpse, dismembered and stuffed into a suitcase to be made as small as possible, and Viviane’s uncanny recognition of the real threat existing beyond the environment (Wyld, 2020: p. 26). It is not the creatures of the deep that have destroyed this woman’s body, but a far more familiar culprit.

Fear lies not in the sea itself but is rooted in the androcentric desire for absolute material control over both women and ecology.

The story of this disposed body is bookmarked by the core narratives of Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane. A young Viviane stumbles upon this suitcase – bursting at its seams with the dismembered female body, and witnesses ‘peeking through the gaps between the white fingers was an eye that seemed to look back at me. [...] In the memory, which is a child’s memory and unreliable, the eye blinks’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 2). This uncanny scene exemplifies the blurred boundaries of the coastal Gothic that Emily Carr (2013) suggests is critical in ecofeminist texts. It is within these spaces that ‘the real and the unreal, the domestic and the grotesque, the alluring and the terrible coexist. The everyday is collapsed with the nightmarish; distortion, dislocation and disruption become the norm’ (Carr, 2013: p. 164). Binary ideas of life and death, natural and unnatural are subverted. The woman is dead, literally torn apart, disembodied – only existing as a sum of parts that can no longer produce a whole. Nevertheless, in the conclusive scene of the novel, the woman’s body is queerly resurrected, brought back in the form of a ghostly retelling of her final moments. Previously a corpse stuffed into a suitcase, the final scene returns to this suitcase before it becomes a makeshift coffin, ‘on the bed, the girl’s largest suitcase. It is not big enough to move *a whole life*, but it will have to do’ [emphasis added] (Wyld, 2020: p. 354). Wyld suggests an uncanny familiarity in this unfamiliar scene because it is embedded from the start in the woman’s narrative – in her death. We, as the reader, know that not only her whole metaphorical life, but her actual, physical whole life – her body – will be broken and forced to fit inside. The breaking down and reassembling of female body parts through this ethereal resurrection reflects the formation of socially constructed boundaries and how this is used to control women’s authorship. This echoes Phillips’ argument that challenges the patriarchal, Cartesian placement of the male mind over the female body, noting that ‘the recuperation of [the] body and its visceral inhabitation in the world’ needs to be understood as a core component of ecofeminism (2017: p. 58). By regaining her body, even in a liminal state, the woman in this scene reclaims her narrative. This spectral resurrection highlights the reality that ‘othered bodies are uncomfortable reminders that our bodies are permeable [...] and have the potential to be disruptive, unmanageable, disordered and disordering’ (Phillips, 2017: p. 62). The permeability of feminine bodies, and all human bodies, is mirrored by the coast where the woman’s corpse washes up. These are bodies of both flesh and water, constantly shifting and changing, merging into one; never to remain fixed in one permanent state. This corpse’s discovery opens the novel and sets the tone for the rest of the

narratives regarding the seemingly disposable nature of feminine bodies by the violent rationality of mankind.

The merging of feminine bodies and the resulting transformative potential is highlighted in the narrative structure that Wyld establishes – a structure that scrutinises the authorship over female bodies, exposing and contesting both corporeal and narrative ownership (see e.g. Campbell [2020]). Although the three main narratives exist independently, as a whole, Wyld echoes Germanà's thinking that 'authorial control is reinforced by [the ghostly] coexistence of multiple author figures, whose texts, metaphorically at least, bleed into each other' (2017: p. 232). Each narrative is rooted in the same ecological space, overlooked by the uncanny Bass Rock. Sharae Deckard (2019) argues that

'Such perceptual shifts enable *telethesia* – the extension of perception beyond the normal range of empirical senses to apprehend other situations in time and space. Telethesia can telescope multiple temporalities, capturing the way in which different moments of socio-ecological crisis over long historical periods are over-layered on fractured environments' (p. 175).

This overlapping of crises is shown through Wyld's inclusion of Sarah's ghost, who haunts the narratives of both Ruth and Viviane. Neither woman experiences fear in relation to this ethereal, feminine presence but, instead, finds comfort in it. This ghostly presence acts as an acknowledgement that these women are not alone in their struggles. Although Ruth does not see Sarah's ghost, 'she [can] imagine a girl just like her', recognising herself in the exploited and abandoned feminine body (Wyld, 2020: p. 49). Each of these core narratives have their own, individual crises, but like the coast itself, they blend together. The authorial control of Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane's individual stories do not solely exist separate from one another, but rather each narrative builds from the previous character - historically, progressing through a wide expanse of history. Through the evocation of telethesia, these narratives altogether speak to the consequences of overwhelming, excessive toxic masculinity and its subsequent violence against feminine bodies. The reader becomes the ultimate witness as a revelation – a change – slowly takes shape along North Berwick's coast.

