

Animal Communication in  
Hyper-Contemporary Australian Literature:  
Genre, Ethics, and Climate Change

Caitlin Macdonald

Faculty of Arts and Social Science  
The University of Sydney

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Philosophy

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Written on unceded Darug land

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Dr Meg Brayshaw     17 March 2025

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# Abstract

This project investigates how genre conditions the representation of animals in hyper-contemporary Australian fiction engaged with the environmental devastation of climate change. Analysing five novels by settler authors—Robbie Arnott’s *Limberlost* (2022), Erin Hurtle’s *The Octopus and I* (2020), Charlotte McConaghy’s *Once There Were Wolves* (2021), Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country* (2020), and Chris Flynn’s *Mammoth* (2020)—I examine how these works effectively navigate the representational and ethical complexities of the Anthropocene by centring animal presence and perspectives. This thesis traces how writers employ a spectrum of generic modes, from straightforward realism to speculative fiction, to depict animals and their interactions with humans, demonstrating that diverse genres can effectively convey animal presence and agency. Crucial to this research is my theorisation of ‘animal communication,’ a concept that transcends anthropomorphism by exploring how writers’ representations of animal gaze, behaviour, voice, and human-animal interactions depict animal presence and subjectivity without relying solely on access to animal interiority. This thesis challenges Amitav Ghosh’s critique of realism, demonstrating how the realist mode, alongside speculative and experimental approaches, addresses the vast, nonhuman dimensions of climate change effectively. Furthermore, it examines critically settler-colonial legacies embedded in these narratives, focusing on their portrayal of violence, care, and ethics in human-animal relationships on colonised land. By revealing how genre shapes the representation of animal subjectivity and environmental ethics through animal communication, this thesis offers a nuanced perspective on contemporary Australian literature at the intersection of environmental ethics, animal studies, and literary form. Its findings contribute to broader discussions on the role of literature in confronting the climate crisis, emphasising the power of storytelling to reimagine human-animal relationships and inspire ethical engagement in the Anthropocene.

# Contents

Introduction	7
- Engaging with Animals and the Development of Literary Animal Studies	16
- Animal Communication	22
- Communicative Capacities of Genre	27
- Communicating Violence, Justice and Care	30
- Chapter Overview	32
Chapter 1: Reimagining Masculinity and Empathy: The Bildungsroman in Robbie Arnott's <i>Limberlost</i>	35
- Summer and the Quoll – the Potential for Carnage	40
- Alternative Expressions of Masculinity	46
- Unacknowledged Colonial Violence	48
- “Come right up against it”	54
Chapter 2: Ink, Vomit, and Blood: The Ripple Effects of Care, Carelessness, and Violence in Erin Hurtle's <i>The Octopus and I</i>	58
- Avant-Garde Poetics	64
- A Journey to Care	67
- Mutton-Birding to Belong	72
- Barriers to Male Care	76
- Reckoning and Recovery	79
Chapter 3: “We’re the monsters:” Morality and Ambiguous Ethics in Charlotte McConaghy's <i>Once There Were Wolves</i>	84
- Synaesthesia and Melodrama Morality	90
- Justice and Injustice, Care and Violence	93
- The Ecological Detective	96
- Ethical Codes and Compromises	100
- “Happy Endings”	103
Chapter 4: Weird Realism in Laura Jean McKay's <i>The Animals in That Country</i>	108
- ‘Zooflu’—Sensory Animal Communication	115
- “(Yesterday)” and “The Queen”	120
- Subverting Familiarity and Enchantment	125
- Wounding	127
- Silence and the Return to Reality	129
Chapter 5: Oral Testimony and Irreverence: Chris Flynn's “motley band of irascible fossils” in <i>Mammoth</i>	132
- Oral Testimony and Humour	135
- Enduring Ideologies of Exploitation	142
- Farewells and Resurrection: Nostalgia, Hope, and Remembrance	148
Conclusion	155
- Future Directions for Research	158
References	159

# Introduction

In an era of accelerating ecological crisis, the language we use to describe our relationship with the nonhuman world is undergoing profound transformation.<sup>1</sup> Concepts such as “entanglement” and “multispecies” thinking proliferate across academic and public discourse, reflecting an urgency to move beyond anthropocentric individualism toward frameworks that acknowledge planetary interconnectedness.<sup>2</sup> In his “anthropology of life,” Eduardo Kohn urges scholars to consider “the effects of our “entanglements” with other kinds of living selves,” expanding the scope of inquiry beyond the human.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Anna Tsing advocates for a research practice that embraces “passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhumans being studied,” positioning human and nonhuman existences within deeply enmeshed social and ecological networks.<sup>4</sup> These perspectives challenge traditional, linear models of causality, particularly in ethical and political thought. As scholars in environmental humanities argue, responsibility cannot be reduced to individual agency alone; it must account for systemic and structural forces that shape environmental degradation, extinction, and violence.<sup>5</sup> Recognising the ripple effects of human actions on nonhuman lives demands a shift in how we tell stories about the more-than-human world.<sup>6</sup> Literature, as a space for imaginative worldmaking, plays a crucial role in this shift. Contemporary Australian fiction engages with a number of urgent questions by interrogating how narrative form and genre mediate human-animal

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<sup>1</sup> Jessica Murray highlights the limitations of current critical vocabularies in representing nonhuman agency. Murray argues, “the terminological slipperiness that confronts anyone attempting to talk about and imagine other animals in respectful modes of engagement signals more than the inadequacy of our scholarly lexicons. Rather, these gaps reveal deeply problematic epistemological and ontological assumptions about other animals and our responsibilities towards them.” See Jessica Murray, “Using Critical Animal Studies to Read Climate Change Fiction: Literary Reflections and Provocations,” *English Academy Review* 39, no. 2 (2022): 67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2023.2173860>.

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘multispecies’ emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings through co-evolution, mutual influence, and shared development. It frames life as an ongoing process shaped by cross-species communication and meaning-making and rejects the notion of organisms as isolated entities. Multispecies studies, developed by scholars like Anna Tsing, Donna Haraway, Eduardo Kohn, and Thom van Dooren, explore these entanglements. Building on Tsing’s call for ‘arts of inclusion’ and ‘immersion’ in nonhuman lives, van Dooren et al. describe “passionate immersion” in “webs of signification”—“linguistic, gestural, biochemical, and more.” They illustrate this through examples of flowers that use “visual and scent” cues to attract pollinators, or canids engaging in play through complex social signals, ultimately emphasising the world as a “lively communicative matrix.” See Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 16, 2, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>; Anna Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom,” *Manoa* 22, no. 2 (2010): 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41479491>.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Kohn, “How dogs dream: Amazonian natures and the politics of transspecies engagement,” *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 1 (2007): 6, 4, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2007.34.1.3>. Kohn references Raffles’ discussion of “entanglements.” See Hugh Raffles, *In Amazonia: A Natural History* (Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Tsing writes: “[a]t the intersection between the sciences of nature and the sciences of culture, a new model is afoot, the key characteristic of which is multi-species love ... it encourages a new, passionate immersion in the lives of the nonhuman subjects being studied. Once, such immersion was allowed only to natural scientists, and mainly on the condition that the love didn’t show. The critical intervention of this new form of science is that it encourages learned-ness in natural science along with all the tools of the humanities and the arts.” See Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion,” 201. Tsing is referenced in Deborah Bird Rose et al., “Thinking Through the Environment, Unsettling the Humanities,” *Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1 (2012): 4, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3609940>.

<sup>5</sup> Rose et al. write, “[h]ow are human identities and responsibilities to be articulated when we understand ourselves to be members of multispecies communities that emerge through the entanglements of agential beings? ... A conception of responsibility founded on linear models of causality and individualist, liberal conceptions of agency has popular appeal, as well as a crucial role in underpinning everyday practices such as criminal law. But political theorists have long understood its inadequacies when it comes to explaining structural and systemic violence and injustice.” Rose et al., “Unsettling the Humanities,” 3.

<sup>6</sup> I recruit ‘ripple effects’ in my analysis of Erin Hurtle’s *The Octopus and I*, which foregrounds human-nonhuman entanglements and the consequences of human action on animal lives. The expression informs my broader examination of literature’s role in reconfiguring agency, responsibility, and storytelling in the more-than-human world.

relationships. The following are the central research questions of this thesis: how can literature represent animal agency? How do different genres shape our ability to perceive and respond to ecological crisis? And how might the act of storytelling itself—its structures, tropes, and conventions—condition our ethical orientation toward the nonhuman?

Over the last thirty years, fiction and scholarly works about the environment have proliferated, with public and academic discourse questioning the best way for literature to engage with climate crisis.<sup>7</sup> In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh popularised a conversation about the limitations of realism and the potential of other genres to represent the complexities of ecological catastrophe.<sup>8</sup> By means of an architectural metaphor, he contrasts the “mansion” of “serious fiction” with the “outhouses” of speculative genres—categories “that were once known by names such as ‘the Gothic,’ ‘the romance,’ or ‘the melodrama,’ and have now come to be called ‘fantasy,’ ‘horror,’ and ‘science fiction’”—and argues that the latter are better suited to represent “improbable” phenomena like climate crises.<sup>9</sup> Ghosh identifies four constraints of realism: its marginalisation of climate change; difficulty accommodating the destabilising aspects of environmental crises; its inability to depict “vast expanses of time and space;” and its human-centric focus that neglects “nonhuman” presence, namely weather and animals.<sup>10</sup> He notes, “[w]ithin the mansion of serious fiction, no one will speak of how the continents were created; nor will they refer to the passage of thousands of years.”<sup>11</sup> For Ghosh, these constraints prevent realist fiction from fully grappling with the magnitude and uncertainty of this planetary emergency, a failing he sees as symptomatic of its “deliberately prosaic” approach.<sup>12</sup> Predicting that the literary mainstream would “double down” on realism’s anthropocentric tendencies, he calls for the dissolution of rigid genre boundaries, arguing that hybridised genres offer the necessary imaginative tools to narrativise human and nonhuman entanglements.<sup>13</sup>

Ghosh is not alone in questioning realism’s adequacy. Catherine Parry highlights how the realist tradition is bound up with colonial and anthropocentric logics, showing how its very structures can naturalise exclusionary perspectives. Through the analogy of taxidermy, she argues that realist literature asks readers to “accept a textual world as a faithful replication of the real world:”

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<sup>7</sup> See Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (University of Georgia Press, 1996); Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: the Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Timothy Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Erin James, *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives* (University of Nebraska Press, 2015); John Parham, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Anthropocene* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Martin Puchner, *Literature for a Changing Planet* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016). Mark McGurl has discussed how genres such as science fiction and horror have captured “the spatiotemporal vastness and numerosness of the nonhuman world.” See Mark McGurl, “The Posthuman Comedy,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (2012): 537, <https://doi.org/10.1086/664550>; Tim Winton’s *Juice* (2024) is a noteworthy example of Australian fiction addressing climate change through a speculative lens. However, as the novel does not engage centrally with animals or human-animal relationships—key focal points of this thesis—it has not been included in my analysis.

<sup>9</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 23, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 11, 23, 61, 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 61.

<sup>12</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 71.

[a]s the skin of a taxidermic animal simulates naturalness ... so a realist novel builds a world ... in a way that minimises its underlying assumptions, necessary elisions and things left unsaid.<sup>14</sup>

Parry identifies possibilities for “posthumanist realism” through fiction that “move[s] away from traditional anthropocentric subject-positioning norms, and ... actively incorporate[s] and accept[s] animal other-worldliness.”<sup>15</sup> Parry’s discussion of “posthumanist realism” is especially relevant to my thesis, as I show how authors like Erin Hurtle and Charlotte McConaghy incorporate animal “other-worldliness” into their narratives without abandoning realist commitments.<sup>16</sup>

Before turning to contemporary Australian texts, it is important to clarify my use of key terms. Following Pam Morris, I distinguish between several related but non-identical concepts. As Morris observes, the terms ‘realist’ and ‘realism’ are “entangle[d] with a series of other words equally resistant to clear-cut definition: factuality, truth, reality, realistic and real.”<sup>17</sup> I use “realism” to mean, with Morris, “any writing ... based upon an implicit or explicit assumption that it is possible to communicate about a reality beyond the writing.”<sup>18</sup> In this thesis, “[r]ealist” refers to works or authors that adopt this mode. “Realistic,” by contrast, signals an effect of verisimilitude—what Morris describes as “the appearance of being true or real; likeness or resemblance to truth, reality or fact”—which may appear in works not strictly realist.<sup>19</sup> Finally, “the real” is best understood, following Morris’s discussion of realism’s opposition to idealism, as a philosophical category not reducible to literary representation: “[t]his brings us back again to the central question of what constitutes reality.”<sup>20</sup> Keeping these distinctions in view prevents conflating textual strategies of representation with broader ontological claims.

While acknowledging Ghosh’s constraints and Parry’s critiques, I argue that contemporary Australian literature demonstrates how realism—particularly in hybridised and experimental forms—can engage productively with precisely those nonhuman and planetary scales often seen as its limits. Across a range of texts—from Robbie Arnott’s realist bildungsroman *Limberlost* to Chris Flynn’s speculative comedy *Mammoth*—I show how authors deploy their chosen modes to grapple with the intertwined crises of extinction, habitat destruction, and animal exploitation. Their novels demonstrate each mode’s capacity to represent animals’ experiences and explore human-animal relationships within a changing climate.<sup>21</sup> A key

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<sup>14</sup> Catherine Parry, *Other Animals in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55932-2>, 86.

<sup>15</sup> Parry, *Other Animals*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> Parry, *Other Animals*, 133.

<sup>17</sup> Pam Morris, *Realism* (Routledge, 2003), <http://doi.org/10.4324/9780203634073>, 2.

<sup>18</sup> Morris, *Realism*, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Morris, *Realism*, 5.

<sup>20</sup> Morris, *Realism*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Climate change encompasses a complex array of phenomena, rooted in human-induced greenhouse gas emissions from sectors such as electricity and heat production, agriculture and forestry, industry, and transportation. Drawing on Hannah Ritchie’s *Not the End of the World*, when I use the term ‘climate change,’ I am referring to both the overarching implications of climate change and its specific, measurable contributors. Ritchie asserts, “climate change is happening, and human emissions of greenhouse gases are responsible.” See Hannah Ritchie, *Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet* (Chatto & Windus, 2024), 73.

question, then, is at what point adaptations of realism cease to belong to the realist mode and enter other generic terrains. This thesis argues that the most obvious turn occurs in Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country*, where the speculative conceit of 'zooflu' pushes the text into what I describe as 'weird realism'—a hybrid mode that unsettles the generic stability of realism while retaining its attentiveness to embodied animal life. Whether grounded in realism, the speculative, or an experimental blend of both, each novel addresses themes of ethics, violence, and care effectively. Therefore, this thesis shows how genre conditions the representation of what I call 'animal communication.'

Animal communication acknowledges that anthropomorphism alone is not a satisfactory description of how writers craft their representations of animals. Rather, animal communication is conveyed through a diverse range of devices including gaze, behaviour, spoken and narrative voice (including anthropomorphism), and the depiction of empathetic relationships between humans and animals. Central to my theorisation of animal communication is the inclusion of both corporeally attuned descriptions of animal bodies, and linguistic explorations of animal interiority, which together create a nuanced framework for representing nonhuman experience. Allan Burns argues that "[w]ithout an interest in the minds of other animals, empathy cannot exist. Without empathy, ethics cannot exist."<sup>22</sup> However, I suggest that empathy and the examination of ethics need not depend solely on access to an animal's mind or narration. Instead, visceral and more 'surface-level' engagements with animal bodies—attending to their physicality and actions—offer equally compelling pathways to foster empathy. Depictions of external, corporeal realities with gestures toward interiority or portrayals of actual interiority are the devices that contribute to the multifaceted term 'animal communication,' which bridges the gap between human and nonhuman perspectives. Central to my figuration is the understanding of genre as a communicative tool that shapes how each text performs animal communication. The term 'communication' reflects this function, acknowledging that genre operates not only as a mechanism for expressing narrative expectations but also as a "rhetorical" force and a site of "social action."<sup>23</sup> As John Frow explains, genre is a means through which "texts seek to control the uncertainty of communication ... by building in figures of itself, models of how it should be read."<sup>24</sup> Frow further elaborates that "genres channel strategic responses to a situation; they are 'typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations,'" emphasising their dynamic relationship with cultural and social contexts.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Carolyn Miller characterises genre as "a rhetorical means for mediating private intention and social exigence," highlighting its role in negotiating individual expression with collective expectations.<sup>26</sup> Together, these perspectives situate genre not as a static framework but as a transformative, dialogic structure that shapes the ethical and relational dimensions of a text. My choice of

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<sup>22</sup> Allan Burns, "Extensions of Vision: The Representation of Non-Human Points of View," *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature* 38, no. 4 (2002): 348, ProQuest.

<sup>23</sup> Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70, no. 2 (1984): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335638409383686>.

<sup>24</sup> John Frow, *Genre*, rev. ed. (Routledge, 2015) 4, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315777351>.

<sup>25</sup> Frow, *Genre*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Miller, "Genre as Social Action," 163.

the term ‘communication’ also draws on its etymological root in the Latin *communicare*, meaning ‘to share.’<sup>27</sup> This emphasis on sharing highlights reciprocal interactions between species, underscoring the ethical dimensions of communication. My analysis shows that Australian writers most often deploy animal communication to think through crucial issues of violence and care in order to generate new ethical frameworks in a time of climate crisis.

The hyper-contemporary Australian novels chosen for analysis in this thesis are Robbie Arnott’s *Limberlost* (2022), Erin Hurtle’s *The Octopus and I* (2020), Charlotte McConaghy’s *Once There Were Wolves* (2021), Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country* (2020), and Chris Flynn’s *Mammoth* (2020).<sup>28</sup> Neither McConaghy’s nor Flynn’s novels are set in Australia but they share with the other works and contemporary Australian literature more broadly a preoccupation with colonialism and capitalism as systems that exploit and harm people, animals, and the environment. They also exemplify Australian literary transnationalism, in which local narratives intersect with global ecological and socio-political concerns.<sup>29</sup> In this way, my selected novels reflect how Australian literature is positioning itself within a global literary context.<sup>30</sup> In my readings of these novels, I extend discussions within literary animal studies by arguing that contemporary Australian writers are responding to calls for literary portrayals that respect the authenticity of animal experiences, foster ethical interactions, and cultivate empathy through their unique narrative approaches to animal communication. By linking my focus on animal communication to a broader examination of genre as a communicative tool, I unite two significant scholarly conversations: the representation of animals in literature, and the role of genre in addressing the complexities of climate crisis. I argue that a novel like Arnott’s *Limberlost*, a traditional realist Bildungsroman, is just as effective, albeit different, in its presentation of animal communication as a speculative work like McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*. These five writers not only explore human-animal relationships but also demonstrate how different deployments of genre can offer innovative responses to the intertwined crises of climate change and ecological degradation, facilitating ethical and empathetic engagements with the nonhuman world.

Australian literature has long been interested in climate and the environment, with Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb’s *Hearts and Minds: Creative Australians and the Environment*, C. A. Cranston and Robert

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<sup>27</sup> “Communication” in the Oxford English Dictionary, accessed November 23, 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/communication\\_n?tab=etymology](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/communication_n?tab=etymology).

<sup>28</sup> Robbie Arnott, *Limberlost* (Text Publishing, 2022); Erin Hurtle, *The Octopus and I* (Allen & Unwin, 2020); Charlotte McConaghy, *Once There Were Wolves* (Penguin, 2021); Laura Jean McKay, *The Animals in That Country* (Scribe, 2020); Chris Flynn, *Mammoth* (University of Queensland Press, 2020).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Giles argues that Australian literature is shaped by a dynamic interplay between national and transnational forces and emphasises that transnationalism should be understood as a critical method rather than a fixed cultural form. He notes that Australian literature reflects both a resistance to, and engagement with, globalising influences, offering a productive lens to analyse works that intersect with larger ecological, colonial, and capitalist concerns. This perspective aligns with the ways Australian literary studies have been enriched through interdisciplinary approaches, encompassing broader social and political dimensions, such as the legacies of colonialism and environmental exploitation. See Paul Giles, “Transnationalism and National Literatures: The Case of Australia,” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* 15, no. 3 (2015): 1–7.

<sup>30</sup> Bill Ashcroft writes: “I would see this as at least the first way in which Australian literature may be read in a world context through its shared response to, and transformation of, the various dominating discourses of imperial control.” See Bill Ashcroft, “Beyond the Nation: Australian Literature as World Literature,” in *Scenes of Reading: Is Australian Literature a World Literature?*, ed. Robert Dixon and Brigid Rooney (Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, 2013), 35.

Zeller's *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers*, Deborah Jordan's survey, *Climate Change Narratives in Australian Fiction* and Tony Hughes-d'Aeth's chapter "Australian Fiction in the Anthropocene" in *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel* providing insight into this engagement.<sup>31</sup> These studies discuss foundational works like George Turner's *The Sea and the Summer* (1987) and the contributions of authors such as Alexis Wright, Tim Winton, and James Bradley.<sup>32</sup> Recent novels like Mireille Juchau's *The World Without Us* (2015), Jennifer Mills's *Dyschronia* (2018), Richard Flanagan's *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams* (2020), and Winton's latest novel *Juice* (2024) illustrate the evolution of Australian climate-engaged fiction and its diverse narrative forms.<sup>33</sup> Mills explores "the ruination of the landscape" as an expression of "the colonial project and capitalism," Flanagan "expresses horror and frustration at the ongoing destruction of the natural world," and Winton adopts a post-apocalyptic lens for addressing the "era of climate catastrophe."<sup>34</sup> The post-2020 period, shaped by events like the Black Summer bushfires and the Covid-19 pandemic, has intensified Australian literary responses to interconnected crises of climate change, habitat destruction, and their impact on human and nonhuman life. The bushfires, grouped with the extreme fires in South America, Canada, and the United States, have been described as "the smoking gun of climate change."<sup>35</sup> Danielle Celermajer and Blanche Verlie emphasise how the fires—which displaced or killed three billion animals—and the pandemic underscored the urgency of addressing the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health.<sup>36</sup> In response, Australian publishing has embraced climate-engaged fiction, reflecting broader global trends.<sup>37</sup> Between 2011 and 2021, the number of books on climate change grew exponentially, further accelerating after 2023.<sup>38</sup> This growth challenges the notion that "climate stories don't sell" and reflects a social shift where readers seek narratives addressing the existential anxieties

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<sup>31</sup> Michael Pollak and Margaret MacNabb, *Hearts and Minds: Creative Australians and the Environment* (Hale and Iremonger, 2000); C. A. Cranston and Robert Zeller, *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers* (Rodopi, 2007); Deborah Jordan, *Climate Change Narratives in Australian Fiction* (Monash University, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4225/03/573BCD3D0A504>; Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, "Australian Fiction in the Anthropocene," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Australian Novel*, ed. Nicholas Birns and Louis Klee (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 289–304, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009083409>.

<sup>32</sup> George Turner, *The Sea and Summer* (Faber & Faber, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> A selection of climate-engaged fiction published in the last ten years includes: James Bradley, *Clade* (Penguin, 2015); Charlotte Wood, *The Natural Way of Things* (Allen & Unwin, 2015); Sally Abbott, *Closing Down* (Hachette, 2017); Alice Robinson, *The Glad Shout* (Affirm Press, 2019); Kate Mildenhall, *The Mother Fault* (Simon & Schuster, 2020); Robbie Arnott, *The Rain Heron* (Text Publishing, 2020); Charlotte McConaghy, *Migrations* (Flatiron Books, 2020); Briohny Doyle, *Echolalia* (Penguin, 2021); and Clare Moleta, *Unsheltered* (Simon & Schuster, 2021).

<sup>34</sup> James Bradley, "Dyschronia by Jennifer Mills," review of *Dyschronia*, by Jennifer Mills, *Australian Book Review*, March 2018; James Ley, "A rising scream: An essay on the metaphysics of love," review of *The Living Sea of Waking Dreams*, by Richard Flanagan, *Australian Book Review*, November 2020; Paul Giles, "Schooled in doubleness: Tim Winton's enthralling new novel," review of *Juice*, by Tim Winton, *Australian Book Review*, November 2024.

<sup>35</sup> Hamish Clarke and Sarah Harris, "Climate change is supercharging the world's wildfires," *Pursuit*, accessed November 10, 2024, <https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/climate-change-is-supercharging-the-worlds-wildfires>.

<sup>36</sup> Danielle Celermajer, *Summertime: Reflections on a Vanishing Future* (Penguin, 2021); Verlie writes, "[s]imilarly to scientific approaches, social constructionism erases human embodiment and considers humans to be onlookers or inventors of climate rather than intimately enmeshed within its living material fluxes." See Blanche Verlie, *Learning to Live with Climate Change: From Anxiety to Transformation* (Routledge, 2022), 4; Thierry Lefrançois et al., "After 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic, translating One Health into action is urgent," *The Lancet (British Edition)* 401, no. 10378 (2023): 789–794, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(22\)01840-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01840-2); Jonathan Chan and Sony Salzman, "As COVID-19 continues, experts warn of next pandemic likely to come from animals," *ABC News*, Sep 10, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/covid-19-continues-experts-warn-pandemic-animals/story?id=72755696>.

<sup>37</sup> "The bigger picture: Australian books respond to climate change," *Books and Publishing*, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://www.booksandpublishing.com.au/articles/2021/09/29/194036/the-bigger-picture-australian-books-respond-to-climate-change/>.

<sup>38</sup> Ali Serim, "The state of climate change book publishing," *The Times of Israel*, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-state-of-climate-change-book-publishing/>.

of a warming planet.<sup>39</sup> Initiatives like literary prizes and targeted publishing strategies underscore the mainstreaming of climate-engaged fiction, with both independent and traditional publishers contributing to its rise.<sup>40</sup>

My thesis examines five contemporary Australian novels that represent a cross-section of literature bridging environmental ethics, animal studies, and literary innovation in the context of climate crisis. Spanning literary realism and speculative fiction, these works position animals at the centre of their narratives and exemplify the diverse genres and narrative strategies employed by Australian authors. They also reflect a balance of emerging and established voices, including debut authors like Hortle and McKay and established figures like Arnott and McConaghy, whose earlier works also address climate concerns. Rather than being definitive examples, these novels demonstrate how Australian writers engage with climate crisis through animal-focused narratives. The range of publishers—Text Publishing, Allen & Unwin, Penguin, Scribe Publications, and UQP (University of Queensland Press)—further accentuates the breadth of interest in this form of climate-engaged fiction. These works illustrate the ongoing evolution of Australian literature in response to escalating environmental challenges.

