



PROJECT MUSE®

---

The Destruction of Nature and the Subjugation of Women,  
Jews, and Refugees: A Critical Ecofeminist Reading of  
Elfriede Jelinek's Texts

Britta Kallin

Journal of Austrian Studies, Volume 58, Number 4, Winter 2025, pp.  
21-37 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/oas.2025.a987161>



➔ *For additional information about this article*  
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/987161>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).  
[202.120.237.32] Project MUSE (2026-06-04 23:50 GMT) Fudan University

# The Destruction of Nature and the Subjugation of Women, Jews, and Refugees

*A Critical Ecofeminist Reading of Elfriede Jelinek's Texts*

Britta Kallin

In her plays and essays, Elfriede Jelinek examines the estranged and distorted relationship between humans and other species as well as the systems of racist and gender-based oppression in which one group of humans dominates and controls another group of humans. She elaborates how these hierarchical relationships negatively affect a healthy, well-balanced, and fulfilling sense of human identity and how these unjust affiliations contribute to a lack of connection that many feel toward their natural environment, and she examines the underlying ethical questions. Humans' alienation from nature results in catastrophes because humans do not value important factors in the food chain: from the bees and the whales to all other animal and plant species that live on our planet and make the planet inhabitable for humans.

A critical ecofeminist reading and activist models of feminist ecology can help analyze the oppressions that result from the desire to dominate other beings and uncover the justifications of these oppressive systems. These tendencies of domination and estrangement from nature have escalated to an unheard-of degree in the Anthropocene. Critical ecofeminism sheds light on Jelinek's aesthetic and narrative strategies that highlight the destruction of nature and unjust human relationships. Several scholars have already argued for a link between Jelinek's texts and the depiction of the destruction of nature by humans. They have pointed out the author's critique of the binaries of men and women and the subjugation of women and marginalized groups that is similar to the subjugation of nature. A reading of Jelinek's texts through a lens of critical ecofeminist theory is still missing, and this article aims to fill

that gap. I argue that Jelinek's texts can be read from the perspective of critical ecofeminism because her texts are interventions into Western patriarchal, capitalist economies, which strive for profit without considering the devastating and catastrophic consequences of environmental pollution. Both critical ecofeminism and Jelinek see an isomorphism between the misogynist and xenophobic oppression of women and minorities and the human domination of nature. Although Jelinek may not label herself as an ecofeminist, her critical approach aligns with key critical ecofeminist concerns. In line with other environmental justice and social justice efforts, Jelinek examines the imagined hierarchical relationship between man and nature and compares it to that between men and women and to that between privileged citizens and migrants, refugees, Jews, and ethnic minorities.

For decades, Jelinek's texts have pointed out the distorted relationships between men and women as well as those between humans and their natural environments. The texts hint at the greed of humans who profit from the destruction of nature and from the exploitation of others. For a long time, humans have "ruled" over everything on Earth and have done so based on a particular interpretation of a Biblical passage (Genesis 1:26–28). Various forms of Christianity, especially various forms of Protestant and capitalist-era Christianity, see this passage as a mandate for human domination. However, Islam and Judaism have traditionally had stewardship models that do not involve ruling or dominating nature. The passage from Genesis implies that humans should act responsibly—be stewards—toward "earth others": animals, wildlife, plants, the rain forest, the oceans, and the planet (Plumwood 137). However, Western cultures have for the most part ignored this obligation. As plant studies and animal studies scholarship demonstrates, the interspecies relationship between humans and other living beings is still hierarchical, not egalitarian, and is based on speciesism, the discrimination based on species membership (see Hopster).

Several of Jelinek's early texts from the 1980s, such as the novel *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* (1985) and several of her later plays, including *Kein Licht* (2011), about the fallout at the Fukushima nuclear accident, as well as *Rein. Gold: Ein Bühnenessay* (2013) and *Angabe der Person* (2022), reflect Jelinek's thoughts on right-wing extremism, ideas of white nationalist supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism and their relation to the care for animals and nature. Jelinek's most recent trilogy, *Sonne / Luft / Asche* (2022), focuses on environmental pollution and climate change. Jelinek points to Austria's and Germany's history of

environmental protection that have long been connected to a right-wing understanding of certain species or groups of humans who claim a “natural” or “scientific” right to exist in Austria and Germany and to dominate and control nature, other species, and other groups of humans. These ideas harken back to the ideology of *Blut und Boden* in which certain ethnic groups belong, while others are excluded. Before delving into Jelinek’s texts, I offer a brief review of ecocritical and ecofeminist theories, as they will help to read and interpret Jelinek’s texts in the context of gender, national belonging, racialized minorities, and environmental literature. I read the texts through an intersectional lens that explores how Jelinek’s texts present issues that relate to the (mis-)treatment of nature, women, Jews, and refugees. The significance of Jelinek’s more recent work is that she extends ideas about nature and women that the ecofeminist movement initially offered in the 1980s and 1990s by including more recent theories such as material feminism and critical ecofeminism from the 2000s and 2010s that built on older, more problematic conceptions of ecofeminism.