Sarah's story is the earliest narrative, harking back to the sixteenth-century and is not told by Sarah at all. Instead, her story is told through the eyes of man, specifically a young boy

named Joseph. His initial gaze is seemingly innocent and even protective of Sarah but, unsurprisingly, this protective, watchful eye soon turns into an obsessive one as he lustfully admits, ‘I am thudding to leave with her, my groin aches’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 312). This quickly transforms into a dangerous, possessive desire for ownership over Sarah’s body that, ultimately, results in her death at the hands of Joseph. In comparison, Ruth’s story takes place following the second World War and is given in the third person. Although she has some authorship over her story, like the haunting feminine, Ruth exists in a ghostly manner within her own story – especially since we, as the reader, already know she has passed away years on from this timeline. Nevertheless, even within this ghostly narrative, Ruth lacks authorship as she is gaslit by her abusive, cheating husband – a man who forces his own narrative of false loyalty on her, “‘I have absolutely no sense of what you’re talking about. [...] I’m afraid you’ve made a mistake.’” His softness was awful. His hurt at what she was *suggesting*’ [emphasis added] (Wyld, 2020: p. 286). Even though the third person point-of-view is a progression from the androcentric perspective given of Sarah, Ruth is still disembodied from her narrative and without any authorship over her own story, which is largely controlled by her husband. She exists on the peripheral and as such remains ethereal to her own body.

Throughout the novel, Wyld illustrates a constant battle against man’s superficial claim of ownership over the female body and the rationalised ideology of additionally claiming authorship based on the superiority of the male mind. The predatory nature of the masculine logic for domination is exposed as a threatening and vengeful reality across all timelines as Sarah, Ruth, and Viviane are all physically hunted. The fight is brought to a climax in Ruth’s narrative where the predatory hunt is disguised as an uncanny, adult-version of a seemingly harmless game of hide-and-seek. An eerie, fictional tradition of this coastal community acted out on the shore. All the women in the community dress the same and don masks with the purpose of eradicating each of their individual identities. Ruth notices that all the women ‘were dressed exactly as she was’ and when she puts her mask on, she notes, ‘it was not comfortable, but at least she didn’t have to try to look happy to be there’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 156). In wearing these costumes, the women are meant to be merged into one, to all look the same. They become nameless and disembodied as their female bodies become indistinguishable, merely flesh – merely prey to the predators who seek to dominate and devour. The emotional response to this invisibility is deemed irrational and, thus, inconsequential. Plumwood describes the erasure of identity in the female body as ‘a *terra nullius*’, perceiving the feminine body as

‘a resource empty of its own purpose or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes’ (1993: Introduction).

The masks that these women wear remove the familiarity, the humanity from the view of the men. Each woman’s facial expressions, their emotive responses become invisible to the men that observe them. They are simply seen as vessels to be used in order to satisfy and progress the rationality of patriarchal dominance. As argued by Phillips, the ‘logic of patriarchy’ is implemented to remove a universal, nonbinary corporeality, and instead dualistic social constructs between masculinity and femininity are used to rationalise the dominance over feminine bodies, favouring ‘idealised, hegemonic masculinity’ opposed to the ‘natural, nature, or the physical or biological realm’ (2017: p. 58). There is a physical difference highlighted between these men and women, between hunter versus hunted. Predictably, it is the women who hide and the men who seek. The men do not hide in any sense of the word, ‘[wearing] paper crowns with cut-outs of animal ears,’ their faces on full display (Wyld, 2020: p. 156). This difference enables the props of the masks to more easily identify the women as Other in contrast to man, justifying the hunt as the masculine desire for ownership over these uniform feminine bodies is perceived to be the only rational response to such otherness. It is the complete domination over these feminine bodies that is seen as the ultimate prize for man’s rationality.