Hyper-contemporary Australian literature increasingly recognises that discussions about climate change on this continent must address the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism.<sup>41</sup> The five novels analysed in this thesis, all written by settler authors, illustrate how issues of ethics, violence, care, and climate change intersect with colonial histories. Examining works by settler writers allows for an understanding of how these authors navigate their position within colonial structures and engage with ethical questions related to ongoing colonial legacies, non-indigenous belonging, and relationships to land and animals. Two of the novels are written by Tasmanian authors and are set in Tasmania, the site of the most famous animal extinction caused by colonialism—the extinction of the thylacine.<sup>42</sup> In Australia, the Black Summer bushfires highlighted tensions around land use and the neglect of First Nations fire management practices, which have been historically marginalised.<sup>43</sup> Jack Kirne and Emily Potter critique the perception of non-Indigenous Australian climate fiction as “new” and progressive, arguing that while these works claim to

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<sup>39</sup> Melissa Jun Rowley, “A New Era of Climate-Driven Storytelling Is Here And Companies Should Jump On Board,” *Rolling Stone*, Sep 11, 2024, <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture-council/articles/new-era-climate-driven-storytelling-here-companies-should-jump-board-1235098827/>.

<sup>40</sup> Tori Tsui, “Why a new literary prize for climate fiction will make a difference,” *New Scientist*, accessed October 4, 2024, <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg26234913-200-why-a-new-literary-prize-for-climate-fiction-will-make-a-difference/>.

<sup>41</sup> Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013) is an example of how Australian literature links anthropogenic climate change with the enduring effects of colonisation. Wright’s narrative situates Aboriginal country as sentient and inextricably linked with Indigenous materialisms, challenging anthropocentric and colonial paradigms. Alison Ravenscroft argues that Wright’s fiction invites non-Indigenous readers to approach Indigenous perspectives with humility and estrangement. She positions these works as vital interventions in global ecological and postcolonial dialogues. See Alison Ravenscroft, “Strange Weather: Indigenous Materialisms, New Materialism, and Colonialism,” *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5, no. 3 (2018): 353–370, <https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2018.9>.

<sup>42</sup> For the history of the thylacine see Robert Paddle, *The Last Tasmanian Tiger: The History and Extinction of the Thylacine* (Cambridge University Press, 2000). Numerous creative works have been written in response to the thylacine’s extinction. See Julia Leigh, *The Hunter* (Penguin, 1999); Louis Nowra, *Into That Forest* (Allen & Unwin, 2013); Sarah Kanake, *Sing Fox to Me* (Affirm Press, 2016); and James Bradley, *Ghost Species* (Penguin, 2020). On the AustLit database, ‘thylacine’ returns 244 results.

<sup>43</sup> B. Williamson, F. Markham, and J. K. Weir, “Aboriginal peoples and the response to the 2019–2020 bushfires,” *Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research*, no. 134 (2020): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.25911/5e7882623186c>.

break from past harmful narratives, climate-engaged fiction “by non-indigenous writers maintains the settler-colonial condition.”<sup>44</sup> They suggest that climate novels often reassert colonial ideas of land ownership and entitlement, and weaponise the language of climate crisis to reinforce existing narratives of possession and belonging. Unlike Kirne and Potter’s examples, the novels analysed in this thesis attempt to grapple directly with the relationship between settler colonialism and climate change. My focus is on how settler writers are growing increasingly conscious of the need to address the continuing presence of settler colonialism and its role in climate crisis. My thesis assesses the strength of these authors’ different attempts in their novels.

Many Australian texts engage with animals, reflecting a long literary tradition in which authors explore human identity in correspondence with animals, the effects of colonisation on animals, friendship with animals, and ecological coexistence. Colonial and contemporary engagements were preceded by the storytelling traditions of Australia’s First Nations peoples. Dreamtime stories position animals not just as characters but as ancestral beings with spiritual, ecological, and moral significance. As Langaliki Robin et al. write, many Aboriginal groups in central and western Australia refer to their “Dreaming Law and Songlines as Tjukurpa ... [which] encompasses ancestral stories that crisscross the land, containing knowledge, responsibilities and cultural Law.”<sup>45</sup> These narratives shape “relationships between people, places, plants and animals,” unfolding in “nonlinear continuous time and often over large areas.”<sup>46</sup> In the settler tradition, examples of animal-engaged fiction span Australian literary history, from iconic early texts to more recent and widely recognised examples: Banjo Patterson’s poem “The Man from Snowy River” (1895), Henry Lawson’s short story “The Loaded Dog” (1901), Frank Dalby Davison’s novel *Man-Shy* (1931), Colin Thiele’s novel *Storm Boy* (1964), Patricia Wrightson’s novel *The Nargun and the Stars* (1973), Eva Hornung’s novel *Dog Boy* (2009), and Favel Parrett’s novel *Past the Shallows* (2011).<sup>47</sup> Scholars contributing to the study of animals in Australian literature include Clare Archer-Lean, Lucy Neave, Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Donna Mazza, and Rachel Fetherston.<sup>48</sup> Building on this tradition and critical history, my

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<sup>44</sup> Jack Kirne and Emily Potter, “Settler Belonging in Crisis: Non-Indigenous Australian Literary Climate Fiction and the Challenge of ‘The New,’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 30, no. 4 (2023): 955, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isab085>.

<sup>45</sup> Langaliki Robin et al., “How Dreaming and Indigenous Ancestral Stories Are Central to Nature Conservation: Perspectives from Walalkara Indigenous Protected Area, Australia,” *Ecological Management & Restoration* 23, no. 1 (2022): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/emr.12528>; D. James, “Tjukurpa time,” in *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*, ed. A. McGrath and M. A. Jebb (ANU Press and Aboriginal History Inc, 2015), 33–45.

<sup>46</sup> Robin et al., “Dreaming and Indigenous Ancestral Stories,” 44.

<sup>47</sup> A. B. ‘Banjo’ Patterson, *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses* (Sydney University Press, 2009); Henry Lawson, “The Loaded Dog,” in *Joe Wilson and His Mates* (Sydney University Press, 2008); Frank Dalby, *Man-Shy* (Angus and Robertson, 2010); Colin Thiele, *Storm Boy* (New Holland Publishers, 2004); Patricia Wrightson, *The Nargun and the Stars* (University of Queensland Press, 2008), Eva Hornung, *Dog Boy* (The Text Publishing Company, 2016), Favel Parrett, *Past the Shallows* (Hachette Australia, 2011).

<sup>48</sup> Clare Archer-Lean, “Revisiting the ‘Problem’ of Anthropomorphism through Ceridwen Dovey’s *Only the Animals* (2014),” *Australian Literary Studies* 34, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.20314/als.80ac7927cd>; Clare Archer-Lean, “Animal Presence: Problems and Potential in Recent Australian Fiction,” in *The Routledge Companion to Australian Literature*, ed. Jessica Gildersleeve (Routledge, 2021), 282–91, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003124160-36>; Lucy Neave, “‘The Distance between Them’: Sheep, Women, and Violence in Evie Wyld’s *All the Birds, Singing* and Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies*,” *Antipodes* 30, no. 1 (2016): 125–136, <https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.30.1.0125>; Lucy Neave, “The ‘Unimaginable Border’ and Bare Life in Eva Hornung’s *Dog Boy*,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no. 2 (2019): 243–256, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989417692389>; Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, *Animals in the Anthropocene: Critical Perspectives on Non-Human Futures* (Sydney University Press, 2015); Fiona

thesis examines contemporary Australian novels published in the aftermath of the Black Summer bushfires and the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on texts that engage with the climate crisis and the ways this awareness shapes authors' approaches to the representational and ethical challenges of human-animal relations.

Hyper-contemporary Australian literature is also marked by a pronounced attention to genre, as writers engage with discussions regarding the capacities and limitations of realism in addressing climate change and specifically the nonhuman. Robbie Arnott expresses his intention to represent animals "as they are, not what we want them to be."<sup>49</sup> Charlotte McConaghy emphasises her commitment to depicting wolves as distinct individuals, drawing on extensive research into their personalities and behaviours to portray them as "characters in their own right," psychologically complete and firmly grounded in ecological and scientific realities.<sup>50</sup> Erin Hortle, Laura Jean McKay, and Chris Flynn, too, are overtly conscious of, and respond to, the debate about realism's capabilities, as evidenced in their 2021 *Griffith Review* conversation about the complexities and challenges of representing animal perspectives in their novels.<sup>51</sup> Hortle, McKay, and Flynn insist that anthropomorphism need not reduce animals to mere symbols. Their reflection directly engages with how realism shapes the representations of animals and challenges conventional human-centred storytelling. McKay asks:

what if a tree or a pig isn't a metaphor? What if it's a tree or a pig? What if *that's* the subject that needs discussing? We are increasingly raising very specific questions in our work. So I hope that readers will take a moment to step back, be quiet (hard for us humans!) and really look at other animals. Maybe that animal is a companion. Maybe it's wild. Or what we call a pest. Or not alive anymore—maybe we're wearing it. What happens if we stop and really consider our relationships with them?<sup>52</sup>

Hortle posits that in her novel she implements anthropomorphism consciously yet resists reducing the octopus to a symbol: "I wanted to take that which science had slowed and charted (in this instance, octopus physiology) and compose it into a narrative."<sup>53</sup> She notes that, despite their formal differences, her novel shares with McKay's and Flynn's a commitment to realism:

[o]ur stories are very different, but I think that at the heart of each book is a desire for some kind of realism when it comes to writing these animals' perspectives, and that realism stems

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Probyn-Rapsey and Rowena Lennox, "Feral Violence: The Pelorus Experiment," *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space (Print)* 5, no. 1 (2022): 362–380, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848620976959>; Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, "Animals and Extinction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 100–113; Donna Mazza, "Kangaroos and Predators in Recent Australian Fiction: A Post-Pastoral Reading," *Antipodes* 32, no. 1–2 (2018): 94–108, <https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.32.1-2.0094>; Rachel Fetherston, "'Little Difference between a Carcass and a Corpse': Ecological Crises, the Nonhuman and Settler-Colonial Culpability in Australian Crime Fiction," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* 21, no. 2 (2021): 1–17; Rachel Fetherston, "'Muzzle for the Queen': Settler–Nonhuman Entanglements in Australian Speculative Ecofiction," in *Animals and Science Fiction*, ed. Nora Castle and Giulia Champion (Springer International Publishing, 2024), 111–27, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41695-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41695-8_7).

<sup>49</sup> See Claire Nichols, host, The Book Show, "Robbie Arnott, Fiona McFarlane and Malcolm Knox on wild cats, crime and satire," ABC Listen, October 28, 2024, 54 min., <https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/the-book-show/robbie-arnott-fiona-mcfarlane-malcolm-knox/104411280>.

<sup>50</sup> "Charlotte McConaghy Q&A," Penguin, accessed October 30, 2024, <https://www.penguin.com.au/qa/3112-charlotte-mcconaghy-qa>.

<sup>51</sup> Laura Jean McKay, Erin Hortle, and Chris Flynn, "Animal perspectives: Breaking the language barrier," *Griffith REVIEW*, no. 71 (2021), <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/animal-perspective/>.

<sup>52</sup> McKay et al., "Animal perspectives," emphasis in original.

<sup>53</sup> McKay et al., "Animal perspectives."

from our character-driven approaches, as opposed to notions of animals as symbols. I was trying to understand characters (of all four species), and figure out how to do justice to that understanding, in writing that was sometimes formally experimental and other times less so.<sup>54</sup>

For Hortle, realism means “thinking through the complexities of the animals and telling their stories in a manner that would do their lives some sort of justice.”<sup>55</sup> In the *Griffith Review* conversation, the authors address key questions: “[w]hat if we knew what other animals were saying?,” “[w]hat responsibilities do we carry, as human writers writing other animal speech?,” “[w]hy did you decide to explore these ideas through art in the form of creative writing?,” and “[w]hat do you hope your stories, and these animals, will do now out in the world?”<sup>56</sup> These questions engage with the narrative possibilities of imagining animal experience, the ethics of representation, and the political potential of environmental fiction in our context. Even the writers producing the most speculative fictions—McKay and Flynn—strive to root their portrayals of animals in the realities of those animals as much as possible. This demonstrates a deliberate and informed approach to anthropomorphism, rather than naive simplification. McKay encapsulates this intention in her remarks about representing animal perspectives authentically. Her perspective highlights the broader commitment of contemporary Australian authors to ecological and scientific accuracy, regardless of genre.

### Engaging with Animals and the Development of Literary Animal Studies

As creatures that are bound up in human politics, actions, and narratives, animals link environmental, ethical, and literary concerns. Ethical frameworks must acknowledge the complexity of animal lives and the impact of humans upon them. Animals have become a focal point for examining the Anthropocene—a period defined by human-driven environmental changes—as their suffering makes tangible the abstract, global-scale impact of environmental degradation.<sup>57</sup> Donna Haraway’s concept of “companion species” underscores the agency and distinctiveness of animals, challenging their reduction to symbols or metaphors.<sup>58</sup> Her framework emphasises relationality and ethical accountability, rooted in direct, situated encounters with animals.<sup>59</sup> Haraway argues that ethical engagement emerges through direct, situated encounters, framed by “response,” “respect,” and “responsibility.”<sup>60</sup> The ethical danger, she insists, lies not only in killing but in rendering animals “killable.”<sup>61</sup> Haraway adapts the concept of the “contact zone,” originally coined by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, in which Pratt

<sup>54</sup> McKay et al., “Animal perspectives.”

<sup>55</sup> McKay et al., “Animal perspectives.”

<sup>56</sup> McKay et al., “Animal perspectives.”

<sup>57</sup> In March 2024, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) and the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) voted against officially designating ‘Anthropocene’ as the name for our current epoch. Despite this decision, the term remains influential in cultural discourse. Critics argue that the concept of the Anthropocene reinforces a human-centred perspective. However, my thesis focuses on how novels challenge anthropocentrism; thus, my use of the terms ‘Anthropocene’ and ‘anthropocentrism’ aligns with this focus, highlighting rather than detracting from the critique of human-centred narratives. See “The Anthropocene,” International Union of Geological Sciences, accessed October 4, 2024, [https://www.iugs.org/\\_files/ugd/f1fc07\\_40d1a7ed58de458c9f8f24de5e739663.pdf?index=true](https://www.iugs.org/_files/ugd/f1fc07_40d1a7ed58de458c9f8f24de5e739663.pdf?index=true).

<sup>58</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, 5.

<sup>60</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 19, 36.

<sup>61</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

articulates that ethical engagement is neither static nor detached but emerges through the tangible interactions of “touch” and “regard.”<sup>62</sup> Pratt introduced the term to describe “the space of colonial encounters ... usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”<sup>63</sup> While Pratt’s notion of the contact zone emphasises “co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power,” Haraway extends this concept to her discussions of multispecies relationships.<sup>64</sup> Haraway acknowledges Pratt’s framework, noting its origins in colonial and postcolonial studies and in linguistics, where the term “contact language” refers to improvised languages that emerge among speakers of different native tongues.<sup>65</sup> In Haraway’s understanding of the zone, “touch ramifies and shapes accountability,” where “accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions; these mundane, prosaic things are the result of having truck with each other.”<sup>66</sup> Haraway directs us to the lived reality of engaging with animals, recognising the “knots” of entanglement “with actual animals and people looking back at each other, sticky with all their muddled histories.”<sup>67</sup> Her theorisation provides a foundation for understanding animal communication as a reciprocal and embodied process that accentuates animal agency. By framing ethical engagement as rooted in “touch” and “regard” within the “contact zone,” she highlights the necessity of recognising animals’ distinctiveness. Throughout the thesis I return to Haraway’s notion of the “contact zone”—moments of entangled encounter, accountability, and touch—as a key framework for understanding how these novels stage interspecies communication.<sup>68</sup> This approach informs my own framework, which positions animal communication not as a unidirectional or interpretive act by humans but as an interactive and relational process. Drawing on Haraway’s insistence on accountability and the lived reality of interspecies entanglements, I propose that animal communication emerges in moments of mutual presence and response. Animal communication is thus an ethical practice that recognises animals as active participants in their interactions with humans.

Kari Weil echoes the importance of rethinking human-animal relationships, arguing that modernism’s tendency to define the “human” in opposition to the “animal” has been disrupted, especially within postmodernism.<sup>69</sup> Weil and Lori Gruen critique the shortcomings of mainstream animal ethics, particularly those rooted in utilitarian and rights-based theories, and explore how feminist care theorists have challenged these dominant perspectives by incorporating affect, emotion, and relationality into ethical discussions about animals.<sup>70</sup> Their critique of “saming” and “othering” as binary approaches to understanding animals

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<sup>62</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (Routledge, 1992), 6; Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>63</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.

<sup>64</sup> Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 216.

<sup>66</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 216.

<sup>67</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 41–42.

<sup>68</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>69</sup> Kari Weil, *Thinking Animals: Why Animal Studies Now?* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 23.

<sup>70</sup> Lori Gruen and Kari Weil, “Animal Others-Editors’ Introduction,” *Hypatia* 27, no. 3 (2012): 477–87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2012.01296>.

underscores the interconnectedness of these practices, which either emphasise animals' similarity to humans or alienates them as fundamentally other:

[s]aming and othering are related to each other as practices derived from the anthropocentric and often patriarchal frames through which we see the world. Insofar as nonhuman animals have been locked within our faulty representations of them, we can see the recent turn to animals as responding to a desire to find something outside of representation itself or to locate those who might resist our flawed linguistic systems. On this account, it is we humans who are engaged by our representations and the world they enforce.<sup>71</sup>

For Weil and Gruen, ethical engagement with animals requires us to “acknowledge the limitations of our perspectives, our language, and the resources of our own minds, but then take the risk of making judgments and taking action for the sake of all animals, ourselves included.”<sup>72</sup> They point to how the ways we think, speak, and write about animals are limited by the language and conceptual frameworks we inherit. My analysis of animal communication echoes Weil and Gruen's acknowledgement of the limits of representing animals. Each author in this study “takes the risk” of representing animals by employing communicative strategies—as shaped by their use of genre—to navigate the complex terrain of portraying animals as both similar to (“saming”) and different from (“othering”) humans.<sup>73</sup>

Central to discussions about cultural engagement with animals is John Berger's influential essay, “Why Look at Animals?”<sup>74</sup> Berger argues that without comprehending the mutuality involved in human-animal relationships, as crystallised through the mirrored gaze when human and animal are seen by the other, humans experience a type of “solitude.”<sup>75</sup> This “solitude” aligns with biologist Edward O. Wilson's term for our current epoch, the “Ereozoic Era—the Age of Loneliness,” which suggests a world altered by the rapid disappearance of species due to habitat destruction, climate change, and human encroachment on habitats.<sup>76</sup> Berger reminds us that by objectifying animals, we not only diminish their existence, but also sever our own connection to them, thereby isolating ourselves from the mutual relationship we once shared. Citing the historic use of “anthropomorphism [which] was [once] integral to the relation between man and animal and was an expression of their proximity,” Berger highlights that now:

animals are always the observed. The fact that they can observe us has lost all significance. They are the objects of our ever-extending knowledge. What we know about them is an index of our power, and thus an index of what separates us from them. The more we know, the further away they are.<sup>77</sup>

Berger writes of both physical, psychological, and social distance, a consequence of human “power” that seeks to exploit rather than commune.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Gruen and Weil, “Animal Others-Editors' Introduction,” 480.

<sup>72</sup> Gruen and Weil, “Animal Others-Editors' Introduction,” 482.

<sup>73</sup> Gruen and Weil, “Animal Others-Editors' Introduction,” 482.

<sup>74</sup> John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” in *About Looking* (Pantheon, 1980), 1–28.

<sup>75</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Erêmos* is the Ancient Greek word for ‘lonely, solitary, desert, waste.’ See Edward O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (W. W. Norton, 2006), 175.

<sup>77</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 14.

<sup>78</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 14.

Jacques Derrida's reflections add a further dimension to Berger's discussion of the animal gaze.<sup>79</sup> In the account of his cat observing his naked body, Derrida considers how the animal's gaze represents "the point of view of the absolute other" and portrays the cat's "absolute alterity."<sup>80</sup> For Derrida, the cat's gaze reveals the limits of human understanding and exposes the ways in which humans construct their own sense of self through the recognition of otherness. In its unflinching and unknowable presence, the cat's gaze confronts the human observer with a perspective that is entirely outside of human experience. Derrida's exploration of "absolute alterity" resonates with Berger's emphasis on the loss of significance in animals' ability to observe humans.<sup>81</sup> However, where Berger sees a loss of connection through objectification, Derrida emphasises the ethical possibilities that arise when the human is confronted by the ungraspable otherness of the animal gaze. Here, Gruen and Weil would likely argue that while Derrida's concept of the animal as the "absolute other" exposes the limitations of human understanding, it still risks reinforcing a binary of othering that separates animals from humans, rather than embracing essential relational and affective dimensions of ethical engagement.<sup>82</sup> I draw on Haraway, Berger, Weil, and Gruen's critical insights to argue that each novel's animal communication attempts to challenge anthropocentrism through attention to both the knowability and unknowability of animals. Specifically, this thesis builds on Haraway's ideas about touch and contact with animals, as well as Berger's concept of "our ever-extending knowledge" and the tension between proximity and distance, by examining how animal communication serves as a narrative bridge between humans and animals.<sup>83</sup> Through analysing five novels, this thesis explores how different generic modes shape interspecies dialogues and the representation of how animals gaze back at humans. In these narratives, moments of encounter between human and animal demand ethical reorientation, challenging dominant anthropocentric paradigms that separate humans from animals, emphasising the importance of relational awareness and interspecies connections.

Literary representations of the relationship between humans and animals have become a significant area of scholarly interest over the last three decades. Literary animal studies, a branch of ecocriticism, challenges the anthropocentric perspectives that have shaped much of Western literature. It critiques the reduction of animals to symbols or resources and calls for more nuanced representations. This shift aligns with growing recognition of the Anthropocene as an epoch defined by human-driven climate change. The field examines how literature navigates human-nonhuman relationships, the complexities of anthropomorphism, and how critical anthropomorphism seeks to recognise animal specificity and agency. As defined by ethologist Gordon Burghardt, critical anthropomorphism is an approach that combines contextual knowledge and careful observation of animal behaviour to generate ideas that enhance understanding and predict outcomes

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<sup>79</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet (Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>80</sup> Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 6.

<sup>81</sup> Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 6.

<sup>82</sup> Gruen and Weil, "Animal Others-Editors' Introduction," 482.

<sup>83</sup> Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," 14.

of human interventions with animals.<sup>84</sup> In 2009, Cary Wolfe recognised the “unique demands” that animals bring to literary studies:

[r]ather than treat the animal as primarily a theme, trope, metaphor, analogy, representation, or sociological datum (in which, say, relations of class, or race, or gender get played out and negotiated through the symbolic currency of animality and species difference), scholars in animal studies ... now appear to be challenged not only by the discourses and conceptual schemata that have shaped our understanding of and relations to animals but also by the specificity of nonhuman animals, their nongeneric nature.<sup>85</sup>

Focusing on “the specificity of nonhuman animals” and thus challenging anthropocentric assumptions about agency and subjectivity has become central to recent work in animal studies.<sup>86</sup> This perspective advocates for understanding animals as beings unto themselves and integral participants in ecological systems. Philip Armstrong traces humanity’s increasing awareness of the fragility of the natural world, highlighting human attempts to dominate and manage nature as fundamentally rooted in the anxieties of modernity.<sup>87</sup> This recognition of fragility reflects the “claustrophobic and denatured environments” that both humans and animals now occupy.<sup>88</sup> Armstrong writes:

[a]ll the human structures that circumscribe animal life—farms, zoological parks, slaughterhouses, fisheries, nature reserves—become sites for scientific manipulation ..., Frankensteinian workshops ..., spaces created by and for the purpose of experimentation with the organic world.<sup>89</sup>

Could literature itself be considered one of these sites of “experimentation” that, rather than “circumscrib[ing] animal life,” actively probes the conditions of the Anthropocene and the dynamics of human-animal relationships?<sup>90</sup> Whereas Armstrong critiques modernity’s promises of progress and control through sites that confine animals, through narrative and formal techniques literature can serve as a space for ethical reflection and experimentation, inviting readers to reconsider the complexities of human-animal relations in the industrialised world.

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<sup>84</sup> Burghardt defines critical anthropomorphism as an approach that combines “various sources of information ... including: natural history, our perceptions, intuitions, feelings, careful behavior descriptions, identifying with the animal, optimization models, previous studies and so forth in order to generate ideas that may prove useful in gaining understanding and the ability to predict outcomes of planned (experimental) and unplanned interventions.” When applying this approach, detailed knowledge of an animal’s behaviour and context is crucial, as illustrated by Burghardt’s experience with selecting and testing snakes based on their behaviour and defensive traits. See Gordon M. Burghardt, “Cognitive Ethology and Critical Anthropomorphism: A Snake with Two Heads and Hognose Snakes That Play Dead,” in *Cognitive Ethology*, ed. Carolyn A. Ristau (Psychology Press, 1991), 73, 77, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203761700-6>.

<sup>85</sup> Cary Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human: ‘Animal Studies’ and the Humanities,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124, no. 2 (2009): 567, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.564>.

<sup>86</sup> Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human,” 567; In their introduction to *Literary Animal Studies and the Climate Crisis*, Sune Borkfelt and Matthias Stephan cite Haiyan Lee who suggests that literature has the potential to cultivate a “new ecological imagination” that transcends both naive anthropocentrism and extreme posthumanism. By focusing on “particular creatures, particular distresses, and particularistic bonds of affection and care,” Lee’s theorisation echoes Wolfe’s call for attention to the “specificity of ... animals.” See Sune Borkfelt and Matthias Stephan, “Narrating Entangled Vulnerabilities in an Age of Global Crises,” in *Literary Animal Studies and the Climate Crisis* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 1; Haiyan Lee, “Through Thick and Thin: The Romance of Species in the Anthropocene,” *International Communication of Chinese Culture* 5, no. 2 (2018): 156, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11020-7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-11020-7_1).

<sup>87</sup> Philip Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity* (Routledge, 2008), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203004562>.

<sup>88</sup> Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*, 170.

<sup>89</sup> Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*, 181.

<sup>90</sup> Armstrong, *What Animals Mean in the Fiction of Modernity*, 181.