In *Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), Caroline Merchant explains that since the Middle Ages, the argument to suppress women was that “lusty women” needed to be controlled so that men had the opportunity to establish their interests without interference from women: “man should function as the ruling intellectual head, while the woman is the body that assists him” (134, 146). For her part, Plumwood supports removing the existing dualisms and binaries that lead to hierarchical thinking: “nature/culture, body/mind, man/woman” in which Western culture should “conceive of nature as more mindlike” (124). She highlights how these associations have been used to justify both environmental degradation and gender inequality. Plumwood also created the approach of “critical ecofeminism” to distinguish it from its more essentialist precursor. She aimed to change the simplistic binaries between women and nature and instead emphasized the complex and interconnected nature of oppression. In *Earthcare: Women and the Environment* (1995), Merchant encourages people of all genders and of all backgrounds to consider nature as a partner and non-humans (plants, animals, water, etc.) as a “political subject” with equal rights to humans (221). In 1997, Noël Sturgeon writes in *Ecofeminist Natures*, “if white ecofeminists were to stop ideologically separating nature from culture, they wouldn’t become tribal peoples—rather, they would be challenged to creatively deal with the politics of their daily technologies, their cyborg natures” (132). Nonetheless, according to Sturgeon, the writings of white ecofeminists excluded some groups of people, which led to

“problems with certain kinds of ecofeminist discourses that essentialize women, people of color, and nature, thereby making some ecofeminist arguments suspect” (168). In previous decades, ecofeminism has been understood as an essentialist version of a mix of feminism and environmentalism. However, this perception is slowly changing, and ecofeminism has evolved into material ecofeminism and critical ecofeminism. Stacy Alaimo asserts in her co-edited book *Material Feminism* (2008) that

nature, as a philosophical concept, a potent ideological node, and a cultural repository of norms and moralisms, has long been waged against women, people of color, indigenous peoples, the queers [queer people], and the lower classes. Paradoxically, women, the working class, tribal peoples, and people of color have been denigrated because of their supposed “proximity” to nature, even as queers [queer people] have been castigated for being “unnatural.” (239)

The so-called idea of women’s and people of color’s proximity to nature was created by white colonialist men to legitimize the domination, suppression, and exploitation of women and marginalized groups. In Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann’s article “Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity” (2012) and Iovino’s article “Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism” (2016), the two authors discuss narrative strategies that may be helpful for reading texts through a lens of critical ecofeminism. In their article, Iovino and Oppermann explain that “anthropomorphizing representations can reveal similarities and symmetries between the human and the nonhuman” (82). As they write, “Posthumanism is a vision of reality in which the human and the nonhuman are seen as confluent, co-emergent, and defining each other in mutual relations” (86). They further assert that “material ecocriticism is part of a project of cultural criticism and cultural creativity. In this project literature can be used as an effective discourse crucial to enhance moral and environmental imagination” (87). They suggest that literary texts can indeed strengthen environmental ethics, an example of which are the ethical questions Jelinek poses in her texts.

Donna Haraway’s idea of “Natureculture” is a synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes an inseparability in ecological relationships that is both biophysically and socially formed. Her theory tries to create “coherent conversations where humans are not the measure of all things” (174). The concept emerged from the ecofeminist interrogation of dualisms that are deeply

embedded within the intellectual traditions of the masculinist sciences and the humanities (e.g., human/animal, culture/nature, man/woman, rational/emotional, and intellect/body). In “*Feministische Ökonomie, Ökofeminismus und Queer Ecologies*” (2013), Christine Bauhardt argues for a move to *Bedürfnisorientierung* (subsistence or needs-oriented approach) to support all living things and end exploitation, rather than producing more products for monetary profit and to gain political power. One of the more recent pathbreaking studies in critical ecofeminist theory is Greta Gaard’s book *Critical Ecofeminism* (2017) that offers insights into the connections and useful overlaps between “sustainability, environmental justice, and ecofeminism” (3). Gaard argues for a “just ecofeminist sustainability” (3), a non-Eurocentric, postcolonial and anti-colonial, critical ecofeminism that uses “ecologically, economically, and socially democratic participatory decision-making to enhance listening, awareness, and consideration of transcorporeal eco-socio-economic relations” (22). It would “reject the linear model of neoliberal economics and replace it with the indigenous and ecological model of the circle, where ‘waste’ is no longer a concept, and sustainability is enacted through transformations of repurposing, composting, and reusing former ‘waste’ in new materials beneficial to an ecological community” (22–23) and it will help create “transspecies diversity of citizen identities” (23) and require an inclusive, participatory democracy.