Significantly, there is no way for the women to win; the men will not stop until all the women are found – no matter how long it takes. Authorial control is questioned and the conflict between feminine bodies and masculine logic for dominance – and, subsequently, ambition for ownership – is made explicit in this uncanny game that further normalises the oppression of othered bodies. Ruth’s authorship is physically wrestled out of her; there is a loss of breath and, consequently, a loss of her voice as her body is physically pinned down by brute force. She describes the fear experienced during this moment of entrapment, ‘immediately her breath was gone and the noise that came out of her was something like a wounded animal. No words formed, there was no time for them’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 164). In comparing Ruth to a wounded animal within this liminal space, Wyld considers how both nature (in terms of ecology) and nature (in terms of humanity) ‘becomes constituted in the Gothic as a space of crisis’ (Smith & Hughes, 2013: p. 3). There are no words – no language – left in a body seen solely as a



resource to be exploited. For Ruth, in this period of history, there is no hope. There is nothing she can do to win this game, she can only ever be the victim – powerless to the men who hunt her, silently pleading that they play by the rules. To regain her voice, Ruth *must* give the men her name. She must succumb to giving up her authorship – her ownership over her body – a body only seen as something to be used for the entertainment of these men. Her freedom can only ever be an illusion. This is the reality that Wyld suggests patriarchy buries along with feminine corporeality to continue exploiting a narrative in which othered ‘bodies are seen as usable, disposable’ (Campbell, 2020).

In contrast to the ghostly women who haunt this novel, the only narrator who is currently alive – *consistently* and *entirely* corporeal – is Viviane, who exists in the present-day and who actively begins to resist patriarchal authorship as her story is told in the first person. Despite the progression of ownership over her narrative, Viviane’s story – her body of text – is still influenced by the patriarchal authority that looms over the histories of these women’s shared experiences. Viviane’s friend, Maggie, explicitly notes this influence by calling out the way Viviane uses predetermined vocabulary to create a false sense of security within spaces domineered by men, which is, arguably, the world at large. When Viviane states that a string of recently murdered women are unrelated, Maggie eerily replies, ‘listen to what you are saying. [...] Listen to how you’re using the words *they* have given you’ [emphasis added] (Wyld, 2020: p. 138). *They* being the androcentric systems and its established language, which is used to uphold a patriarchal society and its desire for domination – a system bent on maintaining conformity, submission, and silence from othered bodies. This speaks to Phillips’ argument that ‘the materiality of the world is mediated through language, and it can therefore be transformed and de/reconstructed through language’ (2016: p. 69). The idea that these murders ‘are isolated events with no wider threat to the public’ is exposed as an inherently androcentric narrative (Wyld, 2020: p. 138). Each murder is distinct but the situation between victim and perpetrator remains the same; these women were murdered, not by the same person, but by the same social constructs and structures imposed and enforced by the patriarchy – rooted in the idea that the rational male mind has superiority over the feminine body and can do as it pleases. Simply put, the thread tying all these horrific crimes together is that the victim is killed because she is a woman and because the man *can*. By producing ‘writing that engages with matter and with bodies’, Wyld’s writing becomes a part of a creative tool of activism that Phillips claims ‘has subversive and transformative power that can disrupt binary thinking and explode phallogentrism’ (2017: p. 65).

By implementing such a clever use of narrative sequence to contest authorship, Wyld reveals and acts on the feminist rallying cry of the twenty-first-century that encourages women to own their stories. The merging of so many female voices in this novel presents an all-encompassing female authorship; a narrative that allows for sadness and anger rooted in the horrific realities shared by feminine bodies. Wyld calls attention to the interconnected realities of women and the environment in the uncanny animism she writes into the coast of North Berwick, and subsequently into all of Earth. Arguably the most haunting imagery of the entire novel is the description Viviane gives of the ghostly figures of women murdered and disposed of by man filling the coast:

‘They spill out of the doorway, and I see through the wall that they fill the house top to bottom, they are locked in wardrobes, they are under floorboards, they crowd out of the back door and into the garden, they are on the golf course and on the beach and their heads bob out of the sea, and when we walk, we are walking right through them’ (Wyld, 2020: p. 325).

The ethereal presentation of these women – these souls – reflects a fluid corporeality of the feminine body, boundaries blurred between human and nonhuman. As argued by Phillips, in writing these bodies creatively, Wyld demonstrates humanity’s ‘organic embeddedness and materiality’ within ecology (2016, p. 63). The spirits of these women are embedded into the coast, and likewise, the coast is forever entrenched in the narratives of these female bodies and all those who come after, walking directly through these histories. The shared feminine corporeality between the ethereal female bodies and the environment shows an all-encompassing reality that reflects the fatal consequences of an anthropocentric and androcentric society. In infusing the novel with these spirits, *The Bass Rock* echoes Germanà’s claim that ‘the haunting feminine can be read as an elusive construct that destabilises authorial control while, simultaneously, laying bare and subverting the politics of the male gaze’ (2017, p. 234). Feminine corporeality, even liminal materiality, challenges the superficial patriarchal claim over the authorship of these bodies.