Susan McHugh provides a foundational framework for understanding how narratives can transcend species boundaries. Her exploration of animal subjectivity and agency has influenced my view of animal communication as a means of portraying animals not as passive beings but as active participants in the narrative. McHugh argues that “animal narratives ... appeal to the power of affect to defy the regimes” that divide human and nonhuman lives.<sup>91</sup> She counters Berger’s view that modernity has erased animal presence, underscoring the “intimate caesura” between humans and animals as a “productive and never absolute intervention.”<sup>92</sup> McHugh posits that literature finds itself at a crucial juncture, facing the “critical peril” of analysing anthropocentric frameworks while also embracing a “creative imperative to elaborate new forms of agency.”<sup>93</sup> Complementing McHugh’s focus on the human-animal divide, Anat Pick foregrounds the concept of vulnerability, illustrating how acknowledging the shared corporeality of both human and nonhuman beings can enhance a deeper understanding of interspecies relationships.<sup>94</sup> Pick diverges from Cary Wolfe’s posthumanist focus on critiquing *internal* constructs of human subjectivity and species discourse by instead concentrating on the “*external*” material realities of living bodies, grounding her analysis in physicality rather than more abstract notions of self or subjectivity.<sup>95</sup> Pick examines the “corporeal reality of living bodies,” both human and nonhuman, to develop both “radical aesthetics” and “radical ethics” that respond to the human-animal divide.<sup>96</sup> Drawing on Simone Weil’s concept of vulnerability, Pick highlights the importance of recognising the shared corporeality of all living bodies. Noting that “[a]nimals have traditionally been perceived as pure necessity, material bodies pitted against human mindfulness and soulfulness,” Pick emphasises that both human and nonhuman animals are “creaturely”—“material, temporal, and vulnerable.”<sup>97</sup> Pick’s conceptualisation of ‘creaturely vulnerability’ is echoed by Weil in her exploration of “fleshy vulnerability” as a concept exposing that which “lies beneath the metaphors and similes” in literature.<sup>98</sup> Both Pick and Weil highlight that understanding the shared physical vulnerability between humans and animals fosters a deeper ethical engagement with nonhuman life. Pick and Weil’s theorisations of vulnerability are central to my analysis of *Once There Were Wolves*, as McConaghy mobilises embodied empathy to highlight both human and animal vulnerability. This framework also shapes my reading of McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*, in which multisensory animal communication is constructed through conditions of vulnerability.

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<sup>91</sup> Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating across Species Lines* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>92</sup> McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 8.

<sup>93</sup> McHugh, *Animal Stories*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (Columbia University Press, 2011), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/pick14786>.

<sup>95</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 3, emphasis in original.

<sup>96</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 3.

<sup>97</sup> Pick, *Creaturely Poetics*, 4, 5.

<sup>98</sup> Kari Weil, “Afterword: The Animal in the Mirror,” in *Beastly Modernisms*, ed. Saskia McCracken and Alex Goody (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 289, <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474498029.003.0017>; David Herman also employs the term “creatural” to highlight shared physicality, focusing on co-existence and “relational ties.” See David Herman, *Creatural Fictions: Human-Animal Relationships in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-51811-8>.

As Timothy Clark discusses, anthropocentrism can obscure the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, reinforcing a view of nature as a resource for human use.<sup>99</sup> This critique is foundational to scholars like Kate Rigby who link anthropocentrism to modern ecological crises, such as species extinction and climate change.<sup>100</sup> These shifts reflect a broader trend in literary animal studies, as Sarah E. McFarland argues, towards challenging the human/animal binary by considering animals as subjects.<sup>101</sup> Gruen identifies a deeper problem in what she describes as “*arrogant* anthropocentrism,” the human tendency to distance ourselves from other species.<sup>102</sup> She emphasises the need to recognise nonhuman agency to challenge this attitude. My thesis builds on these scholarly insights by analysing animal communication as a key vehicle for representing animal subjectivity, agency, “particularity,” and vulnerability.<sup>103</sup> Drawing from the work of McFarland, Gruen, and David Herman, I argue that animal communication enacts a shift beyond anthropocentrism, allowing animals to emerge as active participants in relationships defined by mutual vulnerability and care.<sup>104</sup> Through this lens, animal communication contributes to more nuanced and ethically informed representations of animals in literature.

### Animal Communication

My focus on animal communication is timely, as examining how writers attend to nonhuman agency has become a crucial framework for challenging anthropocentrism in contemporary literary studies. Scholars in the field are increasingly exploring how attention to the expressive capacities of animals can disrupt human-centred perspectives, reimagine the boundaries between human and nonhuman life, and conjure ethical relations. Mario Ortiz Robles delves into the philosophical implications of animal voice, suggesting that literature serves as a platform for reimagining animals’ capacity to communicate meaningfully, even if that communication eludes human comprehension. He grapples with the question of whether animals can truly “speak,” engaging with philosophical inquiries such as those posed by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who he says “goes so far as to argue that even if a lion could speak, we would not understand what it said, so different are human and animal as to make the bridging of the ontological chasm that separates us an impossible as well as a pointless task.”<sup>105</sup> Robles draws on philosopher Jacques Rancière’s concept of politics, which redefines political activity as an effort to alter the “distribution of the perceptible”—that is, the division of what is visible and audible in society.<sup>106</sup> Rancière suggests that politics involves “introducing new objects and subjects onto a common stage,” making “audible as speaking beings those who were previously only

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<sup>99</sup> Clark, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment*, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Louise Hutchings Westling, *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 213–217.

<sup>101</sup> Westling, *The Cambridge Companion*, 153. See also Catherine Parry, *Other Animals in Twenty-First Century Fiction* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-55932-2>.

<sup>102</sup> Lori Gruen, *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for Our Relationships with Animals* (Lantern Books, 2015), 22, my emphasis.

<sup>103</sup> Gruen, *Entangled Empathy*, 26.

<sup>104</sup> Herman, *Creatural Fictions*, 3.

<sup>105</sup> Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (Routledge, 2016), 12, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880389>.

<sup>106</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144.

heard as noisy animals.”<sup>107</sup> Robles extends this concept by questioning how animals, often relegated to the category of “noisy animals,” might be transformed within this reconfigured perceptual distribution to make them “audible as speaking beings.”<sup>108</sup> He writes:

animals of course are already audible *in* literature, if we would only care to listen. The copious catalogue of howls, barks, meows, growls, purrs, chirps, warbles, tweets, and the many other audible voices of the ‘noisy animals’ that inhabit [the literary archive] suggest that in order to make animals count politically, we must first reconfigure the distribution of the perceptible *within* literature [which requires] a politics of reading since animals have been speaking in literature from its inception, even if they have not always been audible.<sup>109</sup>

His observation aligns with the central focus of my thesis on the intersection of literature, animal communication, and political visibility. Drawing on Robles’ call for “a politics of reading,” I examine how hyper-contemporary Australian fiction leverages various genres and narrative strategies to create animal communication and elevate the political status of animals, specifically within the context of the modern settler colonial state.<sup>110</sup> As Rebecca Bach illustrates, the appreciation of animal agency and expression is not merely a modern development. In her analysis of nonhuman animal voices in William Baldwin’s *Beware the Cat* (1561), Bach traces how perceptions of animal voices have evolved. She contrasts the Renaissance recognition of animals as sentient beings capable of emotional expression with a post-Cartesian framework that relegated animal sounds to mere instinctual “noises.”<sup>111</sup> Bach notes that in the “creaturely world” of the Renaissance, “voices used to be shared by breathing mortals, and those mortals were identified as ‘living creatures,’ made by God.”<sup>112</sup> In this era, voices were understood as belonging to humans and nonhumans whereas *noises* were the domain of inanimate things. Bach emphasises that animals were once part of a shared vocal realm with humans, highlighting an historic, more inclusive conception of communicative agency. However, an inclusive understanding of nonhuman voice was fundamentally altered by the rise of Cartesian dualism, which narrowed the definition of ‘voice’ to human speech.<sup>113</sup> This shift reflects a broader anthropocentric turn in Western thought, where only humans were seen as possessing true voices capable of rational communication, while nonhuman animals were demoted to the realm of instinctive, non-verbal sounds.

Timothy Baker writes:

[w]hether the animal is presented, in an inherently anthropomorphic way, as a familiar whose shared existence with humans can better help them understand their own lives or as an other who exists outside the sphere of human comprehension . . . , the presence of animals in fiction presents a continual challenge to questions of linguistic representation.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Polity Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>108</sup> Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, 4.

<sup>109</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144, emphasis in original.

<sup>110</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144.

<sup>111</sup> Rebecca Bach, “*Beware the Cat* within a Short History of Human and Nonhuman Animal Voice,” *Textual Practice* 37, no. 7 (2023): 1047, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2223432>.

<sup>112</sup> Bach, “*Beware the Cat*,” 1048.

<sup>113</sup> Bach, “*Beware the Cat*,” 1048.

<sup>114</sup> Timothy C. Baker, *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (Springer International Publishing, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-03880-9>, 1.

I agree with Baker's assertion that certain representations of animals in fiction disrupt conventional human language, as animals communicate in ways that are not easily translatable into human expression. In my analysis, I examine how each author navigates the "continual challenge" of narrativising animals and propose that meeting this challenge is central to what I term animal communication.<sup>115</sup> Clare Archer-Lean also engages with the challenge of anthropomorphism in Australian fiction, particularly in works like Ceridwen Dovey's *Only the Animals* (2014) and Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015).<sup>116</sup> She examines how metaphor and allegory significantly influence the portrayal of animal agency, arguing that while such narratives challenge human exceptionalism, they may still objectify animals as symbols.<sup>117</sup> Given the complexities of anthropomorphism, I incorporate it as a feature of animal communication, acknowledging it not as a reductive device but as part of a multifaceted approach that also encompasses gaze, animal behaviour, and human-animal empathetic relationships.

Scholars of Australian literature have focused on the complex and often contested relationships between humans and animals in the context of colonisation. Much of this work interrogates the intersection of animality, gender, race, and colonialism and highlights the role of animals in shaping Australian identity and in critiquing Western knowledge systems. Archer-Lean examines Carrie Tiffany's *Mateship with Birds* (2012) and employs Josephine Donovan's theorisation of an 'aesthetics of care' to examine interspecies pastoral relationships and animal symbolism as a method for commenting on animality, sexuality, gender, and violence in 1950s Australia.<sup>118</sup> My research overlaps with Archer-Lean's but rather than analysing the socio-cultural implications of animality, my thesis introduces the concept of animal communication to explore animals as communicative subjects in narrative fiction. Lucy Neave explores both female and animal experiences of predation and violence and the comfort derived from human-animal relationships in novels like Evie Wyld's *All the Birds, Singing* (2013), Eva Hornung's *Dog Boy* (2009), and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013).<sup>119</sup> Neave's work addresses the influence of colonialism and critiques Western knowledge systems, issues that I also contend with in my research. My work extends Neave's focus on emotional comfort and the development of empathy in human-animal relationships by examining the ethical implications of such relationships. Specifically, I explore how violence and harm are communicated and experienced by animals and how human-animal relationships challenge and reshape ethical frameworks in a time of ecological crisis. Fiona Probyn-Rapsey's research on colonisation, animal death, extinction, "feral violence," and the intersection of gender and animal studies has extended the field of animal studies in

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<sup>115</sup> Baker, *Writing Animals*, 1.

<sup>116</sup> Archer-Lean, "Revisiting the 'Problem' of Anthropomorphism," 6; Archer-Lean, "Animal Presence," 290.

<sup>117</sup> Archer-Lean, "Revisiting the 'Problem' of Anthropomorphism," 6; Archer-Lean, "Animal Presence," 290.

<sup>118</sup> Clare Archer-Lean, "Figures in Farming: Carrie Tiffany's *Mateship with Birds* (2012) and the Sexual Politics of Animal Figuration," *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture (Australasian Universities Language and Literature Association)* 70, no. 2 (2023): 99–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20512856.2023.2298573>.

<sup>119</sup> Neave, "Sheep, Women, and Violence," 125–136; Neave, "Bare Life in Eva Hornung's *Dog Boy*," 243–256; Lucy Neave, "Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) as 'Crisis Fiction,'" *Textual Practice* 36, no. 9 (2022): 1559–1577, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2021.1977379>; Evie Wyld, *All the Birds, Singing* (Random House, 2013); Hornung, *Dog Boy*; Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (Giramondo, 2013).

Australia.<sup>120</sup> Focusing on dingoes, Probyn-Rapsey explores how ‘species’ is not merely a biological but a cultural construct that shapes social and material relationships and observes how species-based discrimination affects human care for animals.<sup>121</sup> Her work on ferality and the categorisation of animals across different domains—domestic, wild, livestock, pest—provides a foundation for my exploration of animals that exist in multiple, overlapping realms.<sup>122</sup> My research extends current conversations in Australian literary animal studies by conceptualising animal communication as pivotal in reshaping ethical frameworks and challenging dominant narratives of human exceptionalism. By examining how fictional animals convey their experience of violence and harm, I aim to deepen our understanding of the ethical dimensions of human-animal relationships in the context of Australia’s colonial past and ongoing ecological crisis.

Donna Mazza critiques the portrayal of kangaroos as victims in Australian literature and points out the unsettling tendency to link native Australian animals with “death and extinction,” often in parallel with the portrayal of Aboriginal Australians.<sup>123</sup> Mazza contrasts the reductive depictions of kangaroos with the more “respectful” treatment of apex predators like dingoes and thylacines, revealing a disparity in how native animals are represented.<sup>124</sup> By highlighting discrepancies in the treatment of different species, Mazza’s work deepens conversations about the ethical implications of animal representation. Like Mazza, I analyse the “violent processes of colonization” and their enduring impact on “the Australian landscape and all who inhabit it.”<sup>125</sup> Rachel Fetherston focuses on settler-colonialism and climate change, eco-crime fiction, and the representation of roadkill in Australian literature.<sup>126</sup> She categorises Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country* and Robbie Arnott’s *Flames* (2018) as what she terms “Australian speculative ecofiction,” arguing that both novels serve as critical vehicles for exploring settler-colonial identity and belonging in Australia.<sup>127</sup> McKay’s novel is certainly speculative. However, drawing on McKay’s own claims about the realist nature of her depictions of animals, I have chosen to characterise *The Animals in That Country* as what I term *weird realism* because ‘zooflu’—the speculative element of the book—is grounded in the realities of animals’ worlds and lives. Fetherston suggests that McKay’s novel critiques the idea that settlers can resolve their fraught relationship with the land and its animals merely through a newfound ability to communicate with them. She argues that in *Flames*, Arnott’s “created mythology of the Esk God suggests an investment

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<sup>120</sup> Jay Johnston and Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, eds., *Animal Death* (Sydney University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1gxxpvf>; Probyn-Rapsey and Lennox, “Feral Violence,” 362–380; Probyn-Rapsey, “Animals and Extinction,” 100–113; Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, Siobhan O’Sullivan, and Yvette Watt, “‘Pussy Panic’ and Glass Elevators: How Gender is Shaping the Field of Animal Studies,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 34, no. 100 (2019): 198–215, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1644605>.

<sup>121</sup> Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, “Dingoes and Dog-Whistling: A Cultural Politics of Race and Species in Australia,” in *Colonialism and Animality: Anti-Colonial Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies*, ed. Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloe Taylor (Routledge, 2020), 181–200, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003013891>.

<sup>122</sup> Probyn-Rapsey and Lennox, “Feral Violence,” 362–380.

<sup>123</sup> Mazza, “Kangaroos and Predators,” 108.

<sup>124</sup> Mazza, “Kangaroos and Predators,” 106.

<sup>125</sup> Mazza, “Kangaroos and Predators,” 106.

<sup>126</sup> Fetherston, “‘Little Difference between a Carcass and a Corpse,’” 1–17; Rachel Fetherston, “Unsettlement, Climate and Rural/Urban Place-Making in Australian Crime Fiction,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Crime Fiction and Ecology*, ed. Nathan Ashman (Routledge, 2024), 78–90, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091912-8>.

<sup>127</sup> Fetherston, “‘Muzzle for the Queen,’” 111–127; Robbie Arnott, *Flames* (Text Publishing, 2018).

... in more complex conceptualizations of the Australian settler-colonizer still inhabiting stolen land, critically interrogating what it means to live alongside the Australian nonhuman.”<sup>128</sup> Fetherston is not simply saying that the animals in these texts are used as symbols of settler-colonial identity; rather, she contends that animals complicate and challenge settler-colonial notions of belonging by positioning human-animal relationships in ways that force a reevaluation of settler perspectives on the environment, nonhuman animals, and colonial violence. Fetherston focuses on the potential of “more-than-human communication” to disrupt “Western, settler-colonial dualisms of culture/nature and human/nonhuman” while also critiquing how these narratives obscure Indigenous sovereignty.<sup>129</sup> My analysis similarly considers how communication and settler-colonial belonging are configured in Australian texts but broadens this to investigate how animal communication in these novels reveals intersecting forms of violence—colonial, patriarchal, ecological—within a context of climate change.<sup>130</sup> My thesis adds to Australian literary animal studies by emphasising the potential of literary depictions of animal communication to authentically acknowledge animal experiences, promote ethical human-animal relationships, and deepen empathy towards animals and the environment.

The work of Arnott, Hortle, McConaghy, McKay, and Flynn exemplifies how contemporary ethical conundrums influence narrative. While academic discourse calls for new narrative patterns and tropes in response to the climate crisis, these novels frequently return to foundational storytelling methods.<sup>131</sup> They employ familiar strategies—protagonist development, family dynamics, romance, and friendship, not only to navigate complex ethical landscapes but also to frame the ways animals are implicated in human concerns. This emphasis on relationality reinforces the idea that human and animal lives are deeply enmeshed, both emotionally and materially. It is widely accepted that fully capturing an animal’s perspective through human language is impossible. Thus, my focus is on how these authors strive to maintain a sense of “specificity” and “particular[ity],” acknowledging that the experience of animals cannot be wholly comprehended.<sup>132</sup> By working within as well as subverting conventional narrative forms, these texts employ genre in a sophisticated, critically engaged way to examine ethical conduct, the value of care, and the role of animals in interconnected crises. Animals in these novels are portrayed not only as subjects deeply entangled in human conflicts but also as figures that embody the “slow violence” of modernity.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Fetherston, “Muzzle for the Queen,” 120.

<sup>129</sup> Fetherston, “Muzzle for the Queen,” 124, 111.

<sup>130</sup> Fetherston, “Muzzle for the Queen,” 124.

<sup>131</sup> See Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2, no. 2 (2011): 185–200, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.105>; Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra, “The Rise of the Climate Change Novel,” in *Climate and Literature*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 229–245.

<sup>132</sup> Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human,” 567; Lee, “Through Thick and Thin,” 156.

<sup>133</sup> Rob Nixon conceptualises “slow violence” as “the incremental and often invisible damage that accumulates over time and that takes the form of “[e]limate change ..., toxic drift ..., deforestation ... [and] acidifying oceans.” Nixon defines slow violence as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (Harvard University Press, 2011), 19, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>.

### Communicative Capacities of Genre

Genres shape readers' expectations about a text's values, themes, and structure. The search for genre modes capable of representing the Anthropocene has been dynamic, leading to what Stephanie LeMenager describes as "the struggle to find new patterns of expectation and new means of living with an unprecedented set of limiting conditions."<sup>134</sup> While climate fiction has become an umbrella term, texts collocated under this term defy singular classification, as they range from realism to speculative fiction.<sup>135</sup> This diversity highlights generic flexibility as writers traverse genre boundaries to represent ecological challenges. Lauren Berlant's concept of "genre flailing" aptly describes the search for new genres or frameworks when traditional genres prove inadequate.<sup>136</sup> Berlant defines "genre flail" as a response to the "violence of the world," a process in which individuals "flail about for things to read with, people to talk to, and material for inducing transformations" that allow for collective "disturb[ance]" and "value[-making]" amid instability.<sup>137</sup> Bailey Flynn extends Berlant's concept to speculative fiction, illustrating how "genre flail" fosters new relational ethics and survival strategies in the face of ecological catastrophe.<sup>138</sup> This thesis draws on the concept of "genre flail" to explore how hyper-contemporary Australian novels employ multiple generic modes to navigate climate crisis.<sup>139</sup>

Amitav Ghosh's critique of literary realism—particularly its perceived inability to represent the nonhuman and capture the scale and urgency of the climate crisis—remains central to discussions of climate literature. While Ghosh suggests that realism's constraints render it ill-suited to narrating ecological catastrophe, this thesis contends that the walls of the "mansion" are more porous than he allows.<sup>140</sup> I demonstrate realism's adaptability and capacity to engage meaningfully with both animals and environmental disaster. John Frow's theory of genre supports my claim. Frow critiques rigid genre classifications, arguing that texts actively perform genre, reshaping conventions in response to historical and cultural shifts. He writes that genre is a "set of conventional and highly organized constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning" and that "[g]enre classifications are real. They have an organizing force in everyday life."<sup>141</sup> In this context, I consider how genre conventions guide and constrain animal communication in each text. Recent critical reassessments of realism highlight its ability to evolve and respond to contemporary global crises, meaning it can be positioned as a dynamic and versatile narrative mode in climate-engaged fiction. Lauren Goodlad dismantles the notion of a static "classic" realism, arguing that the genre has always exhibited "aesthetic

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<sup>134</sup> Stephanie LeMenager, "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre," in *Anthropocene Reading: Literary History in Geologic Times*, ed. Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor (Penn State University Press, 2017), 222, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271080390-013>.

<sup>135</sup> LeMenager, "Climate Change," 222.

<sup>136</sup> Lauren Berlant, "Genre Flailing," *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry* 1, no. 2 (2018): 156–162, <https://doi.org/10.22387/CAP2018.16>.

<sup>137</sup> Berlant, "Genre Flailing," 161.

<sup>138</sup> Bailey Flynn, "'Making Something New': Rethinking Genre in the End Times," *The Review of Communication* 22, no. 2 (2022): 144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2022.2059392>.

<sup>139</sup> Berlant, "Genre Flailing," 157.

<sup>140</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 23.

<sup>141</sup> Frow, *Genre*, 10, 13.

flexibility, historical variability, and irreducibility to any single genre, period, technique, or national project.”<sup>142</sup> Jed Esty reinforces this view, describing realism as a “moving target” that responds to evolving geopolitical conditions and new global challenges.<sup>143</sup> Esty’s observation that realism has experienced a revival, especially as new global crises demand a “worldly” perspective, is central to this thesis’s argument about the enduring implementation of realism in climate-engaged fiction.<sup>144</sup> In contrast to Ghosh’s perspective, Pieter Vermeulen asserts that the “imaginative challenge” of representing the Anthropocene prompts not the “doubling down or breakdown of generic conventions, as Ghosh would have it” but rather “a recombination of existing genres and a transformation of existing templates.”<sup>145</sup> Caroline Levine similarly highlights realism’s potential for addressing climate crisis, observing that scholars “have recently begun to reevaluate the importance of realist aesthetics for climate politics.”<sup>146</sup> Levine argues that realism’s “confinement to the plausible” allows for “design blueprints” that model “practical political action” and real social formations:

[w]hile fantasy, science fiction, and experimental art give shape to surprising and unfamiliar worlds, the conditions they imagine are often radically different from what we can make or build now. These works ... often reinforce the sense that we must wait for a radical rupture from the present before we can take meaningful action.<sup>147</sup>

Building on Levine’s argument, this thesis examines how *Limberlost* and *The Octopus and I* employ realism’s localised, human-scaled narratives to prompt critical reflection on real-world systems and structures. These works align with “climate realism,” as defined by Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti.<sup>148</sup> Badia et al. posit that “climate realism” is a mode that engages with the material and subjective realities of climate change.<sup>149</sup> They write, “[i]f classical realism depended on a human subject to sift through the details, climate realism calls for us to consider that what it means to be a human observer is to already veer toward and with an altered sense of meaning-making, detailing, and also weirding the coherence of the world.”<sup>150</sup> I extend the concept of ‘climate realism’ to explore how hyper-contemporary Australian novels employ realism to construct animal communication, challenging anthropocentric perspectives and reframing the ethical stakes of climate crisis. By integrating animal lives into these narratives, these works serve to “weird ... the coherence of the world,” offering readers a reimagined view of reality shaped by the experiences and perceptions of animals.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Lauren M. E. Goodlad, “Introduction: Worlding Realisms Now,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49, no. 2 (2016): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-3508930>.

<sup>143</sup> Jed Esty, “Realism Wars,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 49, no. 2 (2016): 316, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-3509067>.

<sup>144</sup> Esty, “Realism Wars,” 324.

<sup>145</sup> Pieter Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020), 62.

<sup>146</sup> Caroline Levine, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691250854>.

<sup>147</sup> Levine, *The Activist Humanist*, 21.

<sup>148</sup> Lynn Badia, Marija Cetinić, and Jeff Diamanti, *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429428289>.

<sup>149</sup> Badia et.al, *Climate Realism*, 5.

<sup>150</sup> Badia et.al, *Climate Realism*, 6.

<sup>151</sup> Badia et.al, *Climate Realism*, 6.

Broadly defined, speculative fiction encompasses narratives that imagine worlds beyond immediate reality, incorporating fantastical, futuristic, or uncanny elements. The generic modes collocated under this umbrella term have become integral to climate-engaged fiction. Speculative fiction offers a means of engaging with planetary processes, extinction, and ecological collapse in ways that differ from, yet are equally effective as, realist modes. While realism tends to focus on individual experience, speculative fiction “relativize[s] the personal,” situating human lives within broader “spatial and temporal magnitudes.”<sup>152</sup> Its close ties to science provide a “secular materialism and a technical language” for engaging meaningfully with disciplines like climatology, while its roots in “romance” forms allow it to evoke “the exceptional, the vivid, and the sublime.”<sup>153</sup> Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw highlight speculative fiction’s ability to cross “the ‘threshold’ of habitual humanist literary purviews,” imagining nonhuman agency, human extinction, and the “collapse” of human exceptionalism.<sup>154</sup> This adaptability is evident in Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*, which employs speculative elements to explore human-animal communication amid a zoonotic pandemic—what Mark Bould describes as a “contagion narrative.”<sup>155</sup> Similarly, Chris Flynn’s *Mammoth* blends speculative fiction with testimony, historical fiction, and comedy, giving voice to extinct creatures and objects. These works exemplify Bould’s assertion that speculative fiction “has mutated and collapsed, embracing materials and perspectives from neighboring speculative genres,” thereby expanding its scope and communicative capacities.<sup>156</sup>

The versatility of speculative fiction also makes it an effective platform for diverse voices and perspectives. Deborah Jordan’s analysis of Australian climate fiction in the AustLit database underscores speculative fiction’s prevalence in imagining ecological futures.<sup>157</sup> Similarly, Mykaela Saunders’ anthology *This All Come Back Now* highlights speculative fiction’s capacity to convey Indigenous narratives.<sup>158</sup> Saunders argues that “[s]pec fic, as a Western genre, employs devices that our cultural stories have dealt in for millennia—the difference is, to us these stories aren’t always parsed out into fiction or fantasy, as they are just ways we experience life.”<sup>159</sup> She further explains that “many common spec fic themes ... are just stone-cold reality for us,” demonstrating that what may be seen as fantastical or speculative in mainstream Western contexts is often grounded in lived experience and tradition for Indigenous peoples.<sup>160</sup> Saunders exemplifies speculative fiction’s ability to critique dominant epistemologies while offering alternative ways of knowing and imagining ecological futures. As Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra note, “‘green’ concerns of the past four decades” have influenced a wide range of novels, many of which adopt “the ecological future

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<sup>152</sup> Mark Bould, “Speculative Fiction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twenty-First Century American Fiction*, ed. J. Miller (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 69.