Jelinek’s novels and plays offer a way of providing material for ecocritical and ecofeminist ways of reading these texts. She has written a wide range of literary texts that take up the growing imbalance of nonhuman species and humankind. The novel *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* (1985) was published after the start of the 1984 Austrian environmental movement, which contributors to Gundi Dick and Ando Knoll’s edited collection *Hainburg: Ein Basisbuch: 276.485 Anschläge Gegen den Stau* (1985) describe. It brought together progressive and conservative forces and began as a response to the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the Hainburg wetlands, and a year before the meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in 1986. Jelinek wrote the prose text during a period in the 1980s when acid rain was falling on Western European forests and poisoning the ecosystem of trees, mushrooms, and animals. The narrator describes “einen giftigen Regen” (258–59), which destroyed the trees, and the similarity between the exploitative relationship between men and women and between humans and nature is cited in a sarcastic way: “Ob Frau, ob Wiesenknöterich, beide gedeihen sie nach einem eigenen Prinzip, sind zum Abpflücken da, diese Blumen” (31). Women and herbs both thrive

according to their own principle, but they thrive for men to use and abuse them. Men can use and abuse nature, in this case meadow knotweed, and men can use and abuse women for their purposes. Man does not have to concern himself with the needs and desires of nature or women. Jelinek's language shines a light on the gendering of the conceptualization of nature and employs commonly used language that draws parallels between women and plants. Given their different socialization, the names of flowers that are also girls' first names show that language reflects that girls and women are raised and expected to be more in tune with—or in proximity to, as Alaimo puts it—the natural world than are boys and men. The anti-ecological patriarchal societies that are ruled by ideologies of “masculinism” and “masculinist science” expect men to subordinate empathy and care, support technological advances, invest their work and powers in economic trade and war, and create machines to control, colonize, and exploit earth others and other humans (King 353–61; Gaard 93–99). In this novel, Jelinek's critique is in line with critical ecofeminist approaches in how capitalist and patriarchal systems view nature and women as resources to be exploited for profit and control.

Gender studies approaches allow for a reading of Jelinek's texts that critiques capitalism, patriarchy, and exploitation of women's labor and human labor. Gernot Waldner describes the author's technique as follows: “Jelinek's use of language asserts that the language of nature perpetuates the inequality between genders” (160). Waldner concludes that Jelinek's novel *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* “blurs the distinction between nature and culture, highlights the discrepancy between nature as romantic *topos* and nature as critical concept with respect to economy and gender, and it discusses the ramifications of ‘nature’ with regard to future, present, and past” (164). The narrator's voice in *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* exemplifies how women are treated as products for the use of men. The text describes how men's physical abuse of women is similar to men's attempt to conquer (*erobern*) nature and kill wildlife: “Dieser Mann möchte bitte endlich Frauen erobern und Wild abschießen” (32). The prey are women and deer, and the predators are men. Allyson Fiddler explains how Jelinek's language about hunting and woodcutting are symbolic of “man's violent conquering and subsequent modelling of woman's sexuality to his requirements and needs” (121). In the end, the men want to kill deer and other wildlife and sexually and economically dominate women. Christian van der Steeg has argued that Jelinek has long mistrusted the idealization of nature as part of Austrian national identity in which *Heimatfilme* and *Heimatromane* were

distributed after World War II to show the beautiful landscape of Austria to attract tourists and their money. The author confronts the romanticization of the landscape considering the covering up of Austria's National Socialist past. Jelinek compares the brutal domination of the landscape with the violence committed against women and minorities and points out similarities:

Die Naturschönheiten Österreichs, welche mithilfe der Medien von Tourismusbranche oder in der Literatur von Heimatromanen in Umlauf gesetzt werden, waren Jelinek von Anfang an verdächtig und wurden von ihr auf Dissonanzen abgehört. Dabei geht es nicht nur um die Herrschaft über die Natur, sondern auch um jene Machtzwänge, welchen die in der Natur lebenden Menschen ausgeliefert sind. (368)

Van der Steeg describes human beings as having been “surrendered” (*ausgeliefert*) to hierarchical power dynamics. Humans have created these power dynamics in their societies, and they can also choose to undo them. In *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr*, the narrator contemplates about the brutal mayor Hausbergl of Mayrhofen: “Hat Kinder und Frauen ins Moor gescheucht wie die Fliegen” (161), the cruelty and dominance of men over women and children that is similar to the viciousness with which humans treat a pest of unwanted flies culminates in the murder of innocents by a man who chases children and women into the deadly moors. Jelinek points out these hierarchies and the mercilessness of men's behavior in her texts to show that the patriarchal system supports the hierarchies but that contemporary societies could decide to transform themselves into more equitable societies. Daniela Bartens convincingly argues that nature in *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* offers an anti-idyllic environment and dystopian homeland for men and women: “Die Jelineksche Antiidylle wirft die Frage nach dem Zusammenhang von Natur und Heimat auf” (34). Jelinek de-essentializes women and nature by focusing on the domination of nature as well as the discrimination of minorities, refugees, and other nonwhite people.