Ultimately, it is the environment of the coast that embraces the feminine bodies discarded by men. The sea ‘takes care’ of bodies and soil submerges bones (Wyld, 2020: p. 114). These murdered, discarded women become engulfed by nature, othered bodies become

one but not in a way that evokes fear as suggested by Estok's argument that 'the threats' in ecoGothic texts 'have no footing within an ecocentric ontology' (2019a, p. 48). The women of this novel do not fear nature; they fear hu(man) *nature* – the socially constructed, binary idea of the natural, and the ways that androcentrism and anthropocentrism have altered organic, natural spaces. They do not fear the earth that embraces their remains and immortalises them through the natural process of decomposition and renewal. One life merges seamlessly with another. Nature has not *consumed* these feminine bodies, rather it is the ideals upheld by toxic masculinity that continue to feed on these disposable bodies – feasting on feminine bodies in a relentless drive to satisfy the all-consuming desire for dominance. The real anxiety for the fluid corporeality of these ethereal women arises from this excess of desire and its intrusive imposition of dualistic categorisation. Nevertheless, the liminal nature of the coast continues to challenge the androcentric disposition of the rational mind over the emotive, feminine body. Dualisms are battered amongst the waves, crashing against a shore that refuses to surrender to masculine domination. After all, no one can control the sea. There may be attempts to claim, to control its borders, but the actions of the sea are beyond any hu(man) dominion.

Through the lens of ecofeminism, *The Bass Rock* shows that the overwhelming excess of toxic masculinity's desire for dominance within liminal, fluid ecological spaces invokes fear in feminine bodies. By setting this novel in the iconic Scottish coast of North Berwick, questions of authorship are explored and the patriarchal authority behind dualistic narratives is revealed as a social construct established to justify and maintain masculine dominance through the categorisation of feminine bodies as Other. Consequently, these bodies only exist as resources to be exploited and then are disposed of when no longer of any use. The portrayal of toxic masculinity as rooted in a predatory nature, hungry for feminine bodies, further reflects the real-life fears and anxieties of women in a time when these horrors are being exposed as women find their collective voice. Thus, the incorporation of an ecofeminist perspective challenges the anthropocentric definition of ecophobia and suggests that the anthropocentric fear of nature is not only a consequence of the Anthropocene. Instead, ecophobia in the Female Gothic is primarily and deeply rooted in the androcentric, socially constructed, binary categorisation of humans and nonhumans – feminine corporeality versus masculine logic. By addressing these binary constructs, this study shows the significance of acknowledging the shared experiences of women and nature, calling attention to the importance of examining and critiquing a gendered idea of ecophobia to develop this theory in new directions that move beyond anthropocentric *and* androcentric narratives. This novel ultimately represents the

addition of Wyld's own voice to this historical moment – this *movement*, exposing the oppressive and violent realities so many women and other diverse groups have been subjected to across the centuries. Wyld breaks through the silence and allows her anger to erupt in a rallying cry that calls others to join. She encourages us, the reader, to add our own voice to this movement and reclaim authorship over our narrative. If silence will not protect us, we must find our collective voice and call for real transformation within the current, toxic systemic ideologies for the benefit of both ourselves and those who come after us – human and nonhuman because, ultimately, we are one and the same.

### **Biography**

**Kristy Strange** is an independent researcher. She holds an MLitt in The Gothic Imagination from the University of Stirling (Scotland) as well as a BA in both English Literature and Clinical Psychology from Bishop's University (Québec, Canada). Originally from Québec, Canada, Strange lives with her husband and three cats in the Scottish Highlands where she spends most of her days working as a Children's and Families Worker. Her primary research examines the presentation of ecofeminism and the Anthropocene in contemporary Gothic texts; secondary interests include Coastal/Nautical Gothic, Climate Fiction, Children's Gothic, and the works and life of Mary Shelley.