<sup>153</sup> Bould, “Speculative Fiction,” 69.

<sup>154</sup> Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw, “Introduction: The Rising Tide of Climate Change Fiction,” *Studies in the Novel* 50, no. 1 (2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0000>.

<sup>155</sup> Bould, “Speculative Fiction,” 72.

<sup>156</sup> Bould, “Speculative Fiction,” 77.

<sup>157</sup> Jordan, *Climate Change Narratives in Australian Fiction*.

<sup>158</sup> Mykaela Saunders, *This All Come Back Now: An Anthology of First Nations Speculative Fiction* (University of Queensland Press, 2022).

<sup>159</sup> Saunders, *This All Come Back Now*, 13.

<sup>160</sup> Saunders, *This All Come Back Now*, 13.

histories of science fiction” to “imagine a climate-changed Earth.”<sup>161</sup> This approach reflects Bould’s argument that speculative fiction has a “well-developed repertoire of methods and images for depicting large-scale catastrophes and transformed worlds,” making it indispensable for addressing the epistemological and cultural challenges of the Anthropocene.<sup>162</sup> In an Australian literary context, McKay and Flynn’s novels exemplify how contemporary writers are recruiting speculative modes to engage with climate change and animal subjectivity.<sup>163</sup> This thesis explores how these hybrid approaches redefine genre boundaries and expand the communicative capacities of climate-engaged fiction.

### Communicating Violence, Justice and Care

The novels analysed in this thesis foreground visceral scenes of violence involving animals, in which human characters must confront ethical questions and moral boundaries. A trapped and injured quoll, wolves that are shot and killed, the beheading of an octopus, a dingo caught in a fence, and a mammoth hunted by humans are encounters that serve as sites of animal communication and anchor abstract ethical dilemmas in concrete, sensory experiences. Through such moments, authors probe the complexities of violence and care, linking ethical responsibility to embodied encounters with harm. These depictions also link the climate crisis to the systemic violence of colonialism and capitalism, illuminated by Rob Nixon’s concept of “slow violence,” described as “a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive.”<sup>164</sup> I argue that the novels strategically deploy spectacular violence to dramatise the “slow violence” of colonialism, capitalism, and climate change, highlighting animals’ entanglement in these crises.<sup>165</sup> In its extrapolation of texts’ responses to violence, this thesis draws on theories of multispecies justice, a concept introduced by Donna Haraway and developed by Petra Tschakert et al.<sup>166</sup> Multispecies

<sup>161</sup> Trexler and Johns-Putra, “Climate Change in Literature,” 187.

<sup>162</sup> Bould, “Speculative Fiction,” 69.

<sup>163</sup> James Bradley’s *Clade* (2015) is often considered a landmark work of climate fiction. *Clade* inaugurated a shift in Australian writing and drew attention to speculative fiction as a vital framework for engaging with climate change. Its intertwining of personal and planetary dimensions exemplifies speculative fiction’s capacity to reimagine ecological crises on both intimate and global scales. Bradley himself describes the novel as “geological fiction,” which situates human lives within planetary and deep-time scales. Critics like James Tierney have lauded *Clade* as “the first great novel of climate change,” and Geoff Rodoreda notes that while it aligns closely with speculative fiction, it is also internationally recognised as “cli-fi.” See Caroline Baum, “James Bradley’s *Clade* finds glimmer of hope in extreme future,” review of *Clade*, by James Bradley, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, January 31, 2015; James Tierney, “Converting the Nonbeliever: Science fiction, climate change, and James Bradley’s *Clade*,” review of *Clade*, by James Bradley, *Kill Your Darlings*, accessed January 16, 2024; Geoff Rodoreda, “Climate Fiction and Disability: Enabled Futures in James Bradley’s *Clade*,” *Antipodes* 36, no. 1 (2022): 96, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/climate-fiction-disability-enabled-futures-james/docview/2872876059/se-2>.

<sup>164</sup> Nixon’s call to engage with forms of violence that are “incremental and accretive” stems from his broader critique of how such violence is often obscured by its gradual and dispersed nature, particularly in the context of environmental harm. This concept is especially relevant in the Anthropocene, as described by Paul J. Crutzen, where the cumulative impact of human activity on Earth’s geology and ecosystems unfolds across vast temporal and spatial scales. Pieter Vermeulen emphasises that this overwhelming complexity and scale—encompassing fields like “demographics,” “atmospheric chemistry,” and “climatology”—can create a barrier to understanding, and is “likely to *overwhelm and exhaust*” people. Literature, Vermeulen argues, has the potential to address this by mobilising its “imaginative, narrative, affective, and reflexive resources” to make the abstract and dispersed nature of slow violence more tangible and emotionally resonant. See Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2; Paul J. Crutzen, “The ‘Anthropocene,’” in *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene: Emerging Issues and Problems*, ed. Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft (Springer International Publishing, 2006), 16, [https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-26590-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/3-540-26590-2_3); Vermeulen, *Literature and the Anthropocene*, 4, 8, emphasis in original.

<sup>165</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

<sup>166</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 280; Petra Tschakert et al., “Multispecies Justice: Climate-just Futures with, for and beyond Humans,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 12, no. 2 (2021): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.699>.

justice expands the scope of ethics beyond human-centred concerns “by recognizing the everyday interactions that bind individuals and societies to ... other people and more-than-human beings.”<sup>167</sup> Tschakert et al. highlight how consumption and economic systems perpetuate exploitation and ecological harm, calling for ethical accountability across species and acknowledging shared vulnerability in a climate crisis driven by human activity.<sup>168</sup> My thesis contributes to emerging conversations about care, responsibility, and justice by engaging with literature that positions animals as agents within reciprocal interspecies relationships.

The concept of multispecies justice aligns with an ethics of care rooted in feminist theory, which emphasises relationality, interdependence, and situated responsibility. Scholars such as Carol Gilligan, Joan Tronto, and Virginia Held conceptualise care as a contextual practice that transcends prescriptive moral codes, emphasising attentiveness, responsibility, and responsiveness to others.<sup>169</sup> Extending care ethics to nonhuman realms, Carol J. Adams, Josephine Donovan, and Lori Gruen advocate for animal and multispecies ethics.<sup>170</sup> Building on this, I draw on Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa, Thom van Dooren, and Donovan to explore the ethical tensions in multispecies care.<sup>171</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa defines care as a “vital affective state, an ethical obligation, and a practical labour” that sustains the interconnected web of life.<sup>172</sup> Van Dooren introduces the idea of “violent-care,” which addresses the challenges inherent in caring for one entity or ecosystem at the expense of another.<sup>173</sup> Donovan, meanwhile, proposes an ‘aesthetics of care’ that is “nonviolent, adaptive, responsive, and attentive” and that requires sensitivity to the unique contexts and ways of being of nonhuman others.<sup>174</sup> For Donovan, “aesthetics ... requires emotional interaction with living entities—alive agents, hearing those voices, responding to them with ethical care, and transmitting their realities with minimal intervention.”<sup>175</sup> She draws on Simone Weil’s account of “attentive love,” Theodor Adorno’s “mimetic comportment,” and Griselda Pollock’s (after Bracha Ettinger) notion of “wit(h)nessing” to insist that depictions of violence or suffering must recognise the subjectivity of the victim rather than aestheticise it.<sup>176</sup> This becomes especially important in relation to animal death, a recurring motif

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<sup>167</sup> Tschakert et al., “Multispecies Justice,” 1; Kirksey and Helmreich write, “[m]ultispecies ethnographers are studying the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds.” See S. Eben Kirksey, Stefan Helmreich, “The Emergence of Multispecies Ethnography,” *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 4 (2010): 545, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2010.01069.x>.

<sup>168</sup> Tschakert et al., “Multispecies Justice,” 1, 5–6.

<sup>169</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development*, rev. ed. (Harvard University Press, 1982); Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070672>; Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>170</sup> Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations* (Duke University Press, 1995); Carol J. Adams and Josephine Donovan, *Beyond Animal Rights: A Feminist Caring Ethic for the Treatment of Animals* (Continuum, 1996); Gruen, *Entangled Empathy*.

<sup>171</sup> Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Thom van Dooren, “Care,” *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 291–94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615541>; Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

<sup>172</sup> Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa, “‘Nothing Comes Without Its World’: Thinking with Care,” *The Sociological Review* 60, no. 2 (2012): 197, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2012.02070.x>.

<sup>173</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292.

<sup>174</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 73.

<sup>175</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 73.

<sup>176</sup> British art historian Griselda Pollock has been influential in rethinking how art history engages with gender, trauma, and the politics of representation. Drawing on the work of Bracha L. Ettinger, an Israeli-French artist, psychoanalyst, and philosopher

across the novels analysed in this thesis. Such deaths risk functioning as allegories of colonial or personal loss, but they also present moments in which the reader is invited to confront the ethical reality of animal suffering itself.

In addition to Donovan, I also draw on Vinciane Despret's account of interagency and non-lingual communication, which reframes empathy as an embodied practice of making oneself "available for the response of another being."<sup>177</sup> Despret emphasises partial affinities and "[a]cting as if" in order to think *with* animals, a mode of relation that foregrounds bodily gestures, tactile exchanges, and situated forms of attention.<sup>178</sup> This perspective highlights how human-animal encounters in these novels—whether through touch, gaze, or shared vulnerability—generate knowledge and ethical responsibility beyond language or symbolism. Taken together, Donovan's 'aesthetics of care' and Despret's relational framework foreground the central tension of my analysis: animals often function simultaneously as symbols in human narratives and as embodied agents with their own other-worldliness.<sup>179</sup> In texts such as *Limberlost* and *The Octopus and I*, writers risk appropriating animals as vehicles for human emotion, yet those animals also catalyse encounters that demand ethical recognition. The novels I analyse foreground singular human-animal encounters as sites of ethical disruption—moments that resist instrumentalist readings and instead reveal the complexity of interspecies entanglements. These encounters, often fraught with conflict, sacrifice, and unresolved tensions, demand reflection on multispecies justice in a world marked by ecological vulnerability. Animal death in particular crystallises this ambivalence: it exposes the limits of care, the violence folded into human-animal relations, and the ethical challenge of acknowledging nonhuman mortality without reducing it to metaphor.<sup>180</sup> By situating depictions of violence, care, and animal death within this framework, I demonstrate how contemporary Australian writers advance a context-specific ethics of care that acknowledges the complexities of interspecies entanglement while testing the possibilities and limits of realism itself.

## Chapter Overview

This thesis examines five hyper-contemporary Australian novels, each of which employs distinct approaches to genre that influence how human-animal communication is portrayed. Organised deliberately

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known for her concept of the 'matrixial gaze' and related ideas of relationality and trauma, Pollock advances the notion of "wit(h)nessing." This approach emphasises an ethical mode of reception in which viewers or readers engage with traumatic representations through co-subjectivity rather than detached observation—an intervention that underpins Donovan's account of an 'aesthetics of care,' particularly in relation to the representation of animal suffering. See Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 40.

<sup>177</sup> Vinciane Despret, "Responding Bodies and Partial Affinities in Human-Animal Worlds," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 7-8 (2013): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413496852>.

<sup>178</sup> Despret, "Responding Bodies," 71.

<sup>179</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 111.

<sup>180</sup> Rachel A. Lewis similarly engages with care ethics to explore animal agency. In a gender studies context, Lewis "seeks to expand upon previous work in feminist animal care ethics by recentering animal desire as the ground for interspecies solidarity." Lewis situates interspecies care within decolonial politics, arguing that "[d]ismantling anthropocentric" frameworks is crucial for environmental justice, particularly in the wake of zoonotic crises like COVID-19. See Rachel A. Lewis, "Feline Entanglements: Feminist Interspecies Care and Solidarity in a Post-Pandemic World," *Hypatia* 39, no. 4 (2024): 796, 798, 809, <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2024.13>.

to trace a spectrum of fiction from realist to speculative modes, the thesis begins with an analysis of Arnott's *Limberlost*, which employs a realist Bildungsroman structure, and culminates with Flynn's speculative comedy *Mammoth*. This progression is not chronological but methodological: by moving from more traditional realist frameworks to increasingly experimental forms, I demonstrate how shifts in genre recalibrate the ethical and imaginative possibilities of representing animal communication. In charting this trajectory, my thesis reveals how each text addresses environmental degradation and human-animal relations through its unique narrative strategies. In each chapter, I show how different generic choices shape each text's presentation of animal communication and analyse both the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

In Chapter One, I examine Arnott's *Limberlost*, which blends pastoral, gothic, and realist aesthetics to depict the coming-of-age of Ned, a boy whose evolving relationship with animals subverts tropes of colonial masculinity. Set in Tasmania, the novel follows Ned's masculine moral development, punctuated by his encounters with animals and witnessing of animal suffering. These experiences foster in Ned both empathy and responsibility. Arnott's realist Bildungsroman narrativises animal communication through animal gaze, physicality, vocalisations, and behaviour without any anthropomorphic exchanges. This chapter contrasts Ned's personal ethics with his ignorance of colonial legacies and positions his story within Tasmania's complex environmental and colonial history, highlighting how human-animal interactions and relationships shape Ned's ethics of care. In doing so, Arnott exemplifies how colonial and masculine codes constrain the potential for mutual care, even as Ned develops a more empathetic relation to animals.

In Chapter Two, I analyse Hortle's *The Octopus and I* as a novel that shares a similar context and setting with *Limberlost* but significantly diverges in its formal, aesthetic, and ideological commitments. Hortle's protagonist, Lucy, faces a post-cancer identity crisis and grapples with a faltering sense of belonging that leads her to engage in morally ambiguous and often appropriative behaviours. Set in the coastal region of Eaglehawk Neck, Hortle conceptualises this space as a "hydrocommons," where the boundaries between human and nonhuman life are fluidly negotiated, emphasising the interconnectedness of all beings within an ecosystem.<sup>181</sup> Deviating from realist conventions through chapters composed from the perspective of animals, the novel relies on what I characterise as an avant-garde poetics of animal voice. I analyse how Hortle depicts carelessness as a form of material violence embedded in colonial and patriarchal systems.

In Chapter Three, I explore how in *Once There Were Wolves*, McConaghy intertwines generic elements of realism, crime, melodrama, noir, and the thriller to examine violence and morality in human and animal realms. Through protagonist Inti's mirror-touch synaesthesia, which functions as an interpretative form of animal communication and operates as a non-realist device in an otherwise largely realist narrative,

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<sup>181</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 86, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474275415>.

McConaghy crafts heightened emotional responses that allow Inti to experience animals' suffering. Generic hybridity enables McConaghy to challenge moral certainties and depict complex ethics surrounding violence. Like Hortle, McConaghy highlights the ethical complexities of care and coexistence in a world shaped by historical violence and ecological fragility.

Chapter Four marks a shift toward more explicitly speculative fictional forms with McKay's *The Animals in That Country*. In the novel, a 'zooflu' virus enables human-animal communication through a new multisensory ability, generating what I describe as a 'weird realism' that heightens the unfamiliarity of transspecies interactions and yet reflects the tangible experiences and conditions of animal existence. Through her protagonist Jean, McKay examines the moral dilemmas that arise during a pandemic that intensifies both empathy and ethical tensions around human-animal connection. By blending realism with "the weird," McKay disrupts familiar ethical frameworks, exposing systems that objectify and instrumentalise animals and pushing readers to reconsider human-centric moral boundaries.<sup>182</sup> This chapter explores how the novel's speculative elements heighten McConaghy's critique of animal exploitation, as exemplified in "contact zones" like the animal sanctuary.<sup>183</sup>

The final chapter explores how Flynn's *Mammoth* draws on a speculative combination of historical fiction, comedy, and personal testimony to give voice to fossilised objects and extinct animals that have witnessed a long history and multiple forms of human exploitation. Set in America, France, and Ireland in the early 1800s, the novel offers a global perspective on exploitative ideologies as Flynn's fossil narrators reflect humorously and solemnly on their commodification. This chapter explores the interplay of memory and nostalgia as a method of remembrance and idealisation of the past, as well as Flynn's critique of historical and modern systems that continue to objectify and exploit. I examine Flynn's implementation of oral testimony as a distinct method of animal communication, focusing on the dignity afforded to his narrators as they wryly recount the lasting impacts of colonial violence, political agendas, and ecological degradation.

This thesis offers a new way of understanding how contemporary Australian authors are grappling with questions of genre and animal representation in a context of climate change. By developing the concept of animal communication, I demonstrate how authors' selection of genre shapes their narrativisation of the voices, perspectives, and agency of animals. Whether adhering solely to realism, or experimenting with avant-garde poetics, the gothic, melodrama, or other speculative modes, each novel's genre informs its aesthetic and ethical strategies. The novels selected here have been chosen not only for their hyper-contemporary relevance but also because their authors are in active dialogue with one another about form, voice, and ecological representation, as evidenced in forums such as the *Griffith Review*.<sup>184</sup> Positioning these

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<sup>182</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 10–11.

<sup>183</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>184</sup> Laura Jean McKay, Erin Hortle, and Chris Flynn, "Animal perspectives: Breaking the language barrier," *Griffith REVIEW*, no. 71 (2021), <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/animal-perspective/>.

works together foregrounds a generational cohort of Australian writers explicitly experimenting with narrative form as a way of rethinking human-animal relations. Animal communication centres the question of ethical responsibility, prompting readers to consider how violence and harm underpin human-animal relationships. In a context of escalating ecological crisis, this research is crucial. My thesis highlights the ways in which fiction not only reflects but also actively contributes to our understanding of the ethical and moral complexities involved in coexisting with animals in a time of climate crisis.

## Chapter 1: Reimagining Masculinity and Empathy: The Bildungsroman in Robbie Arnott's *Limberlost*

Robbie Arnott's *Limberlost* is a classic realist Bildungsroman, following Ned's life over the twentieth century, incorporating nested stories from his childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.<sup>1</sup> Arnott's commitment to realism is central to how the novel stages both human development and animal encounters. Unlike Arnott's earlier works, which experiment with speculative and mythic elements, *Limberlost* demonstrates how realism can capture animal agency without departing from plausible, everyday plots and modes.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the Bildungsroman form necessitates a focus on human development, which constrains the space afforded to nonhuman perspectives and underscores the ethical tensions embedded in realist representation. Integrating elements of the pastoral and interspersed with gothic tropes of haunting, *Limberlost* is set during World War Two on Tommeginne country in Lutrawita (Tasmania) and the Kanamaluka (Tamar River). The summer when Ned is fifteen forms the bulk of the narrative and the plot is driven by the anticipation of the return of Ned's brothers—Toby and Bill—from war. A predominantly linear narrative with moments of analepsis that recall encounters with a whale and the quoll, *Limberlost* captures Ned's life as he ages. The Bildungsroman form necessitates a focus on human development, which limits the exploration of animal agency. For the purposes of this chapter, I define animal communication in *Limberlost* as animal gaze, behaviour, and audible sound, as opposed to anthropomorphic animal voice. Arnott's reliance on realism shapes how animal communication operates in the novel: animal encounters are anchored in empirically grounded modes of observation. These scenes position animals as agents who confront Ned with his own impulses towards, and social expectations of, harm and violence. In *Limberlost*, themes of animals and care, settler colonialism, and classic ideas of the Australian landscape are intricately bound up with the portrayal of male relationships to the environment in *Limberlost*.

Arnott's novel is inextricably linked to the looming ecological crises it addresses. The Bildungsroman involves the formation and testing of an ethical duty of care towards animals and the environment. Arnott deploys Ned's ethical development as a lens through which to examine broader concerns about extinction and habitat destruction, grounding these anxieties in a localised narrative. Arnott harnesses the “deliberately prosaic” capacity of the realist novel that Amitav Ghosh views as limiting and proves that it can engage with complex ethical questions in the context of climate change.<sup>3</sup> By reflecting on and interrogating the settler-colonial state and its legacy of masculine control over the environment, Arnott engages with the intertwined complexities of climate change and colonial histories through themes of care and violence. *Limberlost* illustrates how realism can effectively navigate the improbable and the nonhuman, using familiar narrative strategies—such as character development and family dynamics—to place crises within the human

<sup>1</sup> The Bildungsroman is considered one of the “new genres or sub-genres characteristic of realism.” See Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (Verso, 2013), 145.

<sup>2</sup> See Robbie Arnott, *Flames* (Text Publishing, 2018) and Robbie Arnott, *The Rain Heron* (Text Publishing, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 26.

experience and to explore ethical tensions in human-animal relationships. Far from being passive symbols, the animals in *Limberlost* emerge as active participants, whose lives and deaths are shaped by the destructive forces of colonisation, environmental degradation, and species loss.

Like fellow Tasmanian authors Erin Hortle, Richard Flanagan, Favel Parrett, and Heather Rose, Arnott situates his work in Tasmania, engaging with the island's colonial history and popular idealisation as an untouched natural space. Critical reception of *Limberlost* has been mixed. Reviews praise Arnott's sensitive characterisation of Ned while questioning the novel's treatment of colonial themes. Megan Cheong highlights Ned's adolescent yearning for escape but critiques the novel's reinforcement of colonial ideology, noting his "child's roleplay of the lie of terra nullius" and adult retreat into nature as enacting a "habit of looking away."<sup>4</sup> She also draws attention to "parallels between Ned's constant scavenging and the colonialist extraction of resources that underlies and sustains his, and our, way of life."<sup>5</sup> In her review of the novel, Jennifer Mills focuses on Ned's "relationships with animals," ranging "from the pragmatic ... to the more complicated experiences of attachment, curiosity, and awe."<sup>6</sup> She notes that "[i]mpulses of care, responsibility, vengeance, and fear overlap, sometimes in a single page."<sup>7</sup> My attention to genre and animal communication extends beyond these reviews, situating Arnott's centralisation of animal suffering within a broader trend in Australian fiction that explores human-animal relationships and the formation of an ethics of care. Given this chapter's emphasis on ethics, the treatment of colonialism in the novel is critical.

Pastoral and gothic elements shape Arnott's portrayal of animal communication in *Limberlost*. The narrative primarily reflects the pastoral genre, complicated by Australia's colonial history. Terry Gifford identifies four elements of the pastoral mode that are useful for reading *Limberlost*: a focus on rural landscapes; "a mode of retreat and return;" stewardship of "grazing animals;" and a negotiation of "nostalgic" or more "environmentally aware" portrayals of rural life.<sup>8</sup> Ned's understanding of First Nations culture is limited to a romanticised yearning for 'ancient wisdom' to guide his hunting and farming practices. As this chapter will show, the novel supports Caroline Levine's view that realist fiction can provoke "real social formations," evident in Ned's release of a trapped quoll, while the novel's treatment of colonialism remains unresolved, particularly around landownership.<sup>9</sup> Heather Sullivan critiques the pastoral tradition as a literary form that, is deeply entangled with colonialism and resource extraction.<sup>10</sup> However, Sullivan sees potential in the mode's transformation into the "dark pastoral," a mode that engages critically with the Anthropocene.<sup>11</sup> Her concept of the "dark pastoral," influenced by Timothy Morton's "dark ecology," offers a lens for examining

<sup>4</sup> Megan Cheong, "Confluences," review of *Limberlost*, by Robbie Arnott, *Sydney Review of Books*, October 16, 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Megan Cheong, "Confluences."

<sup>6</sup> Jennifer Mills, "A distant leviathan," review of *Limberlost*, by Robbie Arnott, *Australian Book Review*, October 2022.

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Mills, "A distant leviathan."

<sup>8</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, rev. ed. (Routledge, 2019), 54–57.

<sup>9</sup> Caroline Levine, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton University Press, 2023), 21, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691250854>; Gifford, *Pastoral*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Heather Sullivan, "The Dark Pastoral: Material Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1, (2020): 27, <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.16>.

<sup>11</sup> Sullivan, "The Dark Pastoral," 27, emphasis in original.

Arnott's revision of the pastoral.<sup>12</sup> Arnott portrays the wilderness both as a realm of comfort and unsettling 'otherness,' a reflection of the broader colonial legacy of environmental disruption and attempted erasure of Tasmania's First Peoples. Ned's encounters with animals embody this ambiguity: he projects "animal fury" and the "potential for carnage," oscillating between careful restraint and confidence to inflict harm.<sup>13</sup> Arnott also employs gothic aesthetics through the "mad whale" and quoll who haunt Ned.<sup>14</sup> Jane M. Jacobs and Ken Gelder suggest that the gothic in colonised Australia explores characters' "renegotiation of their relationship with [haunted] place[s]."<sup>15</sup> In *Limberlost*, moments that hold the potential for violence are instead met with care, and expectations of human estrangement from the landscape are replaced by depictions of genuine connection with animals.

In Australia, a white male's maturation process is often imbricated with colonial and patriarchal legacies. Franco Moretti's concept of the Bildungsroman as a genre tied to "building a homeland" and national identity aligns with how Ned's maturation process is linked to national scripts.<sup>16</sup> Arnott employs a Bildungsroman structure to map Ned's growth, reflecting Sarah Graham's formulation that the genre "concentrates on a protagonist striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity" and "offers privileged access to the psychological development of a central character whose sense of self is in flux, paralleling personal concerns with prevailing values."<sup>17</sup> John Frow, Melissa Hardie, and Vanessa Smith describe the mode as a "move from naïveté to knowledge," marked by alienation and a yearning for connection.<sup>18</sup> As Ned matures, his encounters with animals—marked by violence or care—become moments of "trial," "failure," and growth, reflecting his struggle with colonial and patriarchal structures and the expectations of Australian masculinity.<sup>19</sup> Graham also notes the mode's "concern ... with what it means ... to participate in the life of a nation," while Ericka Hoagland critiques its perpetuation of a "colonialist ethos."<sup>20</sup> By contrast, Jed Esty argues that "the modernist Bildungsroman disrupts

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<sup>12</sup> Sullivan, "The Dark Pastoral," 27; Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>13</sup> Robbie Arnott, *Limberlost* (Text Publishing, 2022), 15.