Critical ecofeminist thought helps uncover why and how these power dynamics can be unraveled and changed. *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* offers additional examples in which nature is abused and the forest's trees become sick and mere fodder for the financial profit of humans: “Aber da stehen die Waldschützer bereit: noch hilfloser als der Embryo ist der Baum, der in dieser Gegend schon oft Menschen im Fallen erschlagen hat. Das ist die Rache der

Natur an den Unmündigen. Noch nie ist ein Waldbesitzer von einem Stamm erdrückt worden" (224). Jelinek expresses the helplessness of the tree huggers and the tree through a comparison with an embryo because the tree does not have any support from humans. The trees may take revenge on humans by falling on them, but the owners of the forests are never the victims. Jelinek uses the narrative strategy of personification or anthropomorphizing of the trees—as considered by Iovino and Oppermann—that want to take revenge against humans who have decimated the number of trees on planet Earth. In this example, Jelinek extends ecofeminist thought because the trees become living beings who want the world to be just, and they wish to take revenge. Nature has been gender-coded as feminine in Western thought to justify the exploitation of women's labor and of the natural environment. To point this out, the speaker in *Luft* refers to planet Earth as "Mutter Erde," "Mama Erde," and "Gaia, die Erdin," the personification of Earth in Greek mythology (87–88). Jelinek draws attention to the fact that what is considered "natural" is just a myth, created by men, that she deconstructs for her readers and audiences to understand that "natural relationships" are mere creations by humans.

Jelinek exposes how binaries serve oppressive systems, reinforcing both sexism and environmental destruction. By drawing attention to the rhetoric and systems behind these hierarchies, she aligns with ecofeminist efforts to dismantle dualistic thinking that legitimizes domination. On Jelinek's aesthetic, Bernhard Judex correctly asserts: "Die Dekonstruktion der phallogozentrischen Gleichsetzung von Frau und Natur führt zur Demaskierung des scheinbar Natürlichen als unnatürlich . . ." (240). Jelinek is attacking what is considered "natural" in her texts to show how Western languages and ideologies have created these hierarchies and the misconstrued coding of nature as feminine. Critical ecofeminism advocates for an ethics of care (Gaard 93), emphasizing the importance of nurturing, sustainable, and non-exploitative relationships with both the earth others and other humans. This includes advocating for ecological balance, respect for biodiversity, and social justice. In Jelinek's text, the forests are dying, and patriarchal societies do not do enough to rescue the trees, which humans need for oxygen and their livelihoods.

In her later texts *In den Alpen* (2002) and *Das Werk* (2003), Jelinek writes about human's struggle to tame the elements and develop technology, such as hydroelectric power plants in Austria: "das Wasser zähmen" (*Das Werk* 115). She uses irony to describe the controversial energy production facility of Kaprun as a "Wunderwerk der Naturbeherrschung" (*Das Werk* 120). Kaprun was con-

ceptualized by the Nazis and built with the help of forced laborers and POWs from Russia and other countries. Shortly after the *Anschluss* in 1938, Hermann Göring attended the facility's groundbreaking ceremony, and many foreign workers were killed by avalanches or work accidents on the mountain. According to Pia Janke, Jelinek's text analysis constitutes "die Dekonstruktion nationaler Mythen, das Aufreißen des Bodens, die Thematisierung der österreichischen Geschichte, die, da sie verdrängt wurde, nicht sterben kann . . ." (138). Furthermore, Jelinek draws a parallel between the use of technology and the abuse of people in Kaprun and the exploration of the Alps and exclusion of minorities:

Am Ursprung der Erschließung der Alpen . . . steht zwar kein individueller Besitzanspruch, wohl aber der kollektive Ausschluss der Anwesenheit anderer. . . . Den einen gehört das Gebirge, die anderen sind ausgeschlossen, vor allem sind diese anderen: die Juden. Die Geschichte des Alpinismus seit dessen Beginn ist eine Geschichte auch des Antisemitismus. Juden wurden aus allen Sektionen des Alpenvereins und der Wandervogelbewegung schon sehr früh, Anfang der zwanziger Jahre, ausgeschlossen und mussten ihre eigene Sektion ("Donauland") gründen. ("Nachbemerkung" 254)

The groups that were encouraged to explore the Alps were part of a long tradition of discriminating against Jews, including the barring of Jews from clubs, public life, and access to the exploration of mountains in Austria and Germany. Jelinek draws parallels between the domination of Jews and the domination of nature in her works, highlighting the systemic and pervasive nature of oppression. She calls attention to the persecution of Jews by the National Socialist regime, highlighting their dehumanization by a misanthropic administrative system. Jelinek's portrayal of the persecution of Jews, particularly during the Holocaust, reflects a systematic and institutionalized form of oppression. This mirrors the systematic exploitation and destruction of nature by industrial and capitalist systems.