### **Bibliography**

- Campbell, J. (2020) Live Book Club: *The Bass Rock* Author Evie Wyld. Available from: <https://www.toa.st/magazine/the-bass-rock-by-evie-wyld-book-club.htm> [Accessed 07/09/2020].
- Carr, E. (2013) The riddle was the angel in the house: towards an American ecofeminist Gothic. In: Smith, A. and Hughes, W. (eds.) *EcoGothic*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 160-176.
- Castellano, K. (2009) Feminism to Ecofeminism: The Legacy of Gilbert and Gubar's Readings of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*. In: Federico, A. R. (ed.) *Gilbert and Gubar's the Madwoman in the Attic after Thirty Years*. Columbia, University of Missouri Press, pp. 76-93.
- D'Eaubonne, F. (1999) Feminism-Ecology: Revolution or Mutation? *Ethics & the Environment*. 4 (2), pp. 175-177.

- Deckard, S. (2019) Ecogothic. In: Wester, M. and Reyes, X. A. (eds.) *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 174-188
- Estok, S. C. (2020) Corporeality, hyper-consciousness, and the Anthropocene ecoGothic: slime and ecophobia. *Neohelicon*. 47 (1), pp. 27-39.
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2019a) Theorising the EcoGothic. *Gothic Nature*. 1, pp. 34-53. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com> [Accessed 22/05/2020].
- \_\_\_\_\_ (2019b) Ecophobia, the Agony of Water, and Misogyny. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. 26 (2), pp. 473-485.
- Germanà, M. (2017) Authorship, ‘Ghost-filled’ Islands and the Haunting Feminine: Contemporary Scottish Female Gothic. In: Davison, C. M. and Germanà, M. (eds.) *Scottish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, pp. 222-235.
- Goldblum, C. (2017) Françoise d’Eaubonne, à l’origine de la pensée écoféministe. *Homme et la Societe*. 203-204 (1), pp. 189-202.
- Grusin, R. (2017) Introduction Anthropocene Feminism: An Experiment in Collaborative Theorizing. In: Grusin, R. (ed.) *Anthropocene Feminism*. Minnesota, University of Minnesota Press. eBook. Available from: Rakuten kobo.
- Johnston, E. & Hendry, L. (n.d.) Basking shark (*Cetorhinus maximus*). Available from: <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/basking-shark-cetorhinus-maximus.html> [Accessed 11/02/2021].
- Jordan, J. *The Guardian*, 21/03/2020. *The Bass Rock* by Evie Wyld review – a fearless vision of toxic masculinity.
- Lothian & Borders RGIS Group, (2010) North Berwick. Available from: [http://www.edinburghgeolsoc.org/downloads/rigsleaflet\\_northberwicka4.pdf](http://www.edinburghgeolsoc.org/downloads/rigsleaflet_northberwicka4.pdf) [Accessed 8/9/2020].

- Packham, J. (2019) The gothic coast: Boundaries, belonging, and coastal community in contemporary British fiction. *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 60 (2), pp. 205-221.
- Palmer, P. (2012) *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic*. Cardiff, University of Wales Press.
- Parker, E. & Poland, M. (2019) Gothic Nature: An Introduction. *Gothic Nature*. 1, pp. 1-19. Available from: <https://gothicnaturejournal.com> [Accessed 22/05/2020].
- Phillips, M. (2016) Developing ecofeminist corporeality: writing the body as activist poetics. In: Phillips, M. and Rumens, N. (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*. Abingdon, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 57-75.
- Phillips, M. & Rumens, N. (2016) Introducing contemporary ecofeminism. In: Phillips, M. and Rumens, N. (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ecofeminism*. Abingdon, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, pp. 1-16.
- Plumwood, V. (1993) *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. London, Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. eBook. Available from: Rakuten kobo.
- Roth-Johnson, D. (2013) Back to the Future: Françoise d'Eaubonne, Ecofeminism and Ecological Crisis. *The International Journal of Literary Humanities*. 10 (3), pp. 51-61.
- Smith, A. & Hughes, W. Introduction: defining the ecoGothic. In: Smith, A. and Hughes, W. (eds.) *EcoGothic*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, pp. 1-14.
- Taylor, C. *Financial Times*, 20/03/2020. *The Bass Rock* by Evie Wyld – prose that shines and devours.
- Thunberg, G. (2019) *No One Is Too Small To Make A Difference*. London, Penguin Books.
- Wallace, D. (2009) The Haunting Idea: Female Gothic Metaphors and Feminist Theory. In: Wallace, D. and Smith, A. (eds.) *The Female Gothic: New Directions*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 26-41.

Wallace, D. & Smith, A. (2009) Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic. In: Wallace, D. and Smith, A. (eds.) *The Female Gothic: New Directions*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-12.

Wyld, E. (2020) *The Bass Rock*. London, Jonathan Cape: Vintage.