<sup>14</sup> In his analysis of Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*, Alex Philp writes that the "thylacine is a complex symbol of the environmental disregard and colonisation that continues to haunt contemporary Australia, a quintessential return of the repressed." This idea is supported by Jim Davidson's coining of the term 'Tasmanian Gothic' and Ken Gelder's work on Tasmania's traumatic history. Philp discusses Tasmania's enduring gothic identity informed by violent events: the genocide of the Palawa people in the early nineteenth century, the extinction of the thylacine, and the legacy of Port Arthur, a notorious convict prison and the site of the 1996 massacre. While the quoll is less culturally iconic than the devil or thylacine, its haunting presence in Arnott's novel speaks to broader legacies of violence and repression in Tasmania. See Alex Philp, "Hunted, Now Haunting: The Thylacine as a Gothic Symbol in Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*," in *Gothic Animals. Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature*, ed. Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 83, 81–82, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34540-2\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34540-2_5); Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Jane M. Jacobs and Ken Gelder, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne University Publishing, 1998), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, rev. ed. (Verso, 2000), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Graham, ed., "Introduction," in *A History of the Bildungsroman* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316479926>.

<sup>18</sup> John Frow, Melissa Hardie, and Vanessa Smith, "The Bildungsroman: Form and Transformations," *Textual Practice* 34, no. 12 (2020): 1907, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2020.1834692>.

<sup>19</sup> Graham, "Introduction," 1.

<sup>20</sup> Graham, "Introduction," 4; Hoagland emphasises that the genre's Eurocentrism reflects the legacy of imperialism. While postcolonial writers often appropriate the Bildungsroman to "incorporate the master codes of imperialism," this can also serve to "sabotage them more effectively." Referencing José Santiago Fernández Vázquez and Maria Helena Lima, Hoagland

developmental time in reciprocal allegories of selfmaking and nation-building” and exposes “the contradictions inherent in mainstream developmental discourses of self, nation, and empire.”<sup>21</sup> In *Limberlost*, this “disrupt[ion]” is evident: Ned’s maturation resists linear progression, complicating the “ideology of progress” and entangling personal growth with unresolved colonial tensions and conventional, nationalised models of Australian masculinity.<sup>22</sup>

The Bildungsroman traditionally charts a journey from adolescence to adulthood, focusing on the protagonist’s development toward self-understanding and integration into society.<sup>23</sup> In an Australian context, this journey often intersects with national narratives that valorise stoicism and individualism. Katherine Bode links the hegemonic template of Australian masculinity to the “Aussie battler,” rooted in “familiar narratives and images of explorers, colonists and farmers doing battle with drought, heat and distance.”<sup>24</sup> Arnott reconfigures the Aussie battler by portraying Ned’s masculinity through emotional and ethical dimensions, adapting the Bildungsroman to trace Ned’s development of a care-oriented masculinity. Bildungsromane like George Johnston’s *My Brother Jack* (1964), A.B. Facey’s *A Fortunate Life* (1982), and Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet* (1991) reinforce the Aussie battler archetype, framing masculinity as self-reliant yet restrictive.<sup>25</sup> Bode identifies a contemporary “crisis in masculinity,” where shifting views on environment, patriarchy, and colonialism destabilise the Aussie battler, leading to “emotional ... disconnect[ion],” particularly in father-son relationships.<sup>26</sup> She points to an emerging “new model of white male hegemony,” shaped by growing awareness of human relationships to land that challenges “the myth of white men’s rights over the land.”<sup>27</sup> Arnott participates in this trend through his critique of environmental and gendered violence, yet his treatment of colonialism remains ambivalent. Ned’s encounters with animals become pivotal in redefining masculinity as stewardship and care, rewriting a script traditionally intertwined with violence. Ned’s status as a working-class white male grants him potential empowerment, yet this same status also renders him vulnerable to exclusion should he fail to conform to socially sanctioned norms of working-class masculinity.

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acknowledges the paradox of postcolonial adaptations, which, while attempting to critique colonialism, may also reinforce its legacy by separating the protagonist from their “community and culture” due to the ongoing effects of colonialism. See Ericka A. Hoagland, “The Postcolonial Bildungsroman,” in *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. Sarah Graham (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 218, 219; José Santiago Fernández Vásquez, “Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial Bildungsroman,” *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 27, no. 2 (2002): 86, <https://doi.org/10.1177/002198940203700207>; Maria Helena Lima, “Decolonizing Genre: Jamaica Kincaid and the Bildungsroman,” *Genre* 26 no. 4 (1993): 434.

<sup>21</sup> Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Esty, *Unseasonable Youth*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Graham, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>24</sup> Katherine Bode, “Aussie Battlers in Crisis? Shifting Constructions of White Australian Masculinity and National Identity,” *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association E-Journal* 2, no. 1 (2006): 1.

<sup>25</sup> Sarah Zapata observes Tim Winton’s “non-traditional depictions of masculinities” that “defy and call into question Australian cultural and gender norms” as well as “the presence of an ethics and practice of care” in these narratives. Zapata’s analysis of the “caring practices” of male characters in Winton’s novels complements my analysis of the pairing of a Bildungsroman journey and ethical formation and presence of care in *Limberlost*. See Sarah Zapata, “Of Tender Hearts and Good Men: Reading Australian Masculinity in Tim Winton’s Fiction,” in *Detoxing Masculinity in Anglophone Literature and Culture*, ed. Sara Martín and M. Isabel Santalària (Springer International Publishing, 2023), 95–96, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22144-6\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-22144-6_6).

<sup>26</sup> Bode, “Aussie Battlers,” 3.

<sup>27</sup> Bode, “Aussie Battlers,” 5.

My focus on ethical care draws on Joan Tronto and Virginia Held's work.<sup>28</sup> It is supplemented by María Puig de la Bellacasa and Thom van Dooren's theorisation of multispecies care, and Josephine Donovan's 'aesthetics of care.'<sup>29</sup> Tronto identifies four elements of ethical care: "attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness."<sup>30</sup> Arnott engages with these elements while acknowledging care's ambiguity due to competing priorities and emotional complexities. Held conceptualises care as both a value and relational practice, emphasising its continuity beyond mere labour and its role in moral development and communal flourishing.<sup>31</sup> Held cautions against prioritising autonomy and rationality at the expense of recognising "human interdependency" and "the need for caring relations."<sup>32</sup> A feminist conceptualisation originally, the ethics of care framework has been adapted by environmental theory. Referencing Puig de la Bellacasa, van Dooren describes care as "the product of intellectual and emotional competencies" that produces "an ethical obligation ... to look after another" and a requirement that "we get involved in some concrete way, that we *do*."<sup>33</sup> This idea can be extended through Donovan's theorisation of an 'aesthetics of care,' which requires literature to recognise animals as living, feeling subjects rather than as mere symbols or aesthetic devices.<sup>34</sup> She critiques "the ubiquitous aesthetic exploitation of animal pain and suffering," where animals "figure only insofar as they amplify or symbolize aspects of the human characters' relationships."<sup>35</sup> By contrast, she calls for writing that "recognizes the animals' subjectivity and engages with it ... not simply as aesthetic objects, vehicles of use to comment on human situations."<sup>36</sup> In *Limberlost*, Arnott moves toward this aesthetic of care: Ned's encounters with animals foreground the animals' own agency and suffering, and pose "the question of how to care."<sup>37</sup> The novel's epigraph, a partial quote from Gene Stratton-Porter's *Jesus of the Emerald* (1923), asserts that "[i]n the economy of Nature nothing is ever lost," omitting its original conclusion, which rejects human exceptionalism.<sup>38</sup> Through Ned's journey, Arnott explores the enduring harm inflicted on the natural world and the struggle to reconcile these legacies. The Bildungsroman in *Limberlost* thus portrays movement towards an ethics of care, positioning care as central to masculine moral growth and capable of disrupting cycles of violence.

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<sup>28</sup> Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (Routledge, 1993), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003070672>; Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 31-33.

<sup>29</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Thom van Dooren, "Care," *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 291-94, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-361554>; Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 127.

<sup>31</sup> Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 31-43.

<sup>32</sup> Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> van Dooren, "Care," 292, emphasis in original.

<sup>34</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*.

<sup>35</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 95, 47.

<sup>36</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 111.

<sup>37</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 6.

<sup>38</sup> "In the economy of Nature nothing is ever lost. I cannot believe that the soul of man shall prove the one exception. I do believe in Jesus Christ, in His mission among us, in the breadth of that mission, and I do believe this picture of Jesus of the Emerald to be the closest reproduction, up to this time, of the face of the man who lived the life and performed the works that history proves were achieved by Jesus Christ." See Gene Stratton-Porter, *Jesus of the Emerald* (Doubleday Page & Co., 1923), 15.

### Summer and the Quoll—The Potential for Carnage

During a summer hunting rabbits and tending his father's orchard, Ned accidentally captures an eastern quoll—a small, carnivorous marsupial with a near-threatened population in Tasmania.<sup>39</sup> Confronted with the choice to kill, harbour, or free the animal, Ned chooses to care for and release it. This encounter prompts him to grapple with his impulse towards violence and inarticulate but strongly felt sense of ethical duty. Over the course of Ned's life, memories of the quoll disrupt his sense of control as he recalls the quoll's terror and his own residual fear. Prior to European colonisation, the eastern quoll was common across southeastern Australia but eventually became extinct on the mainland in the twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Now highly susceptible to invasive predators, quoll populations in Tasmania have also been decimated by agriculture, habitat destruction, and shifting weather patterns that affect their sustainability and recovery.<sup>41</sup> In *Limberlost*, the quoll is both familiar and strange, small yet aggressive when provoked. Known from afar by its screeching screams, it disrupts Ned's sense of control. Vocalising through screams, hisses, and screeches, it is wild and unpredictable and yet becomes trapped by Ned. The quoll embodies a quasi-gothic representation of the Australian bush—wild, uncontrollable, and terrifying.<sup>42</sup> Its screams emphasise its otherness, making it anathema to humans. Yet the quoll transforms into a knowable subject, with its healing serving a crucial part of Ned's 'education' in his Bildungsroman journey. The quoll haunts Ned throughout his life, symbolising his fears of inadequacy, frustration, and powerlessness. These elements are crucial to the formation of his masculine identity.

Arnott stages an alternative model of masculinity through Ned's fraught relationship with the quoll, whose disruptive presence unsettles his summer plans. Ned's childhood is ordered; he grew up nestled in landscapes of beauty and breadth, amongst tameable animals or animals from whom he could distance himself. From the fish he pursues with Jackbird, to the chickens his sister Maggie cares for, to the horses he avoids after one "laid a fierce bite on his upper arm," animals are knowable.<sup>43</sup> In this pastoral space, Ned shoots, traps, and skins rabbits, selling their pelts to afford a boat: "[h]e enjoyed the game of trapping, of finding the runs and outsmarting the animals. But he did not like ... find[ing] rabbits still living in his traps,

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<sup>39</sup> "Species Management Profile: *Dasyurus maculatus*—Spotted-tailed Quoll," Threatened Species Link Government of Tasmania, accessed April 12, 2024, <https://www.threatenedspecieslink.tas.gov.au/Pages/Spotted-tailed-Quoll.aspx>.

<sup>40</sup> Calum X. Cunningham, Zach Aandahl, Menna E. Jones, et al., "Regional Patterns of Continuing Decline of the Eastern Quoll," *Australian Mammalogy* 45, no. 2 (2023): 153, <https://doi.org/10.1071/AM22010>.

<sup>41</sup> Cunningham et al., "Eastern Quoll," 156; Bronwyn A. Fancourt, Stewart C. Nicol, Clare E. Hawkins, et al., "Beyond the Disease: Is *Toxoplasma Gondii* Infection Causing Population Declines in the Eastern Quoll (*Dasyurus Viverrinus*)?," *International Journal for Parasitology, Parasites and Wildlife* 3, no. 2 (2014): 102–112, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijppaw.2014.05.001>.

<sup>42</sup> In his analysis of soundscapes in contemporary Tasmanian fiction, Joseph Cummins highlights the significance of sound in Australian gothic literature, particularly in Marcus Clarke's *Preface to the Poems of Adam Lindsay Gordon* (1913). Clarke describes an Australian landscape filled with unsettling sounds, such as the "myriad tongues of the wilderness," where "flights of white cockatoos stream out, shrieking like evil souls" and "mopokes burst out into horrible peals of semi-human laughter." Referencing Ken Gelder and Rachael Weaver, Cummins writes that aural dimensions are integral to the colonial Australian gothic, which is deeply tied to colonial violence. See Joseph Cummins, "Echoes between Van Diemen's Land and Tasmania: Sound and the Space of the Island in Richard Flanagan's *Death of a River Guide* and Carmel Bird's *Cape Grimm*," *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 49, no. 2 (2014): 262, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021989414523439>.

<sup>43</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 38.

their legs rent, blood matting their fur, primitive terror vibrating off their whiskers.”<sup>44</sup> An introduced species, rabbits spread rapidly and destroy the land in a way caused by, and metaphorically reminiscent of, colonisation in Tasmania.<sup>45</sup> While Ned is momentarily sensitive to their suffering, his response to the quoll is markedly different. Though rabbits and quolls are both seen as pests—rabbits damaging vegetation, quolls attacking poultry—their status as an introduced versus a native species influences Ned’s conduct. He recognises the “creative-destructive process” of eradicating “feral” rabbits, yet he remains uneasy about their suffering.<sup>46</sup> Killing them, he “would look away” and be partially restored by “the tranquillity of the orchard.” Unlike the quoll, whose distress lingers in his memory, the rabbits remain distant figures of necessary violence. Ned also “dreams of trapping, of hunting,” viewing it as a means to trade, acquire, and explore.<sup>47</sup> His economic mentality reflects a settler-colonial rural life that aligns with the pastoral mode. Arnott’s narrative resonates with Haraway’s concept of the “contact zone,” where ethics emerge through direct, situated encounters rather than abstract moral codes.<sup>48</sup> Haraway argues that responsibility is shaped through “touch” and “regard.”<sup>49</sup> Ned’s ambivalence towards rabbits and his deeper connection with the quoll reflect this: the real ethical danger, as Haraway suggests, lies not in killing alone but in rendering beings “killable.”<sup>50</sup> The quoll’s presence disrupts Ned’s ordered world, forcing him into an ethical engagement that is neither static nor detached but entangled with the lived reality of his environment.

Ned captures the quoll in a trap he made for the unknown creature killing the family’s chickens. Arnott accentuates the gap between Ned and the quoll, aligning with Berger’s assertion that animals, though capable of observing us, have been reduced to objects of human knowledge and “power,” reinforcing our dominance rather than enabling true communication.<sup>51</sup> At first, Ned sees the quoll as a potential object of trade: “[h]e’d get a good price for it ... Or he could give it to Maggie. He’d kill the pest, prise its colours free and present it to his sister as a gift ... a trophy ... Proof of his prowess.”<sup>52</sup> Like the rabbits, the quoll represents economic gain and Ned is tempted by the praise he might receive: “[h]is chest buzzed. *Oh great hunter!*”<sup>53</sup> This desire for recognition mirrors traditional tropes of masculinity, which, as seen in McConaghy’s novel in chapter three, often pair strength and stoicism with gratuitous hunting. By comparing Ned’s initial thoughts with his eventual treatment of the quoll, we see a shift from violence to care, from objectification to ethical consideration. Arnott portrays the quoll’s ferocity and vulnerability through its cry: “[t]he quoll burst into a snarl, its jaws flying impossibly wide, revealing a mouth of white knives.”<sup>54</sup> Combining aural and visual imagery, Arnott creates a menacing depiction of the quoll’s aggression. Despite

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<sup>44</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 6, 18.

<sup>45</sup> “European Rabbits,” Department of Natural Resources and Environment Tasmania, accessed 20 April, 2024, <https://nre.tas.gov.au/invasive-species/invasive-animals/invasive-mammals/european-rabbits#Environmentalimpacts>.

<sup>46</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, 60; Arnott, *Limberlost*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 77.

<sup>48</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

<sup>51</sup> John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” in *About Looking* (Pantheon, 1980), 14.

<sup>52</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 27–28.

<sup>53</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 27–28, emphasis in original.

<sup>54</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 28.

its alarming display, Ned remains poised to kill it, “raising his left boot above” it.<sup>55</sup> In response, the quoll “reared back, onto its hind legs, somehow widening its jaw even further, teeth needling the air. A deep rasping scream sprang from its throat ... It rose to the height of Ned’s knee before, in an ugly movement, it fell.”<sup>56</sup> Arnott builds an image of imminent confrontation, yet rather than delivering the anticipated kill, “Ned stopped. His boot hung high. The quoll hadn’t landed on its front paws; it lay on its side.”<sup>57</sup> Feebly positioned as a symbolic “awkward comma in the dirt,” the quoll’s harmed and vulnerable body leads Ned to pause and reflect.<sup>58</sup> Ned sees “how the quoll had been caught: its rear right paw was held in the mouth of the trap.”<sup>59</sup> Arnott illustrates the extent of the quoll’s injuries to heighten its suffering and Ned’s strain in witnessing it: “[t]he ruby meat of the animal’s flesh showed, as did dull stretches of tendon and blinks of bright bone ... A pained chirrup leaked from the nipping teeth. Fresh blood dropped into the dirt.”<sup>60</sup> The quoll’s vulnerability is magnified through the spectacle of its visceral dissection into “ruby meat,” “tendon,” “bright bone,” “pained chirrup,” and “blood.”<sup>61</sup> Carol J. Adams argues that the transformation of living beings into “meat” fragments their bodies and erases their subjectivity, a process she describes as both literal and metaphorical dismemberment.<sup>62</sup> Arnott’s language of “ruby meat” and “tendon” echoes this process of objectification, rendering the quoll’s suffering legible in the idiom of butchery.<sup>63</sup> The shift from the quoll’s fierce “snarl” and “rasping scream” to its “pained chirrup” highlights its frailty as a result of injury.<sup>64</sup> This moment marks Ned’s transition from an anticipated act of violence to one of care. Rather than confirming his masculinity through domination, Ned is drawn into an ethical response—“he wasn’t thinking of fur or money or Maggie. He just wanted to put an end to the scene before him”—shaped by his recognition of the quoll’s suffering.<sup>65</sup> Arnott’s Bildungsroman frames Ned’s choice to spare the quoll as a formative ethical crisis, where he confronts his impulse for violence but responds with care. In resisting the trajectory Adams identifies, where the reduction of animals to “meat” through killing and dismemberment confirms masculine dominance, Ned begins to dismantle the link between masculinity and violence.<sup>66</sup> His decision to release rather than kill the quoll reframes the encounter as an ethical crisis in which care rather than domination becomes formative to his identity. Unlike rabbits, which are pests in Tasmania, the quoll is a native animal and its survival is more precarious due to deforestation. Arnott amplifies its suffering—it “snapped and barked and writhed”—its “[h]igher, louder screams” intensifying Ned’s awareness of its “pain.”<sup>67</sup> The quoll’s “screams” evoke human-like suffering, unsettling Ned while heightening his empathy.<sup>68</sup> Recognising the quoll as an ethical subject, he resists the ‘hunter’ masculinity that would demand killing, skinning, and

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<sup>55</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 28–29.

<sup>57</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>59</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>60</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (Polity Press, 1990), 74.

<sup>63</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>64</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 28, 29.

<sup>65</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>66</sup> Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, 74.

<sup>67</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 30.

<sup>68</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 30.

displaying its pelt. Arnott animates the quoll's vocal and "gestural" communication, aligning with van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster's multispecies ethics, which emphasise "attentive interactions" and "passionate immersion in the lives of" animals.<sup>69</sup> Desiring to "put an end to the scene," Ned drags the quoll in a crate, "open[s] the trap and unglue[s] the bloody paw from its fangs," hiding rather than killing the creature.<sup>70</sup> This uncomfortable "immersion" forces Ned to confront "the question of how to care" and thus his ethical responsibility.<sup>71</sup>

Supporting Cary Wolfe's argument about the "unique demands" animals place on literary studies, Arnott moves beyond metaphor to depict their "specificity," portraying the quoll not as a thematic device but as a "lively agent" in Ned's ethical formation.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, other animals—whales, horses, rabbits—serve as catalysts for Ned's moral reflection. Initially, Ned imagines his sister will admire him for extracting the quoll's pelt, but its distress and the guilt he feels for trapping it awaken his conscience. The quoll becomes a recurring motif of fear, terror, and guilt, constantly reminding Ned of animal agency. At twenty, Ned reflects:

[t]he quoll followed him for years, its jaw gaping through his mind whenever he found terror and fury in the same place ... when he watched a boy throw a rock at his mother in the main street of Beaconsfield ... When ... he saw two drunk ruckmen brutalise each other on the whorled grains of a myrtle table.<sup>73</sup>

Here, Arnott contrasts the quoll's "terror and fury" with masculine violence, suggesting that the emotional states of fear and anger in men often manifest as physical aggression.<sup>74</sup> Ned's memories of the quoll's pain, its "jaw gaping" with screams, becomes a haunting figuration that represents both human and animal experiences of violence, suggesting an interspecies resemblance in their suffering.<sup>75</sup> In a later vignette, Ned's memory of the quoll resurfaces while he's "snorkelling" and "looking for abalone."<sup>76</sup> His thoughts drift to the "skill" and "old knowledge" of the Letteremairrener women, contrasting their expertise—"prising shell after shell free with clever wooden chisels"—with his own inadequacy.<sup>77</sup> When a leatherjacket fish opens its mouth "showing a row of teeth," Ned's memory of the quoll returns, its "fury" and "panic" mirrored in the fish's "fearful energy."<sup>78</sup> Despite securing the abalone, Ned's attention shifts to a young woman when he

<sup>69</sup> Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, "Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness," *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>; Anna Tsing, "Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom," *Manoa* 22, no. 2 (2010): 201, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41479491>.

<sup>70</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>71</sup> van Dooren et al., "Multispecies Studies," 6; Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Cary Wolfe, "Human, All Too Human: 'Animal Studies' and the Humanities," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124, no. 2 (2009): 567, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.564>; Van Dooren et al. write: "[m]uch, but by no means all, of the work in animal studies has focused on people's relationships with a given animal (a dialogic focus that is readily apparent in the term human-animal studies). Instead, a multispecies approach focuses on the multitudes of lively agents that bring one another into being through entangled relations that include, but always also exceed, dynamics of predator and prey, parasite and host, researcher and researched, symbiotic partner, or indifferent neighbor." See van Dooren et al., "Multispecies Studies," 3.

<sup>73</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 31.

<sup>75</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 31.

<sup>76</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 32.

<sup>77</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 32.

<sup>78</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 33.

returns to the surface, leaving behind his thoughts of “teeth [and] fear.”<sup>79</sup> This moment foregrounds Ned’s limitations. His glance towards Indigenous knowledge is fleeting and appropriative: he recognises the “skill” of the Letteremairrener women but treats it as a backdrop for his own self-reflection rather than engaging with its epistemological depth. Ned’s orientation to the past aligns with what Svetlana Boym terms “restorative nostalgia,” which “puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gap,” a concept which will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five.<sup>80</sup> His impulse to seize fragments of wilderness as if they were intact knowledge enacts a fantasy of recovery while overlooking the violence that produced their absence. What is lacking in his view is “reflective nostalgia” which “dwells in ... longing and loss.”<sup>81</sup> This latter mode, which accepts rupture and acknowledges the impossibility of return, would allow Ned space to reckon with the lasting effects of colonisation and genocide. Instead, the vignette concludes disturbingly smoothly, sidestepping the necessary discomfort of acknowledging the enduring effects of colonial violence.

Returning to Ned’s childhood and interactions with the quoll, Arnott intertwines Ned’s masculine identity and ethical development, emphasising Puig de la Bellacasa’s concept of recognising an “obligation” to care through “practical labour.”<sup>82</sup> This integration of care and masculinity challenges traditional notions of emotional detachment.<sup>83</sup> Confronted with the quoll’s distress, Ned initially plans to “kill it, for mercy as much as for money.”<sup>84</sup> However, as he watches his father handle the quoll with unexpected care, he begins to see strength in compassion: “[h]e just wanted his father to do it. To swing the handle, to slam this day shut. Instead, the old man ... [p]eered at it with a butcher’s eye ... And then he was lowering it, with care, with gentleness, into the crate.”<sup>85</sup> William’s quiet, “gentle” treatment of the animal subverts the emotional distance typically associated with hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating that care is an expression of profound strength.<sup>86</sup> In this pivotal moment, Ned’s struggle with his father and feelings of inadequacy reflect broader tensions of “inter-generational estrangement” in Australian masculinity.<sup>87</sup> While Ned desires approval from William, their emotional distance mirrors the trope of “wounded, white men” in Australian masculinity.<sup>88</sup> Ned’s decision to release the quoll marks a critical point in his moral growth. Initially, he sought approval through violence—planning to kill and display the quoll as a show of “prowess.”<sup>89</sup> Yet,

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<sup>79</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 34.

<sup>80</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41, emphasis in original.

<sup>81</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41, emphasis in original.

<sup>82</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, “Nothing Comes Without Its World,” 197.

<sup>83</sup> Lia Bryant and Bridget Garnham discuss how traditional Australian masculinity (in the example of farmers) is shaped by “an economy of value, moral worth and pride” that positions stoicism and self-reliance as central traits. They argue that the idealised figure of the “Aussie battler” emerges from “romantic agrarian mythology,” where “pride and self-worth are vested in traditional values of hard work, struggle and self-sacrifice.” They note that this rigid adherence to stoicism has led to a “significant social crisis in Australia.” See Lia Bryant and Bridget Garnham, “The Fallen Hero: Masculinity, Shame and Farmer Suicide in Australia,” *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 22, no. 1 (2015): 75, 67, 68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2013.855628>.

<sup>84</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 37.

<sup>85</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 111.

<sup>86</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 111.

<sup>87</sup> Katherine Bode, “Unexpected Effects: Marked Men in Contemporary Australian Women’s Fiction,” *Australian Literary Studies* 22, no. 4 (2006): 444, <https://doi.org/10.20314/als.09a5774f6b>.

<sup>88</sup> Bode, “Aussie Battlers,” 7.

<sup>89</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 28.