Just as Jews were dehumanized and treated as objects during the Holocaust, Jelinek also depicts nature as being objectified and exploited for human gain. Both are stripped of their intrinsic value and reduced to mere resources or commodities. The author underscores the interconnectedness of human and ecological systems by pointing to the destruction of nature that is seen as a reflection of broader societal issues, including racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. The author frequently depicts women as objects of

male desire and exploitation, namely as commodities and property. This interconnectedness suggests that the oppression of one group or system inevitably impacts others.

While ecofeminist thought has been criticized as essentializing women and people of color, Jelinek depicts the complexity of women's and other minorities' different experiences by exploring how the domination of nature through the hydroelectricity plant in Kaprun is vital to the dominant group insofar as the facility strengthens their economic domination through profitable water production. White Christian men dominate and exploit the mountain and its water, just as they economically dominate women and minorities through otherizing and dehumanizing them and making them the objects and instruments for the workforce. The domination and control over nature and over women by men and the domination of ethnic minority groups are corelated as described by ideologies of white Christian European supremacy theories: keeping the dominant group (white Christian men) with their power on top and harassing, regulating, and discriminating other groups (women, minorities, nature) by legitimizing the subjugation of these groups through sexist, racist, and speciesist forms of social hierarchies that are based on economic greed. The antisemitic rhetoric that circulated in Europe during the previous centuries culminated under the National Socialists in tropes of chaos and disease with calls for the control (and later extermination) of the Jewish population. During the Shoah, German women and men discriminated against the Jewish minority population by excluding Jews from social privileges. The policies and rules morphed into brutal persecution, boundless torture, the stated attempt to exterminate all Jews, and the planned and relentless murder of millions of Jews. Jelinek shows the complexity of different forms of oppression that are supported, regulated, and sanctioned by the governing system and the interconnections of these forms of oppressions. The brutal destruction of forests and pollution of air in her works parallels the violent persecution and extermination of Jews. Jelinek stresses the erasure of Jewish culture and identity through fascist regimes, similar to the erasure of natural landscapes and ecosystems through industrialization. Both forms of erasure result in a loss of diversity and richness.

In the epilogue of *In den Alpen: Drei Dramen*, Jelinek alludes to Paul Celan's short prose text "*Gespräch im Gebirg*" about a Jew who is not allowed on the mountains, in part because the landscape is representative of Austrian national identity and therefore excludes him from the pleasures of exploring the

mountains: “Da spricht einer, der nicht dazugehört und nicht dazugehören darf” (254–55). Jelinek aims to de-essentialize a group of people by referring to various forms of domineering practices and by opposing the idea of concentrating on the stereotypical aspects of a group of people. Van der Steeg has also described Jelinek’s focus on the history of xenophobic and anti-Semitic exclusionary and discriminating practices during National Socialism in her texts, practices such as not permitting Jews and the lower classes access to the mountains (368). In German-speaking countries, certain public spaces have for a long time been kept for the use of privileged, i.e., white Christian middle- and upper-class men, and in some spaces also white Christian women. The nationalist, antisemitic, and patriarchal idea of nature in Austria and Germany was constructed and restricted as untouchable for underprivileged and marginalized groups, such as Jews, during National Socialism. The critical ecofeminist tradition shows how otherizing binaries, in this case Jews and non-Jews, establish similar hierarchies to those of men and women as well as citizens and refugees. The false conclusion is that women and underprivileged groups are closer to nature and emotional and men represent culture and rationality. Jelinek breaks up this binary by pointing her audience to the underlying rhetoric of those ideas and by showing who benefits from these established behavioral rules.

In her more recent trilogy, *Sonne / Luft / Asche*, Jelinek focuses on the destruction of nature when she contemplates droughts, floods, and the burning landscapes on our planet: “Brennen werden sie wie Papier, das mich haßt” (*Sonne* 4) and “Die Sonne wars! Ich soll es schon wieder gewesen sein. Die freuen sich doch so, endlich gebraten zu werden” (4). The speaker describes herself as the sun and takes on the role of a nonhuman star: “Ich werde ein wesenloser Ball, aufgebläht vom eigenen Licht, von meiner eigenen Bedeutung, von diesem Licht, das immer heller wird, bis alles Wasser verdampfen und alles, was es auf der Erde noch gibt, gekocht wird. Nur gibt es keine Esser mehr dafür” (6). According to this prediction, Planet Earth will burn and boil its species, but no species will survive and be able to eat anything because human, animal, and plant species will be extinct.