Arnott shows that true “prowess” is demonstrated by his decision to set it free.<sup>90</sup> Ned’s struggle to find a suitable release spot for the quoll due to deforestation reflects broader challenges in wildlife conservation. McConaghy’s *Once There Were Wolves* similarly explores the tension between agriculture, conservation, and economic interests, focusing on the difficulties of reintroducing wolves to the Scottish Highlands amid farmers’ concerns for livestock. With Callie, Ned takes the quoll out on his boat to search for a place with “[b]igger trees ... black gums: prime quoll habitat ... Farmland still felt close too, even though he couldn’t see any paddocks.”<sup>91</sup> Ned observes that “[t]here was an emptiness to the horizon, a feeling of cultivation.”<sup>92</sup> Noticing how the quoll’s habitat has been compromised by deforestation and farming, Ned struggles to find an appropriate location to release it. Both Arnott and McConaghy highlight the delicate balance needed for coexistence in a human-dominated world, with Arnott emphasising the “slow violence” that contributes to the quoll’s endangered status.<sup>93</sup> Before releasing the quoll, Ned “waited ... for a feeling ... something that told him he was ready, *that he was doing the right thing. No such feeling came ... he ripped off the crate’s lid. The quoll came out fast, all muscle and colour. No suspicion, no trepidation.*”<sup>94</sup> Arnott contrasts the quoll’s calm, decisive behaviour with its earlier fear and rage, its quick return to its natural habitat signifying its agency. Troubled by whether “he was doing the right thing,” Ned’s reflection captures the untidy ethics of care that involves a “a hands-on, ongoing process of recreation of ‘as well as possible’ relations.”<sup>95</sup> Arnott deliberately limits Ned and Callie’s time with the quoll after its release: “[a]t the first branch the quoll paused, sniffed. Opened its mouth, showed its fangs.”<sup>96</sup> Yet, instead of screaming, it “closed its jaw and turned back to the trunk.”<sup>97</sup> The shift from communicating “fear” and “rage” to quiet resolve contrasts with its earlier distress.<sup>98</sup> The quoll’s silence also transforms Ned’s response—no longer avoiding his emotions, he experiences emotional release, signalled by the “heat flooding his eyes.”<sup>99</sup> Any expectation that the quoll would linger like a domestic animal, confirming an intimate connection with Ned, is undermined by its quick escape. Ned’s release of the quoll exemplifies van Dooren et al.’s argument that “[i]mmersive ways of knowing and being with others involve[s] careful attention to what matters to” animals and the nonhuman, as Ned’s emotional response reflects “passionate immersion,” making him “curious,” “entangled,” and newly attuned to care.<sup>100</sup> Years later, as Ned recounts the quoll’s “fierce presence” to his daughters, he reflects on his transformation, wondering if “the troubled boy of that summer would recognise the man he’d become.”<sup>101</sup> His ethical awakening—choosing care over violence despite potential disapproval—marks a pivotal shift in his journey. Through contrasting moments of animal communication that convey harm

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<sup>90</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 28.

<sup>91</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 161.

<sup>92</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 161.

<sup>93</sup> Nixon examines the tension between human notions of speed and ecological slow time, evident in the rapid exploitation of long-formed resources. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>.

<sup>94</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 162, my emphasis.

<sup>95</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 162; Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 162.

<sup>97</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 38, 162.

<sup>98</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 29.

<sup>99</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 30, 162.

<sup>100</sup> van Dooren et al., “Multispecies Studies,” 6; Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion,” 201.

<sup>101</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 165.

and care, Arnott traces Ned's growth in a Bildungsroman that redefines masculinity to embrace emotional vulnerability and environmental responsibility.

### Alternative Expressions of Masculinity

Arnott's Bildungsroman expands Ned's ethical reckoning beyond interpersonal relationships to encompass environmental destruction, illustrating how economic demands and hypermasculine social norms reinforce cycles of violence. A decade after leaving his family's orchard, Ned works as a foreman for a logging crew cutting down manna gums in Tasmania's east. Arnott vividly depicts the violence inflicted upon the "ancient hardwoods" through imagery of "[a]romatic, bloodlike sap [that] ran from the wounds the men hacked into their trunks," paralleling the description of the quoll's injuries where "[f]resh blood dropped into the dirt."<sup>102</sup> The mirroring of wounds underscores human influence on both species. By involving Ned in the deforestation that he earlier acknowledged as destroying the quoll's habitat, Arnott portrays how environmental violence is normalised as part of the traditional or stereotypical male Australian role. He highlights a divide between Ned and the other men in the logging team while intertwining themes of masculine and environmental violence. While Ned observes his crew, Arnott draws a direct connection between the physical destruction of nature and the men's self-destructive behaviours:

the foresters mirrored the violence they'd wreaked on the White Knights—the name they'd given to the pale, towering mannas—in the way they treated their own bodies. They poured lakes of beer down their throats, as well as rivers of brownish, burning rum. Spread out in the shadows of the White Knights, they sang and fought and screamed until they vomited, cried for their wives and crashed into their swags.<sup>103</sup>

In Arnott's overt paralleling of the "wounds the men hacked into their trunks" with the "lakes" and "rivers" of alcohol they drink, he builds a vision of hypermasculinity bent on destruction of others and the self.<sup>104</sup> Arnott's portrayal of drunkenness alongside deforestation commentates on the social norms that perpetuate destructive behaviours. The image of the men dispersed amongst "the shadows of the White Knights" in a frenzy of singing, fighting, screaming, crying, and collapse is a chaotic performance of hypermasculinity that involves acts of abandon and violence—a gothic representation.<sup>105</sup> Arnott extends this vision by depicting the men who had been "leathered by decades of warring with the trees. They rarely felt the need to speak to each other, not even when they felled the largest of the Knights, lopped off the limbs and hauled the pale-glowing trunks onto their flatbed trucks."<sup>106</sup> In this, Arnott personifies the trees as opponents and implies a struggle for dominance and control over the environment, evoking a sense of the trees'

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<sup>102</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 13, 29.

<sup>103</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 13–14.

<sup>104</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 14; Daniel Moss discusses similar themes in contemporary Australian literature, linking gendered violence with environmental degradation. Moss argues that traditional masculine ideals often reinforce a binary of winners and losers and the "dispensability of the other," which historically intersects with Australia's history of "colonisation and violence." He writes that this violence influences the "treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders" and "the destruction of the environment." See Daniel Moss, "More than 'Rotten Apples': Australian Literature and the Possibility of Redemption for Men Who Abuse," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* 20, no. 1 (2020): 10.

<sup>105</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 14.

<sup>106</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 14.

resilience.<sup>107</sup> After the symbolic slaughter and literal culling of the trees, Ned reports how “the talk at camp turned lewd ... It was intimated that splinters suffered in fucking a waxed tree hollow were ultimately preferable to the long-term wounds inflicted by a marriage.”<sup>108</sup> The imagery of penetration and violation is equally applied to women and trees as vessels for male gratification. Arnott links the barbarity of tree logging to expressions of a domineering hypermasculinity from which Ned distances himself. Ned’s feelings of vulnerability are emphasised as he recalls his relationship with the quoll as he seeks reprieve from the other men.

In contrast to the loggers’ blatant machismo and apathy towards the trees, Ned’s retreat to the forest exemplifies a different kind of masculinity that makes space for care within the male role:

[a] harsh growl rang through the bush, a call of animal fury. More followed—deeper, guttural snarls, as well as high-ringing yowls of despair, sounds of fleshy terror ... He knew what these voices were. The devils had made a kill—or, more likely, stolen one from a quoll—and were fighting over the flesh ... It was this moment, as he felt again the liquid dread of unseen monsters, that brought him back to the night of the mad whale ... brought about by similar circumstances: an evening of demons, the potential for carnage.<sup>109</sup>

Arnott immerses us in the auditory landscape of the bush through the range of animal “voices” and “cacophony” of “snarls,” “yowls,” and “screams.”<sup>110</sup> Again, Arnott evokes a sense of the Tasmanian gothic through the devil and quoll calls. As Linda Hassall writes, “the haunting cries of animals ... symbolically prescribe[s] notions of danger and of things buried deep within the Tasmanian wilderness.”<sup>111</sup> Recalling the quoll’s screams from his childhood and the “liquid dread” from “the night of the mad whale,” Ned is confronted with a “sensation” brought on by the “potential for carnage.”<sup>112</sup> Arnott captures two moments of immense violence; the former, a senseless and brutal expression of toxic masculinity where Arnott equates the mutilation of trees with rape, the latter a necessary expression of animal communication and relations in nature. Ned is set apart from the previous scene’s illustration of the men’s destruction of the trees and themselves. By removing Ned from the camp and their “lewd” conversation, Arnott articulates that masculinity and violence need not be mutually exclusive.<sup>113</sup> Later in the novel, Ned reflects:

when he remembered the quoll, he worried that the men around him wouldn’t understand. While working on the mainland, where quolls had nearly been exterminated, the rouseabouts would have asked why he hadn’t killed it. The loggers toppling the White Knights would have flung wet bottles at his head. The saltwater stock workers would have just stared.<sup>114</sup>

Arnott connects the logging of Tasmania’s critically threatened manna gums to a model of masculinity that expects Ned to kill the quoll, reflecting broader environmental and patriarchal violence in twentieth-century

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<sup>107</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 14.

<sup>108</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 14.

<sup>109</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 15.

<sup>110</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 15.

<sup>111</sup> Linda Hassall, *Theatres of Dust: Climate Gothic Analysis in Contemporary Australian Drama and Performance Landscapes* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2021), 54, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6159-4>.

<sup>112</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 15.

<sup>113</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 14.

<sup>114</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 163.

Tasmania. Ned's care for the quoll, rooted in an ethics of care, directly challenges masculine ideals of dominance and control over nature. Bob Pease discusses the social constructions of dominant masculinity and suggests that "feminist approaches" that "emphasise the material sources of women's oppression and the destruction of nature hold the most promise for developing an alternative understanding and practice for men to engage with nature in non-oppressive ways."<sup>115</sup> With reference to Stacy Alaimo's work on trans-corporeality, Pease writes: "[i]t is our vulnerability and our corporeal connection to the material world that fosters an ethic of care for the environment."<sup>116</sup> In *Limberlost*, rather than participating in violent expressions of masculinity through the destruction of nature or misogyny, Ned's masculine moral development at this stage in the novel is marked by memories of his care for the quoll, observations of hypermasculinity in the loggers, and separation from their macho performances.

### Unacknowledged Colonial Violence

Arnott tracks Ned's life across the twentieth century, with landscape changes marking the passage of time. In his mid-thirties, after marrying Callie, Ned travels to the Australian mainland to work on a cattle muster to support his family, as his orchard is unprofitable. Ned's journey allows Arnott to explore the effects of large-scale agriculture on both the land and those who work it. Given the job of guiding the cows to new pastures, Ned reflects that "his time killing the White Knights had left him with a permanent stickiness to his hands and a reddish wound in his soul" where, by contrast, "[m]ustering mostly involved sitting on a horse, and it paid well."<sup>117</sup> Tony Hughes-d'Aeth explores the attachment of tropes of hegemonic masculinity to the pastoral space, referring to idealisations of "self-sufficiency, collective action, masculine labour, celebration of fertility, return to nature and its thorough eradication."<sup>118</sup> The novel aligns with Gifford's concept of the contemporary pastoral, encompassing themes such as "awe in the face of natural phenomena," recognition of the "creative-destructive process" that can often be "intentionally destructive to the subtle natural processes of our home," and finally, the conflation of the "exploitation of our planet" with the "exploitation of minorities or the less powerful."<sup>119</sup> The novel reflects human complicity in environmental destruction yet overlooks the broader context of agricultural work as a continuation of colonisation. While working on the mainland, Ned notices how: "[o]rchards were soon replaced by the churned red soil of potato paddocks" and "vast pastures of grass, used for dairy and beef farming," observing that "before this was cattle country it had been sheep country, and before that it had been the

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<sup>115</sup> Bob Pease, "Recreating Men's Relationship with Nature: Toward a Profeminist Environmentalism," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 1 (2019): 117, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X18805566>; Stacy Alaimo, "Insurgent Vulnerability and the Carbon Footprint of Gender," *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning (Online)*, no. 3–4 (2009): 22–35, <https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i3-4.27969>.

<sup>116</sup> Pease, "Recreating Men's Relationship with Nature," 120; Alaimo writes: "I would like to propose that we inhabit what I'm calling 'trans-corporeality'—the time-space where human corporeality, in all its material fleshiness, is inseparable from 'nature' or environment." Alaimo's concept highlights how material existence is shaped by, and entangled with, ecological systems. See Stacy Alaimo, "Trans-Corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature," in *Material Feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Indiana University Press, 2008), 238.

<sup>117</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 98.

<sup>118</sup> Tony Hughes-d'Aeth, *Like Nothing on This Earth* (UWA Publishing, 2017), 105.

<sup>119</sup> Gifford, *Pastoral*, 60.

hunting grounds of the Pairelehoinner people.”<sup>120</sup> Arnott illustrates a chronological progression from the “forests” of the “Pairelehoinner people,” to “sheep country,” and finally to 1960s “cattle country,” capturing the broad sweep of time from First Nations’ arrival to colonial agricultural expansion.<sup>121</sup> Through a landscape marked by “cultivation” and “emptiness,” seen in the “churned red soil” and “remnants of ancient forests,” Arnott highlights the “slow violence” of environmental exploitation.<sup>122</sup> The term “remnant” suggests both survival and loss, reflecting the destruction of “ancient forests” and the enduring presence of Indigenous histories despite attempted erasure.<sup>123</sup> By tracking the linear trajectory of colonial agricultural progress in a discrete time and place in Australia, Arnott’s depiction resonates with Hughes-d’Aeth’s approach in examining the Western Australian wheatbelt. Hughes-d’Aeth aims to dismantle the perceived normalcy of a “settled landscape,” treating it instead as “a sudden event” by considering human influence within a broader geological timeframe.<sup>124</sup> He argues that while the Western Australian wheatbelt serves an important economic role, it has also caused enormous environmental harm.<sup>125</sup> Arnott critiques the myth of a “settled landscape” by demonstrating how colonial expansion left profound ecological damage and revealing the lasting harm masked by the notion of progress.<sup>126</sup> Although Arnott acknowledges the complexities inherent in the pastoral mode, the novel’s treatment of violent colonial legacies remains ambiguous.

During Ned’s experience of mustering, Arnott contrasts Ned’s desire for the “natural competence” of men like his brothers with his sentimental yearning for the “wisdom” of Tasmania’s First Peoples.<sup>127</sup> Ned recalls how the “Pairelehoinner had shaped the land with fire,” creating plains ideal for “populations of wallaby and kangaroo,” and reflects on their “wisdom.”<sup>128</sup> Yet, when guiding cows to new pastures, Ned admits, “this was not his valley, these were not his waters” and that he must trust the “wisdom” of others about the “treacherous[ness]” of the strait.<sup>129</sup> By acknowledging that the valley and waters are “not his,” Ned reinforces the colonial concept of land as property.<sup>130</sup> His deference to the wisdom of both farmers and the Pairelehoinner remains extractive. Val Plumwood argues that when Indigenous Australians are classified as “nature” they are “defined as a *terra nullius*, a resource empty of its own purposes or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and molded in relation to these purposes.”<sup>131</sup> Ned’s ambivalence toward Indigenous sovereignty and his inability to reconcile First Nations disenfranchisement with his own sense of ownership reflect the logic of settler-colonial belonging, as explored by Bob Hodge and Vijay Mishra, Alison Ravenscroft, Michael

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<sup>120</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 98.

<sup>121</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 98.

<sup>122</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 161, 98; Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

<sup>123</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 98.

<sup>124</sup> Hughes-d’Aeth, *Like Nothing on This Earth*, 105.

<sup>125</sup> Hughes-d’Aeth, *Like Nothing on This Earth*, 105–106.

<sup>126</sup> Hughes-d’Aeth, *Like Nothing on This Earth*, 105.

<sup>127</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 107.

<sup>128</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 99, 107.

<sup>129</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 101.

<sup>130</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 101.

<sup>131</sup> Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (Routledge, 1993), 4, emphasis in original.

Farrell, and Emily Potter, among others.<sup>132</sup> They examine the complexities of ‘unsettlement’ and ‘unbelonging,’ revealing that settler-colonial belonging is linked to dispossession. Potter examines non-Indigenous belonging as “desired, asserted, contested, and unrealized” through a “colonial-capitalist” logic, arguing that “non-Indigenous Australian culture goes un-interrogated, normalized as the base-line against which aberrance is measured,” allowing for the reinforcement of “silences and exclusions.”<sup>133</sup> In *Limberlost*, Arnott captures moments where Ned’s sense of belonging is “contested,” yet ultimately reproduces a narrative of uncontested settler-colonial belonging.<sup>134</sup>

Arnott reveals how industrial agriculture and farming inflict violence on the land and, through Ned’s interactions with a suffering cow, how violence is normalised in farming culture. When tasked with driving a herd across a tidal estuary to a nearby island, Ned, distracted by thoughts of his family and future, fails to notice when a cow strays from the herd and becomes stuck in a sandbar. Arnott depicts Ned’s desperate attempts to free the cow: “Ned circled it again, kicking harder at its side, wailing again with his crop. The cow sprayed water from its nose.”<sup>135</sup> The cow’s “energy was sapped ... Ned felt it looking at him, exhaustion in its shuddering body. A wet plea in its eyes.”<sup>136</sup> In the image of the cow “shaking and huffing,” “struggling to keep its head above water,” Arnott’s portrayal of animal communication is both restrained and imbued with a quiet sense of desperation.<sup>137</sup> Able to secure a rope around its neck, the “cow was yanked forward with ugly strength” and led to safe ground.<sup>138</sup> However, Ned “[s]aw that he’d tied the rope too tight. Saw how it had torn a long, red burn into the cow’s neck, from the top of its leg to the base of its head. Parted fur matted on the flesh. Blood oozed from the wound.”<sup>139</sup> Arnott’s imagery of the rope tearing and burning suggests branding, contributing to Arnott’s broader literary project that connects intimate encounters between Ned and suffering animals with larger systems of violence. The cow’s “wound” is mirrored in Ned’s vision of a once lush landscape now starkly marred by agricultural farming: it was “just an unsheltered paddock. Trees once must have grown here: trees torn from the land by remorseless industry ... the rest of the coastline had lost its wild character, its romance.”<sup>140</sup> Linguistic echoes between the rope that “had torn a long, red burn into the cow’s neck” and the “trees torn from the land” link the acts and consequences of farming and deforestation.<sup>141</sup> The cow’s suffering parallels the environmental destruction caused by ruthless agriculture. Ned’s nostalgia for the land’s “wild character” and “romance” evokes a colonial ideal of untouched nature, which denies Indigenous presence, sovereignty, and the violent history of

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<sup>132</sup> See Bob Hodge (Robert Ian Vere) and Vijay Mishra, *Dark Side of the Dream: Australian Literature and the Postcolonial Mind* (Allen & Unwin, 1991); Alison Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (Routledge, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315554129>; Michael Farrell, *Writing Australian Unsettlement: Modes of Poetic Invention 1796-1945* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137465412>; Emily Potter, *Writing Belonging at the Millennium: Notes from the Field on Settler-Colonial Place* (Intellect Books Ltd., 2019).

<sup>133</sup> Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 2, 7, 9.

<sup>134</sup> Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 2.

<sup>135</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 104.

<sup>136</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 103.

<sup>137</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 104.

<sup>138</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 104.

<sup>139</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 104.

<sup>140</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 105.

<sup>141</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 105.

dispossession.<sup>142</sup> As Boym writes, nostalgia fuses “loss and displacement” with “a romance with one’s own fantasy.”<sup>143</sup> In his attempt to mentally reinstate a lost world that never truly existed, Ned’s longing for wilderness exemplifies “restorative nostalgia.”<sup>144</sup> After Ned’s search for the injured cow culminates in the blunt fact that “she was dead,” the narration shifts from the collective anonymity of livestock to the “specificity” of a singular animal.<sup>145</sup> Ned’s empathetic identification—imagining the cow’s wound as his own, “a rope sawing into the soft skin of his flank”—renders interspecies connection as an embodied, sensory act rather than a purely intellectual exercise.<sup>146</sup> This moment reflects the sensory aspect of animal communication, as seen in McConaghy’s portrayal of human-animal empathy in *Once There Were Wolves*. Both authors portray animal communication as an embodied experience, exemplifying how empathy is a key aspect of interspecies relationships rather than purely cognitive understanding. Arnott positions Ned between the ‘restorative’ pull of a romanticised pastoral ideal and the ‘reflective’ acknowledgement of loss and entanglement. This tension will resurface in Chapter Five’s discussion of Flynn’s *Mammoth*.

After Ned apologises for the cost of the cow, the farmer reassures him, acknowledging Ned’s efforts: “[i]t’s happened before, and it’ll happen again ... I’m grateful for the effort you put in to saving the damn thing. Lots of men would’ve let it drown.”<sup>147</sup> Similarly to the logging scene in which Ned distances himself from performances of hypermasculine behaviour, Arnott critiques traditional notions of masculinity that prioritise economic value over empathy and care. Arnott thus resists what Plumwood describes as “instrumental reductionism” which “identifies the other with what is only a part of their being, the part that is of use to us as flesh.”<sup>148</sup> Lia Bryant and Bridget Garnham conceptualise “farming masculinity” as a cultural construct rooted in “stoicism, physical strength and [the] breadwinner” role, where male farmers are seen as “strong, independent, and responsible for maintaining the farm and family legacy.”<sup>149</sup> They argue that in Australia’s “drought-stricken ... rural landscape,” this identity is shaped by values, pride, and economic pressures, reinforcing a “dominant discourse of ‘stoicism’” that links “economic failure” to personal worth and family legacy.<sup>150</sup> Referencing Judith Butler, they suggest that “failure” or “loss” can unravel “gender identity,” leaving farmers burdened with “shame.”<sup>151</sup> By centring the cow’s suffering, Arnott critiques the utilitarianism of “farming masculinity,” offering an alternative model based on empathy and responsibility.<sup>152</sup> While Ned feels guilt, the farmer dismisses the incident as inevitable, attributing it to the cow’s stubbornness. Nonetheless, Ned is critical of what he sees as his lack of “natural competence,” a model shown in his brothers’ and other men’s masculinity.<sup>153</sup> Ned’s struggle to provide for his family and feelings of

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<sup>142</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 105.

<sup>143</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), XIII.

<sup>144</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

<sup>145</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 106; Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human,” 567.

<sup>146</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 106.

<sup>147</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 106–107.

<sup>148</sup> Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 169.

<sup>149</sup> Bryant and Garnham, “The Fallen Hero,” 68.

<sup>150</sup> Bryant and Garnham, “The Fallen Hero,” 68, 72.

<sup>151</sup> Bryant and Garnham, “The Fallen Hero,” 72.

<sup>152</sup> Bryant and Garnham, “The Fallen Hero,” 68.

<sup>153</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 107.

incompetency reveals tensions in his male identity. Arnott contrasts masculine stoicism with what DeMond S. Miller and Charles S. Corprew describe as “ecological masculinity,” which emphasises empathy and environmental responsibility, challenging dominant views of masculinity rooted in economic pragmatism.<sup>154</sup>

Arnott extends his critique of industrial agriculture through the novel’s depiction of pesticides. This aligns with Rachel Carson’s warnings about the “indiscriminate” use of chemical insecticides in *Silent Spring* (1962).<sup>155</sup> Carson highlights how such “poisonous and biologically potent chemicals” have been “put ... into the hands of persons largely or wholly ignorant of their potentials for harm” and how they infiltrate ecosystems and bodies alike, often “without their consent and often without their knowledge.”<sup>156</sup> In *Limberlost*, this invisible toxicity manifests in Callie’s cancer, which Arnott links directly to the pesticides used on the orchard. The chemicals that ensured the productivity of Ned’s land simultaneously poisoned Callie: “settling on the bedding ... on tea towels, on shirts, on her skin and in her pores. The chemical taste of it in her mouth, coating her tongue, clogging her nostrils.”<sup>157</sup> While Ned shields himself with “thick gloves” and an “old flannel shirt” wrapped around his mouth and nose, Callie is exposed to the full force of these carcinogenic substances.<sup>158</sup> The novel thus critiques the uneven burden of environmental harm, revealing how industrial agriculture’s violence is not only enacted upon the land but upon the bodies of those most vulnerable to its consequences. As Carson warns, chemicals act as a “barrage ... hurled against the fabric of life.”<sup>159</sup> *Limberlost* echoes Carson’s sentiment by tracing how agricultural success is built on the slow, unseen destruction of human and ecological health.

Just as *Limberlost* exposes the hidden toll of industrial agriculture, so too does the novel reveal how the broader structures of colonialism remain unacknowledged by those who profit from them. While Ned comes to some understanding of the legacy of colonial violence in an abstract sense, the novel ultimately reinforces many aspects of white Australian masculinity, particularly his inability to confront his own role as a landowner who benefits from that violence. His ambivalence toward colonisation and its impact on his identity as a landowner reflects the limits of his moral development within the context of broader national and patriarchal ideologies. In the 1970s, Ned meets with his two adult daughters to share news of Callie’s cancer diagnosis with them. At that time, Australia was institutionally racist, with various legal and social policies reflecting and perpetuating racial discrimination. Until 1992, when the High Court’s Mabo decision overturned the concept of *terra nullius*, Indigenous Australians had no legal recognition of land ownership or rights.<sup>160</sup> Ned’s daughters, Grace and Sally, challenge him over his failure to return land to the

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<sup>154</sup> Bryant and Garnham, “The Fallen Hero,” 72; DeMond S. Miller and Charles S. Corprew, “Ecomasculinity, Livelihood Security, Caring, and Resilience in the Aftermath of Disasters and Ecological Devastation,” in *Men, Masculinities, and Earth*, ed. Paul M. Pulé and Martin Hultman (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 229.

<sup>155</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Penguin, 1999), 25.

<sup>156</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 25.

<sup>157</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 125.

<sup>158</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 125.

<sup>159</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 163.

<sup>160</sup> “The Mabo Case,” Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, accessed January 20, 2025, <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/mabo-case>.

Letteremairrener and Panninher peoples, drawing attention to colonial injustice and environmental damage caused by farming. Arnott heightens tension by contrasting the daughters' recognition of colonisation as invasion with Ned's pain over Callie's cancer and her physical decline. Sally challenges Ned: "[t]he invasion, Dad. I thought you'd at least know that your great-grandparents weren't exactly invited here," to which Ned responds, "[t]here are some things you don't understand."<sup>161</sup> When Sally counters, "[l]ike massacres?" Ned asserts, "[d]on't you talk to me like that."<sup>162</sup> His internal focalisation reveals that "[t]he only problem in all this history, ethics and economics was that it left no room to speak about Callie ... that the cancer was back."<sup>163</sup> Faced with Sally's "reasonable tone" and Grace's "condescension," Ned "felt off-balance, disoriented, angry" at their "impertinence" and yet aware of "the nag of unease. The sting of truth."<sup>164</sup> He had "prided himself on learning about the Letteremairrener people, and the Panninher who'd also lived in the valley ... But he'd treated it all as history ... he had done nothing about it."<sup>165</sup> While pining after First Nations' wisdom in his childhood and early adulthood, Ned's reverence remains rooted in appropriation, with no consideration of his own position as a beneficiary of Indigenous dispossession. His failure to reckon with his heritage as a descendant of settler Australians underscores his ongoing disconnection to the realities of Indigenous sovereignty. Potter observes that securing non-Indigenous belonging often involves dismissing Indigenous claims to place as resolved. She writes: "discourse is fraught with what is covertly (and sometimes overtly) required in the process of securing an assured non-Indigenous belonging: the consignment of Indigenous claims to place as past and resolved."<sup>166</sup> Ned observes the absence of Tasmania's First peoples but treats Indigenous sovereignty as "history," consigning "Indigenous claims to place as past and resolved."<sup>167</sup>

*Limberlost* prioritises Ned's emotional journey and connection to the land and its animals, opting for resolution over confronting active unbelonging. Ned's view of the land reflects a settler-colonial mindset, where the bush is viewed either romantically or demonically. Struggling with the desire to share Callie's diagnosis while avoiding responsibility for colonial violence and Indigenous sovereignty, Ned justifies his ownership of the orchard to himself by rationalising the hard work invested in it:

[b]e serious, he wanted to say to them. You don't just give away an orchard. It's not what people do. Where would we have gone? Do you know how hard your mother and I worked for that place? Do you understand the blood and sweat we put into it? Did you not enjoy your childhood on that property, in that valley, on the banks of that river—of kanamaluka? Do you understand how lucky you've been?<sup>168</sup>

In a context where his daughters share their knowledge of colonial invasion, Ned attempts to resolve "the looseness of his connection to the place ... how tenuous his grip on the world was" by proving his

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<sup>161</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 195.

<sup>162</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 195.

<sup>163</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 195.

<sup>164</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 197, 198.

<sup>165</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 198.

<sup>166</sup> Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 30.

<sup>167</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 198; Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 30.

<sup>168</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 198.

belonging.<sup>169</sup> Hughes-d'Aeth suggests that “the reality of successful colonisation,” as seen in agricultural labour, is a “sacrament of [human] lives” that secures both land and life, a concept Arnott illustrates through Ned’s efforts to make the orchard profitable for his family.<sup>170</sup> Drawing from Potter’s theorisation, Jack Kirne’s explanation of white belonging shows how this legitimacy hinges on ignoring Indigenous presence:

rightful ownership and belonging to the land can be articulated by ongoing and effective cultivation of place—ownership of the land is legitimised through its management, largely through exploitative agricultural practices. However, for this to remain stable, Indigenous presence must be wilfully overlooked.<sup>171</sup>

Arnott wrestles with the politics of non-Indigenous belonging in a novel published at a time when Australia’s consciousness of the myth of *terra nullius* was growing. However, Ned’s refusal to engage with his daughters’ critique of colonialism reinforces the discomfort around these historical injustices. The daughters—idealistic 1970s university students—are depicted as uncaring, shrill, and binary in their thinking. Arnott clearly directs us to sympathise with Ned and to be incensed at his daughters for not allowing him to tell them about Callie’s cancer. By considering Ned’s journey to adulthood and ethical formation, when given the opportunity to reconsider his own ignorance towards Indigenous dispossession, Ned fails to ethically care and respond. In this way, Arnott avoids any comfortable resolution to Ned’s part in the maintenance of dispossession through his land holdings. In this moment of tension with his daughters, Ned wrestles with “how important his connection to the river was,” his memories of the whale, and his work on the land, memories that distract him.<sup>172</sup> The scene resolves without further reference to his daughters’ plea.

“Come right up against it”

A defining experience in Ned’s movement towards an ethics of care is his encounter with the “mad whale.”<sup>173</sup> Arnott opens his novel with a local myth about a vengeful whale who has allegedly attacked sailors at the mouth of the Tamar River. Portrayed through gothic aesthetics, the myth bookends *Limberlost* and is a source of great fear and uncertainty for Ned as it appears in fragmented memories throughout his life and the novel. Half-remembered details about the encounter surface in moments when Ned wishes to recall and authenticate his father’s heroism. The novel culminates with Ned’s complete memory that depicts his father’s model of care, one that undoes the gothic dramatism that shapes Ned’s renditions of the “mad whale.”<sup>174</sup> The whale is initially imagined to be a creature of retributive violence, occupying Ned’s thoughts “day” and “night” as he obsesses over the destruction it brings: “[a]ll day he thought of the smashed ketches and skiffs, of an unseen giant with a blade snagged in its brain. At night his dreams were flooded with blood-

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<sup>169</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 32.

<sup>170</sup> Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, “Settlers of the Marsh: Settler Desire and its Vicissitudes,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 9, no. 3 (2019): 342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/2201473X.2018.1491154>.

<sup>171</sup> Jack Kirne, “Agricultural Catastrophes: Revising Settler Belonging and the Farming Novel in *Everyman’s Rules for Scientific Living*,” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature: JASAL* 20, no. 1 (2020): 7, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/JASAL/article/view/14137>; Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 30.

<sup>172</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 199.

<sup>173</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

<sup>174</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

foamed water.”<sup>175</sup> Ned’s juvenile anticipation of a vicious monster is extinguished in the climactic encounter with the whale and its calf. Ned’s father, William, takes his three sons to the river to disprove the “nonsense” story.<sup>176</sup> By contrasting Ned’s imagined experience with the truth and reality of the encounter, Arnott reworks Ned’s expectations of masculinity and heroism, instead promoting a template of quiet humility and deep respect for animals through his father. William:

[h]ad not moved, not an inch, as a whale exploded from the water a few yards from their boat. That was the man Ned wanted back. The man who’d locked eyes with a giant in the night, then turned to his shivering sons and said, “They’re resting ... She’s as interested in us as we are in dragonflies ... If you’re going to fear something, boys, it’s best to understand it ... To come right up against it.”<sup>177</sup>

Rather than requiring saving from a supposed monster, Ned, his father, and brothers meet a whale mother and its calf, neither of which appears concerned by the humans.<sup>178</sup> Arnott consequently inverts the expectation of human whale watching and focuses on the mother’s quiet, non-threatening presence as it gazes upon them. By contrasting this depiction of the whale with the quoll’s fear and rage at being trapped by Ned, Arnott employs moments where mutual human and animal awareness of the other is conveyed through gaze and aural communication.

Arnott positions the whale as a creature of both alterity and “familiarity” as it bares its eye to Ned: it “exposed to us the creamy striations of its belly. Twisted through the water so that the hugeness of its eye was close to us.”<sup>179</sup> Ned perceives the eye as both “shockingly familiar in its mammalian warmth” and also “filled with starlight: an eye lit by a half-dark heaven.”<sup>180</sup> For Ned, meeting the “mad whale” means confronting the myth surrounding a nightmarish force of unpredictable violence in whose presence he is entirely vulnerable.<sup>181</sup> Rather than positioning William as the hero who saves his sons from the “giant in the night,” Arnott conjures an encounter of tranquil contact between humans and animals.<sup>182</sup> Arnott’s depiction of Ned’s encounter with the whale resonates with Haraway’s articulation of the “contact zone,” where ethics are not abstract but emerge from tangible, situated interactions.<sup>183</sup> William, the archetypal father figure, remedies Ned’s fear with the reality that “[s]he’s as interested in us as we are in dragonflies.”<sup>184</sup> In a moment devoid of violence and laden with attentiveness and calmness modelled by his father, Ned witnesses peaceful human and animal co-existence. Arnott recodifies the hero (Ned’s father) and the villain (the ‘mad whale’) by shifting from an anticipated macho pursuit of violence to a portrayal focused on human-animal accord. Ned’s masculine moral development ends with him recalling his father’s calm care for animals, a peaceful encounter that replaces domination with cross-species empathy.

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<sup>175</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

<sup>176</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

<sup>177</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 218–219.

<sup>178</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 1.

<sup>179</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 199.

<sup>180</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 199.

<sup>181</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

<sup>182</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 218–219.

<sup>183</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>184</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 218.

Arnott aims to provide resolution in the novel's conclusion through Ned's older brother Bill's return home from war and the complete memory of the "mad whale."<sup>185</sup> The novel's final paragraph encapsulates Ned's intense and unparalleled emotional release resulting from Bill's return: "this hugeness of feeling. This undamming of a whole summer's fear, this half-sickening lurch to joy."<sup>186</sup> Neither "at weddings," "births," "funerals," nor "in the presence of whales ... Not as Callie's last breath eased out of her ... Not even then, at the very end of his life, did he feel it again."<sup>187</sup> Offering a passionately resonant account of Ned's long and full life, Arnott completes Ned's Bildungsroman with reference to this emotional climax. However, Julianne Guillard's reflection on the Bildungsroman—"[c]an an individual succeed—or grow into adulthood, if adulthood is predicated on success—if modern society is failing?"—suggests that this individual success is compromised by the failure of the larger society in which the protagonist is embedded.<sup>188</sup> While Ned's personal journey culminates in emotional release, his failure to fully reckon with Indigenous dispossession demonstrates how individual success is complicated by unresolved social issues. Potter's discussion of the "prevalence of haunting tropes in narratives of national reconciliation (or its failure/refusal)" aligns with Arnott's narrative, the resolution of which underscores a broader failure to address Indigenous erasure and dispossession.<sup>189</sup> Ned's memorialisation of Letteremairrener and Pairelehoinner peoples reflects a discourse of Indigenous "absence and erasure" and problematically reinforces the myth of total Indigenous genocide in Tasmania.<sup>190</sup> Interestingly, the initially haunting figures in the novel are rendered idyllic in the conclusion. Ned's nostalgic recollections of quolls and whales offer a sanitised remembrance that avoids deeper engagement with the land's history. Arnott's novel reflects Guillard's conundrum: an individual like Ned cannot fully succeed or grow if modern society, built on colonial violence, remains flawed.<sup>191</sup> Arnott's communicative animals in *Limberlost* lead Ned to interrogate and contend with his masculine identity, capacity for violence, and the value of care, and yet Ned's ethical journey remains inadequate in his confrontations with the violent legacies and realities of colonisation.

In contemporary Australia, the exploitation of land, animals, and people has a shared history with ecological degradation, colonial dispossession, and the domination of women. By troubling traditional ideas of Australian masculinity that partner with anthropocentric colonial patriarchy, Arnott resists the normalisation of suffering in systems that perpetuate violence towards humans and animals. Instead, he depicts how caring relationships with animals are essential to the formation and enactment of masculine moral and ethical sensibilities. In his realist novel that is influenced by pastoral and gothic aesthetics, Arnott's animal

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<sup>185</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 2.

<sup>186</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 226.

<sup>187</sup> Arnott, *Limberlost*, 226.

<sup>188</sup> Julianne Guillard, "Falling Short: *The Bildungsroman and the Crisis of Self-Fashioning* by Aleksandar Stević (Review)," *Studies in the Novel* 53, no. 2 (2021): 203, <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/i-falling-short-bildungsroman-crisis-self/docview/2547639418/se-2>.

<sup>189</sup> Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 126.

<sup>190</sup> Potter, *Writing Belonging*, 126.

<sup>191</sup> Guillard, "Falling Short," 203.

communication is attached to either imagined or real instances of animal suffering and is accompanied by Ned's responses to this suffering. Ned's interactions with animals punctuate his journey to manhood and alert his conscience to the effects of harm and violence. *Limberlost* differs from many traditional Australian Bildungsroman narratives by deeply engaging colonial legacies and ethical issues through Ned's interactions with animals, rather than personal growth alone. Arnott's communicative animals lead Ned to interrogate and contend with his masculine identity, capacity for violence, and the value of care, and yet Ned's ethical journey remains inadequate in his confrontations with the violent legacies and realities of colonisation.

## Chapter 2: Ink, Vomit, and Blood: The Ripple Effects of Care, Carelessness, and Violence in Erin Hortle's *The Octopus and I*

Erin Hortle's *The Octopus and I* adopts a realist framework but deliberately disrupts it through avant-garde poetics, using experimental animal perspectives to experiment with the parameters of realism. Unlike *Limberlost*, which remains firmly within a realist Bildungsroman form, Hortle's novel pushes against conventional realism while retaining its grounding in plausible, localised contexts. In doing so, the text exemplifies how hybridised realism can creatively depict both animal communication and ethical care. In *The Octopus and I*, Hortle writes the story of a woman, Lucy, in search of connection to place and people. The novel casts Lutrawita (Tasmania) as a site of promise: Lucy is an Australian mainlander who grew up in Melbourne, graduated from university, and then moved to Tasmania in search of a new life. Both Arnott and Hortle implement conventional, highly saleable stories of middle-class white men and women coming to self, yet both refurbish these traditional storylines to contend with larger forces of environmental, masculine, patriarchal, and colonial violence and address the importance of ethical care. Like *Limberlost*, Hortle's novel emerges out of a long tradition of Tasmanian authors grappling with Tasmania's environmental and colonial past and present. Hortle traces the reformation of Lucy's identity as she navigates her changed sense of embodiment after breast cancer and in the context of her changed relationship with her partner Jem. Lucy's connection with octopuses and her search for meaning whilst confronting a sense of 'failed femininity,' alongside her relationships with other women, are central to the novel and in Lucy's journey to care. Set on Paradarmerme country in the south-east Tasmanian town of Teralina/Eaglehawk Neck, the novel focuses on littoral spaces between land and sea. By setting a story of identity formation in Tasmania, Hortle could be seen to perpetuate the romanticisation of islands as spaces of Western possession and as sites of identity creation, explained by Elizabeth McMahon in her work on Western 'enthrallment' with how "identity, space and desire" can be transformed in enclosed and isolated island 'worlds.'<sup>1</sup> However, Hortle is aware of the neo-colonialist trope of self-discovery and addresses the problematic aspects of Lucy's quest for belonging.

The largely chronological narrative is divided into three parts and dedicates five of its eight sections to animal perspectives. Hortle employs avant-garde poetics to craft these perspectives that disrupt conventional storytelling without intruding into the human-centric plot. This experimental use of style shapes animal communication in the novel and distinguishes Hortle's approach from a solely realist depiction. The animal chapters focus on the biological traits and social habitats of each species, with distinct language styles tailored to their perspectives: the octopuses' voices are rendered through first-person stream of consciousness; the seals through free indirect discourse; and the mutton-bird and human characters

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth McMahon, *Islands, Identity and the Literary Imagination* (Anthem Press, 2016), 28.

through third-person omniscient narration. Hortle's varied stylistic approach constructs a new anthropomorphic mode that aligns with a multispecies ethic, enriching what might otherwise be a human-centred narrative. Hortle augments what Ghosh calls realism's "deliberately prosaic" tendencies with these inset passages, which extend but do not contravene the novel's realism.<sup>2</sup> Hortle's delineation between human and animal perspectives while maintaining an overarching realist framework allows the novel to capture the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds without reducing the latter to allegory or fantasy. Animal communication is achieved through both the animal-narrated chapters and the human perspectives, where it emerges in animals' gazes and through empathetic human-animal relationships. In this way, Hortle's realism shows that it is possible to engage with climate change and the nonhuman through the probable and the localised. Throughout the novel, animal encounters are mediated through gendered codes. Jem's environmental advocacy, Shayne's fishing ritual, and Mitch's domineering authority exemplify how patriarchal performances of masculinity directly influence the ripple effects of care and carelessness. Recognising this treatment of masculinity is key, particularly since hyper-contemporary Australian fiction frequently complicates the ethical and posthumanist goals of Critical Animal Studies through its preoccupation with masculinity. The violent fate of each animal at the hands of humans further underscores the ecological stakes of the novel. Two of the novel's human protagonists, Lucy and Jem, demonstrate their awareness of climate change, interest in environmental advocacy, and concern for the preservation of animal life. Lucy works in marketing for a Tasmanian Devil conservation site, and her partner Jem is a Tasmanian-born sustainable abalone farmer and environmentalist. Activities like 'octopussing' with two older women, Flo and Poppy, tattooing octopuses over her scarred chest after a car accident damages her breast implants, and mutton-birding with Flo and her son Harry are attempts to resolve Lucy's ungrounded identity post-cancer. However, these methods of belonging minimise Indigenous cultural traditions, revealing Hortle's self-awareness of the neo-colonial overtones of the self-discovery trope. As the novel progresses, Lucy's relationship with Jem deteriorates, culminating in an affair with Harry. A subplot involving a local boy named Jake, his father Shayne, and two uncles culminates in the death of a seal. This event triggers a series of impulsive actions by Jem, resulting in a tragic accident that causes Shayne's death. Lucy ultimately decides to leave Jem and moves in with Flo by the novel's end. This chapter examines Hortle's portrayal of care, carelessness, and violence as interconnected forces shaped by settler-colonialism and patriarchy in Tasmania. I argue that Hortle's focus on liquid materiality—ink, vomit, and blood—illustrates the effects of care and carelessness, grounding the novel's ethical exploration in the material consequences of ethical and careless actions. These ripples cascade across relational and ecological boundaries, highlighting their interconnectedness and lasting consequences. Carelessness affects both human and animal lives, while acts of care open possibilities for ethical transformation. By adapting a typical narrative of self-discovery to address ethical questions, Hortle aligns with her view that realism involves

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<sup>2</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 26.

“thinking through the complexities of the animals and telling their stories in a manner that would do their lives some sort of justice.”<sup>3</sup>

Hortle’s debut novel emerged from her 2018 PhD thesis titled “Writing the Nonhuman: The Octopus and I: Anthropomorphism and Posthumanism in narrative.”<sup>4</sup> Her thesis delves into the complexities of representing animal consciousness in literature and confronts the inevitable anthropomorphism involved when using human language to depict animal thoughts. Published by Allen & Unwin, the publisher of Michelle de Kretser, Sofie Laguna, Christos Tsiolkas, and Charlotte Wood, Hortle’s novel aligns with their overall commitment to sustainability, which encompasses both the books they publish and their production processes.<sup>5</sup> While the novel has not received any awards, critics have praised Hortle’s nuanced depiction of human-animal interactions and varied depictions of animal perspectives. Georgia White compares Hortle’s novel to other notable examples of ecological and climate fiction, such as Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018) and Alice Robinson’s *The Glad Shout* (2019).<sup>6</sup> White praises Hortle’s unique portrayal of the octopus’s “alien consciousness” and her effective engagement with the existential threats posed by climate change.<sup>7</sup> Amanda McLeod commends the diverse perspectives and conflicting views that arise due to the range of human and animal characters, noting that “Hortle blurs the lines between black and white,” “prompting readers “to question the notions of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’”<sup>8</sup> The inner cover of the book, featuring Hokusai’s “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife” (1814), hints at the novel’s engagement with themes of intimacy, guilt, self-awareness, and moral boundaries. The inner cover reproduces Hokusai’s *The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife* (1814), a woodblock print depicting a woman in erotic entanglement with two octopuses. The disconcerting mixture of pleasure, intimacy, and threat in the image signals the novel’s concern with encounters that blur species boundaries and test moral limits. With this image, the book frames its exploration of intimacy, guilt, and self-awareness within a visual tradition already charged with questions of transgression and desire. After her dalliance with Harry, Lucy becomes engrossed in octopus research and encounters Hokusai’s print. Imagining the octopus and then Harry between her legs, she experiences guilt. While considering the moral taboo of “[b]estiality,” Lucy ponders the octopus’s unique ability to taste through touch, questioning if it could “know” not just her physical actions but her deeper self.<sup>9</sup> This moment harnesses what Mark Fisher identifies as the weird’s production of “a sensation of wrongness,” unsettling the reader by veering away from familiar frames of intimacy and morality, and forcing us to ask where the limits of care might lie. This effect is explored in further detail in Chapter Four.<sup>10</sup> Noting these themes in the novel, Erin Stewart acknowledges Hortle’s subtle approach to the idea of “melding with other

<sup>3</sup> Laura Jean McKay, Erin Hortle, and Chris Flynn, “Animal perspectives: Breaking the language barrier,” *Griffith REVIEW*, no. 71 (2021), <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/animal-perspective/>.

<sup>4</sup> Erin Hortle, “Writing the Nonhuman: The Octopus and I: Anthropomorphism and Posthumanism in Narrative” (PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.25959/23238560.v1>.

<sup>5</sup> “About Allen & Unwin,” Allen & Unwin, accessed October 9, 2023, <https://www.allenandunwin.com/about>.

<sup>6</sup> Georgia White, “Our octopuses, ourselves,” review of *The Octopus and I*, by Erin Hortle, *Overland*, September 2, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> White, “Our octopuses.”

<sup>8</sup> Amanda McLeod, “*The Octopus and I* by Erin Hortle,” review of *The Octopus and I*, by Erin Hortle, *Writing NSW*, April 28, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> Erin Hortle, *The Octopus and I* (Allen & Unwin, 2020), 314.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 9.

life forms” seen in how, “[r]ather than becoming an octopus, Lucy feels herself communing and cooperating with them,” an approach Stewart describes as “unique and moving.”<sup>11</sup> Fiona Wright commends the novel’s animal characters for counterbalancing human dramas but notes that “Hortle’s attempts to enter their subjectivity aren’t always ... successful.”<sup>12</sup> Hortle’s anthropomorphic creation of animal subjectivity and specific focus on the octopus, a creature of radical alterity with which Lucy forms a source of deep and intimate connection, marks the novel as a poignant commentary on otherness and the possibilities of connections beyond human experience. Each review responds to Hortle’s depiction of cross-species relationships, interactions, communication and mutual empathy. Rather than focusing on empathy, in this chapter I explore how Hortle addresses carelessness that manifests in thoughtless violence, avoidance of responsibility, and ethical ambivalence. I place the novel in conversation with emerging work in care ethics that confronts impoverished value-systems and embedded carelessness in social structures that perpetuate violence.

My analysis centres on how Hortle navigates an ethics of care and is guided by Josephine Donovan, Thom van Dooren, and Mariá Puig de la Bellacasa’s work on care. Donovan points to the problem of how animals are made to “figure only insofar as they amplify or symbolize aspects of the human characters’ relationships or situations; the moral reality of the animals’ own suffering is elided.”<sup>13</sup> Hortle’s text is self-conscious about this tendency. While Lucy’s encounters with octopuses reflect her own bodily and emotional journey, the novel simultaneously insists on the circumstantial realities of the animals themselves. By presenting the perspective of the octopus, Hortle destabilises the anthropocentric aesthetic design that Donovan critiques, even as the risk of allegorical reduction remains. In this sense, Hortle’s hybrid realism both yields to and resists the “aesthetic effect” Donovan identifies, staging an unresolved tension between animals as metaphors and animals as subjects of care.<sup>14</sup> This tension resonates with van Dooren’s insistence that care is never abstract or symbolic but a situated practice that asks, “*what* am I really caring for, *why*, and at *what cost* to whom?”<sup>15</sup> Hortle’s novel engages directly with these questions. Van Dooren highlights that by contending with the practice of care we confront “broader frameworks of value” that deem certain lives more worthy than others in an age of species depletion and extinction.<sup>16</sup> He builds a nuanced vision of ethical care that involves necessary forms of violence, explaining: “care for some individuals and species translates into suffering and death for others, the ‘violent-care’ of conservation ... In short, care is grounded in all of the ‘inescapable troubles of interdependent existences,’ and can offer no guarantee of a ‘smooth

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<sup>11</sup> Erin Stewart, “*The Octopus and I* by Erin Hortle,” review of *The Octopus and I*, by Erin Hortle, *Arts Hub*, May 11, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Fiona Wright, “Erin Hortle: *The Octopus and I*,” review of *The Octopus and I*, by Erin Hortle, *The Saturday Paper*, April 18, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 47.

<sup>14</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 47.

<sup>15</sup> Thom van Dooren, “Care,” *Environmental Humanities* 5, no. 1 (2014): 292, emphasis in original, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615541>.

<sup>16</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 294.

harmonious world.”<sup>17</sup> Van Dooren ultimately promotes the recognition of relationality and responsibility, and practice of care and conservation, an approach that Hortle reflects in her novel.<sup>18</sup>

With van Dooren’s work, I also make use of the concept of carelessness that Elizabeth DeLoughrey discusses in her response to The Care Collective’s *The Care Manifesto* in which they state that “our world is one in which carelessness reigns.”<sup>19</sup> DeLoughrey notes that a sense of “ambivalence” surrounds violence and that “carefulness” is tied to a recognition of responsibility.<sup>20</sup> This tension between care and carelessness resonates with the settler-colonial legacies of violence that Hortle confronts by setting her novel in Tasmania. Both Lucy and Jem’s conduct towards others exemplifies the broader patterns of “ambivalence” and responsibility-avoidance that Hortle explores in her representation of white belonging and patriarchal violence within a contemporary settler-colonial context.<sup>21</sup> Hortle’s cast of female and male characters demonstrate the capacity for both care and violence and yet the novel clearly endorses caring relationships and highlights exploitative violence. Hortle thus subverts the stereotypical alignment of femininity with care and masculinity with violence and instead emphasises the problem of carelessness, regardless of gender. As in Arnott’s *Limberlost*, Hortle’s treatment of animals echoes Puig de la Bellacasa’s argument that “an ethics of care cannot be about a realm of normative moral obligations but rather about thick, impure, involvement in a world where the question of how to care needs to be posed.”<sup>22</sup> By exploring both the impulse of carelessness and the journey toward care, Hortle engages with what van Dooren describes as the “ethical obligation ... to look after another” and the necessity that “we get involved in some concrete way, that we do.”<sup>23</sup> This responsibility confronts an “ambivalence” about violent legacies that profoundly shape Tasmania today and the expression of ethical care.<sup>24</sup> Hortle makes overt the effect of place dynamics on ethical conduct, drawing connections between carelessness, white belonging, and patriarchal violence.

Drawing on the novel’s island setting, watery locations, focus on marine animals, animal gestation, femininity, and infertility, I argue that Hortle depicts Eaglehawk Neck as a “hydrocommons.”<sup>25</sup> Explaining that the “hydrocommons” is both a concept and a methodology, Astrida Neimanis writes:

[w]e are created in water, we gestate in water, we are born into an atmosphere of the same water although more diffuse, we take in water, we harbor it, it sustains and protects us, it leaves ... at the same time as we are always to some extent, in it. The passage from body of water to body of water (always as body of water) is never synecdochal or metaphoric; it is radically

<sup>17</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292; Puig de la Bellacasa, “‘Nothing Comes Without Its World,’” 197–9.

<sup>18</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292.

<sup>19</sup> DeLoughrey writes: “[w]hile the authors of the recently published *The Care Manifesto* open their tome with the statement that ‘[o]ur world is one in which carelessness reigns’ ... and examine the violence wrought by ‘careless states’ ... ‘careless kinships’ ... and ‘carewashing’ corporations ... , I want to shift the attention here to where *carefulness* reigns, albeit often invisibly, as a feminist embodied practice.” See Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “Care,” *Women’s Studies* 50, no. 8 (2021): 812–813, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2021.1994317>; Andreas Chatzidakis et al., *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (Verso Books, 2020), 6, 9, 16, 13, <https://www.proquest.com/legacydocview/EBC/6342322?accountid=14512>.

<sup>20</sup> DeLoughrey, “Care,” 813.

<sup>21</sup> DeLoughrey, “Care,” 813.

<sup>22</sup> María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 6.

<sup>23</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292.

<sup>24</sup> DeLoughrey, “Care,” 813.