Similarly, the longer second text, *Luft*, is part of a contemplation about humanity’s need to breathe in oxygen and the overproduction of carbon dioxide through cars and industry. In *Luft*, one focus of the narrative is the erection and destruction of borders between countries: “Viele Grenzen sind nur gedacht, manchmal hat man einen hohen Zaun draufgemacht, mit einer schicken Fri-

sur aus NATO-Draht. Fragen Sie den nächsten Flüchtenden, der sich anstellt, um den Blutzoll zu entrichten, siehe, da steht er schon" (27). The cruelty of borders and barbed wire fences that keep refugees out is personified by a fence that wears a chic hairdo made up of NATO wires. Jelinek uses her satirical language to show the weirdness of border crossings in the twenty-first century. The refugees have to leave blood at the border to make it to the next stage in their flight from war and natural disasters. The speaker of the text refers to refugees as *Flüchtende*, *Flüchtige*, and *Fremdlinge* (27, 49, 91): "Da ist ja auch noch ein Problem. Fremdlingen, die Schutz erbitten, helfen? Schmeißen wir sie gleich weg! Denn schirm ich nun euch Flüchtlinge, bereitet sich im eigenen Land der Krieg vor. Und dann irgendwann müssen wir mit ihnen gehen" (91). Jelinek's speaker does two things: the speaker questions the request to help refugees and the unwillingness to support others who do not belong by offering a satirical comment about throwing refugees away, just as one might toss trash aside or dispose of it. Then the speaker poses and answers a rhetorical question about whether society should assist refugees who beg for help with the seemingly barked response, "Schmeißen wir sie gleich weg!" (91). The text personifies the inanimate trash by conflating the concrete item with the living refugee considered by many in society to be "trash," given that both can be freely discarded. Both lack value, and refugees are perceived as bringing economic and social problems. Not being able to support those in need adds to social tensions, and the scapegoating of refugees distracts from the real political issues. The text ironically implies that those who support refugees may be asked to leave the country with them.

The speaker in *Luft* contemplates the role of humans and humanity, a group of beings of a particular species that may have been created to be a progressive, forward-thinking being (*fortschreitendes Geschlecht*): "Das Zerstören ist oft mühsam, und auf Erden darf kein einziges Geschlecht mehr untergehen, denn das Menschengeschlecht wurde als fortschreitendes Geschlecht konzipiert. Oje, jetzt ist es abgebrochen, kommt mir vor. Nein, es folgt bloß dem Konzept nicht" (32). The human species does, supposedly, not evolve according to the intended purpose, which is to progress and advance the world. However, surprisingly, humanity now destroys its own habitat. Jelinek's text refers to poor air quality in which smog and high levels of pathogens prevail and where humans are poisoned through polluted air. Because of the natural disasters, the fight over food and water will further increase, and climate refu-

gees are fleeing and will continue to flee their home countries as they look for safe locations to support themselves and their families.

The speaker in *Luft* also refers to the plastic garbage in the oceans. Nothing on the planet can grow except for the garbage piles and the sea level: “Wir müssen mit dem auskommen, was wir haben. Es wird nicht mehr, es wird nicht anwachsen, nur weil wir unseren Dreck hineinschmeißen. Stimmt nicht: Der Meeresspiegel wird ansteigen, irgendwann kommt er dann raus, und dann kommt alles raus” (36). One of Jelinek’s recurring themes is the critique of accelerated and intensifying consumerism and the environmental devastation it causes, including issues related to plastic waste. The speaker offers an explanation for the rising sea levels, namely the rising temperatures and the melting glaciers. In Jelinek’s text, the speaker’s sarcastic allusions to plastic waste are metaphors for critiquing the artificial, disposable nature of contemporary culture. The wordplay of “auskommen” for people “to get by” and “herauskommen” for the sea level in the sense of “to appear or emerge” show the connection between consumption and the environment. Jelinek’s writing deconstructs the ways in which society generates waste—not only of material goods but also of human potential—by privileging economic growth and consumption. Jelinek here offers a critique of consumerism, capitalism, patriarchy, and the exploitation of human beings.

Several times in *Luft*, the speaker pays homage to the Fridays for Future movement, school-aged children and young adults who skip school and march on the streets in protest to save the planet (38, 42, 55, 65, 85): “die Demos zur Reinerhaltung der Elemente werden von klugen jungen Elementen durchgeführt, ein schöner Gedanke, dass sie das böse Wasser und die böse Sonne und die giftige Erde retten wollen” (42). Jelinek compares the chemical elements of water and others to the young “elements,” the children of humans who try to save their species and their habitat. Once, the speaker refers to the Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg: “So wie Greta, die unseren kommenden Untergang so bewegend und einleuchtend schildert, danke dafür” (84). The speaker thanks Thunberg for her work of eloquently explaining the irreversible climate catastrophe and her work in environmental justice struggles. Thunberg has publicly fought for a change in human behavior to reduce the use of fossil fuels and the emission of carbon dioxide and methane that heat up the planet and that will create disastrous and extreme temperatures and extreme weather events.

Thunberg and the global youth climate protests inspired Jelinek's 2020 play *Lärm. Blindes Sehen. Blinde sehen!* In this work, Jelinek explores themes of ecological destruction, the climate crisis, and humanity's complicity in the degradation of the planet. She connects the climate crisis to broader critiques of capitalism, consumerism, and the systemic inequalities that exacerbate ecological disasters. This sentiment recurs four years later in *Luft*, in which she reminds the reader and her audience not to dig and frack for natural resources and coal:

denn diese Erdfülle enthält viel Schädliches für uns, das nicht frei werden sollte. Außerdem hat es sich an seine Gefangenschaft schon längst gewöhnt, die Kohle, das heißt: finden kann man sie noch, doch arbeiten darf sie bald gar nicht mehr, in dreißig Jahren ist sie ganz weg, wetten? Man ist dann aus ihr ausgestiegen, für diesen Gedanken werden sie sich früher oder später erwärmen müssen, oder sie werden anders erwärmen müssen, jedenfalls wenn Sie die Kohle fragen. (67)

Jelinek uses wordplay and irony to connect the *erwärmen* that one can do with a thought, as one does when one “warms up” to an idea, and the “warming up” of the planet: people must warm up to the idea of not using coal as a form of energy. The author repeatedly uses the phrase “wetten?” (“wanna bet?”), a playful taunt from a TV show host or a bet among friends, to emphasize the mediatization of the world and the severe nature of her claims. In addition, she includes humor by anthropomorphizing coal and implying that humans should converse with the element and ask the “coal” for its opinion to better understand the chemical element.

The speaker in *Luft* refers to a period on Earth in which humans, animals, and plants cannot survive. “Das wird dann allerdings keiner mehr sagen, weil es keinen mehr gibt, der noch etwas sagen könnte, etwas Schönes über die Natur, die Luft, die Erde, das Wasser” (46). The text underscores the accepted truth that people know the effects of climate change but act only according to the short-term goal of the survival of the current generation. While animals and plants try to survive despite human intervention in the cycle of life, Jelinek highlights the difference between nature (which needs protection) and human nature (which needs to break with its evil roots): “Ist aber das Erste, das ihr anmahnt, die böse Natur des Menschen, welche die gute Natur um ihn herum vernichtet, wirklich die Ursache? Habt ihr die böse Menschennatur etwa ganz vergessen?” (85). Human nature destroys, while plant and animal

nature survives. Humans could model their behavior on animist tribes who live a subsistence lifestyle (Gaard 19) that take from nature only what nature can replenish and that can regrow, and they can learn from indigenous traditional knowledge that offers alternative ways of living to these oppressive systems.

Reading this selection of Jelinek's texts through the lens of critical ecofeminist theory illustrates the gendered language of ecological and human hierarchies, the for-profit exploitation of nature, women, Jews, minorities, and other species by multinational companies, and the catastrophic consequences of environmental pollution to humans and to other species. Analyzing the passages against the backdrop of the desire and interest in profit and dominance *vis-à-vis* the stewardship of planet Earth emphasizes Jelinek's critique of the gendered conceptualization of nature and highlights the author's attempt to show how women and indigenous communities face disproportionate environmental and social harms from environmental degradation, such as pollution, climate change, and resource extraction. Analyzing Jelinek's texts through the lens of ecofeminism shows how the author uses the language of her texts to deconstruct and intervene into the structures of patriarchal and capitalist societies that strive for profit and do not consider the destructive consequences of environmental exploitation and fossil fuel pollution. Through her works, Jelinek calls for greater awareness of the parallels between different forms of oppression and the need for systemic change. She urges readers to recognize the interconnectedness of these issues and to advocate for gender equality, environmental and social justice, and sustainability. Jelinek enriches critical ecofeminist thought and offers an artistic rendering in her early novels and later plays. By drawing these parallels, Jelinek's works offer a profound critique of the ways in which power and control are exercised over both nature and marginalized groups, urging readers and her audiences to reflect on their roles in perpetuating or challenging these systems. Critical ecofeminist approaches make it possible to illustrate how Jelinek draws out comparisons of hierarchies between the racist and patriarchal oppression of women, minorities, and refugees by privileged groups such as white Christian men and the domination of earth others—other species such as plants and animals as well as water, soil, etc.—by humans. In the tradition of ecofeminist thinkers, Jelinek examines and explores the language and the systemic hierarchical relationships between men and women as well as those between privileged citizens and migrants, refugees, Jews, and ethnic minorities and shows similarities between those and the exploitative relationship between humankind and nature.

**Britta Kallin** serves as Associate Professor of German Studies and Associate Chair at the School of Modern Languages at the Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta, Georgia. She studied German, English, and Gender Studies in Hamburg and Cincinnati, Ohio. Her research examines gender, race and ethnicity, national narratives, populism, and ecocriticism in contemporary German-language literature. She has published on Franz Kafka, Christa Wolf, Günter Grass, Elfriede Jelinek, Marlene Streeruwitz, Cornelia Funke, and others.

### Works Cited

- Alaimo, Stacy. "Trans-Corporeal Feminism and the Ethical Space of Nature." *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana UP, 2008, pp. 237–64.
- Bartens, Daniela. "'Die Natur ist immer die Antwort auf dumme Fragen': Metamorphosen des Natürlichen in Elfriede Jelineks *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr* und *Raststätte oder Sie machens alle*." *Was. Zeitschrift für Kultur und Politik*, no. 81, 1995, pp. 29–43.
- Bauhardt, Christine. "Feministische Ökonomie, Ökofeminismus und Queer Ecologies: feministisch-materialistische Perspektiven auf gesellschaftliche Naturverhältnisse." *Gender und ökonomischer Wandel*, ed. Ilona Ebbers, Brigitte Halbfas, and Daniela Rastetter, Metropolis, 2013, pp. 11–46.
- Celan, Paul. "Gespräch im Gebirg." *Neue Rundschau*, vol. 71, no. 2, 1960, pp. 199–202.
- Dick, Gundi and Ando Knoll, eds. *Hainburg: Ein Basisbuch: 276.485 Anschläge gegen den Stau*. Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1985.
- Fiddler, Allyson. *Rewriting Reality: An Introduction to Elfriede Jelinek*. Berg, 1994.
- Gaard, Greta. *Critical Ecofeminism*. Lexington Books, 2017.
- Haraway, Donna. "Otherworldly Conversation, Terrain Topics, Local Terms." *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, Indiana UP, 2008, pp. 157–87.
- Hopster, Jeroen. "The Speciesism Debate: Intuition, Method, and Empirical Advances." *Animals*, vol. 9, no. 12, 2019.
- Iovino, Serenella. "Posthumanism in Literature and Ecocriticism." *Relations: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2016, pp. 11–20.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann. "Material Ecocriticism: Materiality, Agency, and Models of Narrativity." *Ecozone*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2012, pp. 75–91.
- Janke, Pia. "Der Mythos Kaprun in *In den Alpen* und *Das Werk*." *Jelinek, une répétition? Jelinek, eine Wiederholung?* ed. Francoise Lartillot and Dieter Hornig, Peter Lang, 2008, pp. 127–41.
- Jelinek, Elfriede. *Angabe der Person*. Rowohlt, 2022.
- . *Das Werk. In den Alpen: Drei Dramen*, Berlin Verlag, 2002, pp. 89–252.
- . *In den Alpen. In den Alpen: Drei Dramen*, Berlin Verlag, 2002, pp. 5–87.
- . *Kein Licht*. Rowohlt, 2011.
- . "Nachbemerkung." *In den Alpen: Drei Dramen*, Berlin Verlag, 2002, pp. 253–259.
- . *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr*. Rowohlt, 1993.

———. *Rein. Gold: Ein Bühnenssay*. Rowohlt, 2013.

———. *Sonne / Luft / Asche*. Typoskript with page numbers. Rowohlt, 2024.

Judex, Bernhard. "Zerstörte Subjekte—beherrschte Naturen: Zum Naturbegriff und zur Ökologiekritik bei Bernhard und Jelinek." *Elfriede Jelinek und Thomas Bernhard: Intertextualität—Korrelationen—Korrespondenzen*, ed. Bastian Reinert and Clemens Götze, DeGruyter, pp. 231–48.

King, Ynestra. "Healing the Wounds: Feminism, Ecology and the Nature/Culture Dualism." *Feminism and Philosophy: Essential Readings in Theory, Reinterpretation, and Application*, ed. Nancy Tuana, Routledge, 1995, pp. 353–73.

Merchant, Carolyn. *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. Harper Collins, 1980.

———. *Earthcare: Women and the Environment*. Routledge, 1995.

Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.

Sturgeon, Noël. *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory, and Political Action*. Routledge, 1997.

Van der Steeg, Christian. "Natur." *Jelinek-Handbuch*, ed. Pia Janke, Metzler, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2024, pp. 367–70.

Waldner, Gernot. "Ecology and Its Discontents: The Concept of Nature in Elfriede Jelinek's *Oh Wildnis, oh Schutz vor ihr*." *Ecologies of Socialisms: Germany, Nature, and the Left in History, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Sabine Mödersheim, Scott Moranda, and Eli Rubin. Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 147–66.