<sup>25</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 86.

material. These complex and shared cyclings—body, to body, to body—comprise our planetary hydrocommons.<sup>26</sup>

Neimanis specifies further that the “amniotic relations” of our connection to other “bodies of water” contain the facts of “biological materiality” and is also a methodology by which we can comprehend our interdependence to others.<sup>27</sup> Neimanis’s figuration of distributed, connected “bodies of water” within a “hydrocommons” fosters a politics of care and recognition of ethical responsibility that goes beyond metaphor.<sup>28</sup> The figuration comes from a feminist new materialist lens and ethical framework that understands relations between self, others, animals, and place as connected through water.<sup>29</sup> The notion of the “hydrocommons” is guided by the question, “[h]ow might both our difference and commonality as bodies of water help us cultivate more attentive relations to other bodies of water, both connected to and different from us?”<sup>30</sup> Shared by human and animal, Hortle’s first-person narrative enacts a literary “hydrocommons” of “attentive relations.”<sup>31</sup> Through this “hydrocommons,” Hortle portrays how the substances of ink, vomit, and blood palpably convey the ripple effects of carelessness.<sup>32</sup>

My analysis follows the novel chronologically and is organised through a focus on how care and violence determine human relationality between self, others, animals, and place, with specific attention to moments when one response dominates. By foregrounding moments of violence and conveying them through animal communication, Hortle poses critical questions about ethical care and invites us to reckon with violence that can realistically and necessarily be circumvented. She highlights how Tasmania’s colonial history shapes contemporary ethical conduct and how acts of violence in the novel exemplify careless attitudes. Tasmania’s history of British colonial expansion, Port Arthur’s penal colony, attempted Indigenous genocide, a convict-manned whaling station, the tragic Port Arthur massacre, and enduring colonial forces in modernity—explicit in the construction of highways originally designed without care or concern for ecological welfare—shape how care can eventuate in this location. In the ink, vomit, and blood that appear in the novel, as well as through animal communication, Hortle renders visible and visceral the violence that manifests in Tasmania. By examining moments when these representations of violence appear and how they exemplify careless attitudes, this chapter attends to Hortle’s navigation of ethical conduct in contemporary Tasmania, as shaped by its settler-colonial history.

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<sup>26</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>27</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 98, 37.

<sup>28</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>29</sup> While feminist theorists such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray have long explored the symbolic and corporeal dimensions of women and water, my analysis is refracted through Astrida Neimanis’s feminist new materialist framework, which foregrounds the environmental and material interconnections of the hydrocommons. Neimanis extends these earlier feminist perspectives by situating water through her materialist analysis and explicitly environmentalist ethic. See Julia Kristeva, *The Power of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (Columbia University Press, 1982); Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Cornell UP, 1985).

<sup>30</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 67.

<sup>31</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>32</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

### Avant-Garde Poetics

The animals Hortle represent do not ‘talk’ as we understand speech and dialogue in narrative but rather have consciousness that is translated through narrative. Hortle opens the novel with the perspective of an octopus:

[m]y body is brimming is pulsing is purring is ready. The world moves so slowly as tide washes with inhale in exhale. It was enough before but now my body is full and I notice too much and I touch I see I taste the fish filth clotting my skin. I notice it is not clean enough for my eggs and my den so snug with its doormat of crab husks not enough for my eggs. The world sighs slowly but I need it to sway swiftly I need currents to swirl and whorl and rush.<sup>33</sup>

Immediately, we are met with an anthropomorphic animal perspective unlike our own, yet containing a thread of similarity, as the “doormat of crab husks” signals domesticity.<sup>34</sup> Aiding a conceptualisation of the novel as representing a “hydrocommons,” Hortle invites us to embrace the perspective of an animal immersed in, and dependent on, water.<sup>35</sup> As Donovan warns:

in literature, one of the most common devices that exploit animal pain for aesthetic effect is the animal metaphor, or, more specifically, the animal ‘stand-in’ or surrogate, where the animal acts as a substitute for a human and/or is employed as an objectified vehicle through which to reveal or express human feelings.<sup>36</sup>

Hortle’s experimental use of octopus perspectives may risk being read as another iteration of allegorical substitution, yet it also opens a space to ask whether such departures from strict realism can instead register the animals’ subjectivity. In representing the octopus, Hortle ironically reaches for a deeply human mode of defamiliarising language by employing something akin to modernist stream-of-consciousness. By combining animal subjectivity with this distinctly human narrative approach to rendering consciousness, Hortle emphasises both the inherent unknowability of animal experiences and the importance of attempting to imagine nonhuman perspectives. Hortle clearly echoes elements of the poetry of H.D. and Gertrude Stein. While H.D. effectively embraced modernist techniques, such as fragmentation and non-linear narrative structures to craft meandering viewpoints, to transcend the supposed typical linearity of human consciousness, and articulate the embodiment of landscape, Stein’s innovative prose and syntax represented “a kind of phenomenological moment in which consciousness meets (but does not process) perceptual reality.”<sup>37</sup> Through multiple points of view, active verbs, sentence repetition, and participles that “stress ... process,” “Stein lessens the traditional subject’s role and suggests instead a multivalent perspective.”<sup>38</sup> Stein’s experimental approach challenges readerly expectations, presenting sentences that repeat and sound familiar but that ultimately defy clear interpretation. Through this syntactic flatness, Stein’s work conveys a “cumulative effect” that blurs conventional categories of meaning and value, driving readers into new

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<sup>33</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>34</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>36</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 46.

<sup>37</sup> Susan E. Hawkins, “Sneak Previews: Gertrude Stein’s Syntax in *Tender Buttons*,” in *Gertrude Stein and the Making of Literature*, ed. Shirley Neuman and Ira B. Nadel (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1988), 119, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08541-5\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08541-5_8).

<sup>38</sup> Hawkins, “*Tender Buttons*,” 120.

territory.<sup>39</sup> In *Tender Buttons*, Stein also explores the house as a “female domain,” finding pleasure in considering the household space, its rooms, objects, and activities, portraying them as part of life’s tactile and important experiences. The mental buttons in her narrative are suggestive and indicative of the flow of experiential existence.<sup>40</sup>

In Hortle’s creation of the octopus’s perspectives, its movement in the water and the reference to the “doormat” in its den, she echoes Stein’s poetic illustration of home and domesticity and establishes a connection point between humans and animals through common experiences of home and habitat.<sup>41</sup> Hortle clearly draws from the innovative narrative techniques of H.D. and Stein, drawing on what is known and unknown about animal subjectivity, and experimenting with the boundaries between human and animal worlds through narrative play. Hortle’s anthropomorphism immerses us in the octopus’s world, highlighting its solitary nature and acute sensory receptors. The poetic, lyrical style of the focalisation, repetitive verbs, and playful bending of diction and syntax evoke a sense of octopus physiology with tentacles that walk, swim, and sway in water and that also “touch” and taste.<sup>42</sup> Hortle mimics the ocean’s ebb and flow, as the octopus moves towards the shore: “I ... ripple and dance and jet and twirl across the bed of swaying weed towards the thunder and rumble that beckons and calls.”<sup>43</sup> By focusing on the octopus’s movement and the reciprocity between it and the water that “beckons and calls,” Hortle harnesses multisensory vocabulary to capture how the animal sees, tastes, smells, feels, and moves.<sup>44</sup> Through unbroken syntax, the octopus reveals its multisensory capacity:

[s]omething grabs at me and clasps one of my arms and gently pulls at me. I touch her see her taste that she is like me and I curl my arm around her wrist and she is warm unlike me. I taste she is curious is scared is sad is frantic her skin tells me even though it is dumb skin it tells me.<sup>45</sup>

Hortle’s portrayal of multisensory experience is reminiscent of Inti’s synaesthesia in McConaghy’s *Once There Were Wolves*, though McConaghy’s narrative is presented solely through a human lens. Both Hortle and McConaghy represent embodied connections between woman and animal created through the sensory blending of another’s pain which amplifies empathy. This kind of embodied connection is distinct from Arnott’s representation of Ned’s relationship with the quoll in *Limberlost*. While Ned’s connection with the quoll is significant, it remains grounded in realism and thus in human perception and understanding that relies on an external, observational relationship between human and animal. Hortle includes directly narrated animal perspectives. Hortle’s animal communication mirrors Wolfe’s call to engage with the “specificity of nonhuman animals” by representing the octopus’s embodied reality.<sup>46</sup> Hortle amplifies the similarities and differences between the octopus and the unknown human who we later know to be Lucy:

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<sup>39</sup> Hawkins, “*Tender Buttons*,” 122.

<sup>40</sup> Hawkins, “*Tender Buttons*,” 123.

<sup>41</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3–5.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfe, “Human, All Too Human,” 567.

both are female, one is warm-blooded, the other cold-blooded. As Neimanis writes, by “attun[ing] ourselves empathically towards other bodies of water, beyond us,” we might “experience the spatial scale of water at the visceral level, as that which irrigates our own bodily systems and carries away our waste.”<sup>47</sup> Hortle portrays the octopus’s “watery bodiedness,” its ability to “taste” Lucy, perceive her gender, and sense her emotions.<sup>48</sup> This prompts us to consider what else the octopus can taste in waters chemically altered by “anthropogenically created pollutants.”<sup>49</sup> Later in the novel, Hortle references pollutants when Lucy and Jem’s father discuss why octopuses cross the isthmus. Lucy theorises, “[m]aybe they head to the ocean side of the neck because there’re so many sea caves and more ... nutrients in the water over there,” to which Jem’s father agrees, acknowledging “the pollution from the salmon farms in Norfolk Bay. Thousands of diseased fish trapped in those pens.”<sup>50</sup> In a discussion of how humanity ‘reshapes’ water through ‘rematerialisation’ in the form of aquifer depletion, river damming, and pollution, Neimanis writes that “water is also ‘what we make it’ quite literally.”<sup>51</sup> Neimanis’s concept of water as something we shape and “make” is conjured through the octopus’s embodiment and acute sensitivity.<sup>52</sup> Water is more than “simply something ‘out there’—environment, resource, commodity, backdrop—[it is] also the stuff of human bodies.”<sup>53</sup> Neimanis suggests that by developing a sense of “bodies of water” connected in a “hydrocommons,” we can develop knowledge of our own imbrication with others and thus recognise our ethical responsibility.<sup>54</sup>

Why does the novel privilege the octopus as its primary animal interlocutor? Hortle chooses a female creature, one who can move over land but lives in water, and whose biological purpose is bound up with care for, and defence of, its eggs—of new life. Lucy becomes fascinated with the migration of female octopuses across the isthmus. They brood and safeguard their eggs in sea caves before dying in a process called senescence. As an animal who models care through its sacrificial journey across the isthmus, Hortle’s octopus is both materially and symbolically emblematic of care in the “hydrocommons.”<sup>55</sup> Hortle’s portrayal aligns with Neimanis’s concept of “gestationality,” which frames water as a medium for life’s emergence and transformation.<sup>56</sup> Neimanis develops the idea of “amniotics”—a logic of “interpermeation” where bodies, human and nonhuman, are continually shaped by their watery entanglements.<sup>57</sup> The octopus’s brooding and migration enacts water’s gestational role, echoing Neimanis’s idea that “gestationality” is a process that binds bodies together while maintaining their specificities.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 50, 52.

<sup>48</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 55.

<sup>49</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 35.

<sup>50</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 64.

<sup>51</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 21.

<sup>53</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>55</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>56</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> Neimanis writes: “I refer to this onto-logic as an ‘amniotics’—my way of naming the logics that entangle bodily waters in both commonality and difference. Water is articulated as always both ‘being’ and a process of ‘becoming’—gathering water from certain bodies and flowing back into others in return.” See Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 68.

<sup>58</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 97.

Cephalopods have populated global literature for the past three hundred years, typically through references to tentacled giant squid and octopus-like creatures and monsters. From Alfred Tennyson's sonnet *The Kraken* (1830), Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870), and H.P. Lovecraft's short story "The Call of Cthulu" (1928), to contemporary works like Sy Montgomery's *The Soul of an Octopus* (2015), Peter Godfrey-Smith's *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Origins of Consciousness* (2016), Jane Rawson's novel *From the Wreck* (2017), Adrian Tchaikovsky's science fiction novel *Children of Ruin* (2019), Netflix's documentary *My Octopus Teacher* (2020), Ray Nayler's *The Mountain in the Sea* (2022), Shelby Van Pelt's *Remarkably Bright Creatures* (2022), and National Geographic's *Secrets of the Octopus* (2024), we can see mounting attention to the octopus as a creature of beauty and intelligence that inspires awe. Tchaikovsky and Van Pelt have written novels from the point of view of an octopus, attempting to capture, through narration, "how the octopus interacts with its environment" and a sense of their "distributed cognition" as distinct from human "proprioception."<sup>59</sup> Hortle engages with popular interest in octopus intelligence but uniquely centres their maternal biology. Through constructing a narrative "hydrocommons," Hortle positions the octopus as primary animal interlocutor and model of consistent care, articulated through the "maternal desperation" and "maternal ferocity" that governs its life's work of caring for its offspring.<sup>60</sup> Through animal communication we are reminded of the value of comprehending relational interdependence and participating in relationships of care.

### A Journey to Care

Immediately following the passage written from the octopus's perspective, Hortle presents Lucy's reflections on her life. After breast cancer, a mastectomy, and a hysterectomy, Lucy chooses breast implants to reclaim bodily agency but struggles with embodiment. Her plea "to be ... specific" reflects a need for stable identity amid change, while her choice to "remake" her body signals a desire for control.<sup>61</sup> In their work on "mastectomied" bodies, Lenore Manderson and Lesley Stirling note that self-referentiality becomes complex when women "talk about their bodies at different stages of the past and present, within different discourses."<sup>62</sup> Constantly living with the "visual legacy of the disease," the altered "torso is a constant reminder of the relationship of the body to self-image, gender identity and sexual expression."<sup>63</sup> Hortle captures the contours of post-cancer subjectivity and breast cancer's "visual legacy" as Lucy works to make sense of her implants and later, her scarred chest.<sup>64</sup> The transformation from "pre-cancer, pre-

<sup>59</sup> The Ezra Klein Show, "Inside the Minds of Spiders, Octopuses and Artificial Intelligence," *The New York Times*, February 24, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/24/opinion/ezra-klein-podcast-adrian-tchaikovsky.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86; Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 61, 196.

<sup>61</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 11, 23.

<sup>62</sup> Lenore Manderson and Lesley Stirling, "The Absent Breast: Speaking of the Mastectomied Body," *Feminism & Psychology* 17, no. 1 (2007): 81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353507072913>.

<sup>63</sup> Manderson and Stirling, "The Absent Breast," 76.

<sup>64</sup> Manderson and Stirling, "The Absent Breast," 76.

silicone-boobed Lucy” to “flat Lucy” brings a sense of uncertainty.<sup>65</sup> Dissatisfaction grows as Lucy struggles to define who she is and yearns for her new body to be acknowledged beyond its reproductive connotations. In *The Octopus and I*, Lucy grows frustrated by the attention she receives from her community and from Jem: “I wanted my new body to be acknowledged as more than a body geared towards reproduction (no longer) or masculine pleasure ... I wanted to be acknowledged as, as a ... That was the thing: I didn’t know what.”<sup>66</sup> Her search for belonging in her body and community reflects a desire to be cared *for*. In this way, Lucy’s evolving awareness of her embodied self underscores the importance of cultivating ethical, interconnected relationships across identity and species boundaries.

Lucy is invited by Poppy and Flo—two older, local women—to go ‘octopussing,’ fishing for and pickling octopuses. In Lucy’s search for ways of grounding herself as she grapples with feminine dysphoria, the opportunity to go ‘octopussing’ reflects a “hydrocommons” framework of “cultivat[ing] more attentive relations to other bodies of water.”<sup>67</sup> Lucy declares that she wishes to “gain access: to acquire a claim to that local inheritance; to immerse myself in that raw, feminine culture; to both transcend my body and collapse into history.”<sup>68</sup> Hortle connects Lucy’s search for maternal and feminised connections to a belief that this will restore her sense of self. Despite the problematic associations, Lucy reveals: “I’d forgotten all about the lumps of silicone sitting beneath my skin; I’d lost myself and my body in the experience of processing the octopuses.”<sup>69</sup> Her desire for “immersion” and “to both transcend my body and collapse into history” reflects her yearning for belonging, met through a maternal community.<sup>70</sup> Lucy’s idealisation of her “romantic memory” with Poppy and Flo is quickly challenged as she is confronted by the violence of beheading an octopus.<sup>71</sup> Hortle overlays the scene with Lucy’s reflections with Jem about the preservation of animal life. Jem argues, “it’s not like [octopuses are] a threatened species ... it’s not like they have familial bonds ... the ecosystem won’t suffer for their deaths,” evaluating the octopus’s life through a utilitarian lens.<sup>72</sup> Ironically, Lucy later observes the mother octopus’s sacrificial dedication to its eggs.

The octopus’s gaze and Lucy’s empathetic response function as elements of animal communication that highlight the immediate act of violence and its broader ethical implications. Initially, Lucy engages thoughtfully with the moral quandary of beheading an octopus:

[i]t looked in me in the eye intentionally ... But what was its intent? What did it want? To live, obviously. But was there a thought beyond the instinct to live? Did it, for instance, think of me? It was such a peculiar sensation, to be watched like that, by it—her. It confused the dynamic between us.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 20.

<sup>66</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 33.

<sup>67</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86, 67.

<sup>68</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 50.

<sup>69</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 59.

<sup>70</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 68, 50.

<sup>71</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 68.

<sup>72</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 68.

<sup>73</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 69.

Lucy's regard for the octopus's subjectivity is reinforced through her imagined direct address to it: "[y]ou're an aspiring mother. You're trying to do the right thing by your body, by your eggs, and it's all going wrong. You might not believe it, but I know how you feel."<sup>74</sup> Hortle complicates Lucy's role in the octopus's death by emphasising her awareness of its experience. Berger's analysis of the gaze offers insight here. He suggests that animals in captivity passively avoid engagement, representing an erasure of subjectivity:

[t]he public purpose of zoos is to offer visitors the opportunity of looking at animals. Yet nowhere in a zoo can a stranger encounter the look of an animal. At the most, the animal's gaze flickers and passes on. They look sideways. They look blindly beyond. They scan mechanically. They have been immunized to encounter, because nothing can any more occupy a central place in their attention. Therein lies the ultimate consequence of their marginalization.<sup>75</sup>

Berger's critique illuminates the loss of a reciprocal, ethical gaze—a gaze that acknowledges the animal as an active participant in the relationship. The octopus in Hortle's novel does not engage in passive avoidance; its direct, defiant gaze challenges Lucy. Here Vinciane Despret's insistence that "having a body" discloses and renders perceptible the very existence of ... reciprocity" is informative.<sup>76</sup> As Lucy holds the octopus, it "squelched out a jet of ink, hitting me square in the chest."<sup>77</sup> While perhaps seemingly banal, "just an animal reflex," the action evokes a sense of the animal's distress.<sup>78</sup> In being squirted with ink and later feeling the spasms of the octopus's body, Lucy's own body becomes what Despret terms a 'responding body,' one that is undone and remade by contact.<sup>79</sup> These marks—of gaze, ink, and involuntary convulsions—are not neutral signs but invitations to an "affected perspective," moments when bodies attune to one another reciprocally though not symmetrically, "being touched/affected by what matters for the animal he/she observes."<sup>80</sup> The octopus's pregnancy does not initially sway Lucy's choices, and guided by Flo to kill the octopus quickly and humanely, she abruptly chooses to behead it: "[t]hey're all brain; they're meant to be as intelligent as dogs. Dogs hold your gaze. Could I behead a live dog? A pregnant dog? I cut off its head."<sup>81</sup> Lucy prepares the animal, "rubbing at its syrupy pelt."<sup>82</sup> In doing so, she feels its bodily resistance—its nerves, its limbs—and is drawn into the "thick, impure involvement" of "embodied empathy," where meaning arises not from identification but from risky, partial affinity.<sup>83</sup> Hortle refuses to mask the violence of this act: Lucy acknowledges the octopus's sentience even as she kills it. Later, Lucy attempts to scrub off the ink from her chest and hands, aligning herself with Lady Macbeth: "[o]ut damn spot.' I giggled quietly to myself."<sup>84</sup> Amused at first, Lucy engages with the

<sup>74</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 70.

<sup>75</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *About Looking* (Pantheon, 1980), 26.

<sup>76</sup> Vinciane Despret, "Responding Bodies and Partial Affinities in Human-Animal Worlds," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 7-8 (2013): 53, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413496852>.

<sup>77</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 69, 70.

<sup>78</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 71.

<sup>79</sup> Despret defines embodied empathy as "feeling/ seeing/thinking bodies [that] undo[es] and redo[es] each other, reciprocally though not symmetrically, as partial perspectives that attune themselves to each other." See Despret, "Responding Bodies," 61.

<sup>80</sup> Despret, "Responding Bodies," 56, 57.

<sup>81</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 71.

<sup>82</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 71.

<sup>83</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 6; Despret 61.

<sup>84</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 72.

“inky record of the octopus’s violent death.”<sup>85</sup> As she tries to wash the ink off, she admits that she “hated” her implants, confronting both her actions and her altered body.<sup>86</sup> Hortle constructs here what Haraway would call a “contact zone,” marked by both “touch” and “regard.”<sup>87</sup> For Haraway, the issue is not merely the act of killing but the relational dynamics that make “beings killable.”<sup>88</sup> Haraway’s call to acknowledge the relational nature of killing is evident in the tension in Lucy’s journey: she is forced to confront not only her actions but also the larger structural conditions that render the octopus “killable.”<sup>89</sup> Lucy’s journey is a negotiation of ethical responsibility, one in which moral development is inseparable from the bodily transformations produced through contact with others—human, animal, and place.

Hortle employs several images to convey relationality and human-animal interdependence in her novel. The Eaglehawk Neck isthmus, a “land-bridge that connects the Tasman Peninsula to mainland Tasmania,” serves as the ‘space between’ where Lucy’s transformation occurs.<sup>90</sup> As part of the narrative “hydrocommons,” this isthmus represents water as a shared space where life moves and changes.<sup>91</sup> The stage for the car collision, the Arthur Highway that runs through the isthmus perpetuates ecological violence in the form of habitat fragmentation and wildlife mortality, and is the visual manifestation of settler theft and reorganisation of land for the purposes of so-called progress. The highway threatens the journey of female octopuses crossing the isthmus to brood and safeguard their eggs in sea caves. Hours after beheading the octopus, Lucy witnesses another crossing the highway. This scene mirrors the novel’s opening, narrated from the octopus’s perspective, which foreshadows this moment. In the opening, the octopus’s internal experience is conveyed vividly, giving her subjectivity rather than allowing her to exist purely as a symbolic figure. Motivated to save the creature, Lucy narrates: “I lunged forward and grabbed. My hand wrapped around a slimy arm ... she latched on, holding me as much as I was holding her.”<sup>92</sup> Lucy misjudges the time it takes to complete the manoeuvre and a car hits them: “I landed heavily on my chest. My breasts compressed beneath me ... A disembodied octopus arm in my fist. Suckers still clinging to me.”<sup>93</sup> The injuries to Lucy’s body and the octopus’s amputation are illustrated with gruesome detail: Lucy “was shredded. Strips of skin and flesh peeled back to expose the silicone beneath. I ground to a stop. Chin down like a brake.”<sup>94</sup> Upon impact, Lucy had “flung the octopus. Ripped her arm from her head. She twitched. Nerves,” nearly killing the animal in her attempt to save it.<sup>95</sup> The harm to both Lucy and the octopus exemplifies the destructive violence of the highway. Despite her intent to care, the broader carelessness of her reckless conduct, in combination with the existence of the highway, results in harm.

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<sup>85</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 72.

<sup>86</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 72.

<sup>87</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>88</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

<sup>89</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

<sup>90</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 14.

<sup>91</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>92</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 73–74.

<sup>93</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 73–74.

<sup>94</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 74.

<sup>95</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 74.

Lucy's chest is re-scarred after the collision. Adamant that she does not want implants again, Lucy's journey to care begins anew. Initially, Lucy's body felt "unfamiliar," but she later feels "free" without the implants.<sup>96</sup> In conversations with her psychologist, Lucy reveals that her scarred chest continues to conjure feelings of discontent: "I hate that my chest is never going to be something I love or even remotely like about myself anymore."<sup>97</sup> Lucy's decision to tattoo octopuses over her scarred chest represents the intersections of relationships to self, other, and animals as it links to her post-cancer body, her time 'octopussing' with Flo and Poppy, and her connection to the octopus. For Lucy, tattooing is a generative method of healing her sense of embodiment and contributes to resolving her ungrounded identity. Departing from the psychologist's office, Lucy observes a comprehensively tattooed woman in a tattoo parlour: "[s]he was an obscene explosion of colour; she was a walking, overgrown, feral flower garden."<sup>98</sup> Lucy's attraction to the woman echoes the attraction she finds with Flo and Poppy while 'octopussing.' Profoundly affected by the sense of "immersion" constructed through the potent blend of woman, nature, and art, Lucy urgently requests "a tapestry, like yours. I want octopuses. A mess of them. All over my chest."<sup>99</sup> As the tattoo artist, Kat, "weav[es] the scars into the design" over multiple sessions, Lucy forms a deep bond with her.<sup>100</sup> The tattoo moves as her scars heal, making her feel as if it is "alive ... like it's experiencing her healing body with her. Living her body with her."<sup>101</sup> Hortle engages with the distinctly feminist history of tattooing over mastectomy scars to contest the disempowerment that comes from breast cancer and mastectomies. As discussed by Karen Leader, mastectomy tattoos can be seen as a method of "cutting into nature to create a living, breathing autobiography," an attempt at "permanence in an age of transience;" they "pose ... a challenge to the meaning of feminine beauty."<sup>102</sup> Accompanying Lucy's search for self-expression is her desire for maternal and feminised connections to ground her identity. In tattooing octopuses specifically onto her chest, Hortle connects the human and animal through the artwork. The octopus is a means of repairing self-image rather than than a gesture of genuine interspecies reciprocity. The octopus becomes a figure of healing that Lucy consumes and inscribes onto her skin, without recognising its alterity. Lucy's claim that the tattoo is "[l]iving her body with her" gestures toward empathic relationality, yet as soon as the tattoo "stills," she experiences renewed loneliness, revealing that the octopus's presence was never truly mutual but always contingent on her own needs.<sup>103</sup> This extractive dynamic is underscored by the ink itself. While Hortle never specifies octopus ink as the tattoo medium, the historical and biomedical uses of cephalopod ink (in etching, tattooing, and cancer treatments) hover suggestively in the background. The tattoo's pigment thus parallels the octopus's own secretions, but in Lucy's case this resonance only

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<sup>96</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 136.

<sup>97</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 136.

<sup>98</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 138.

<sup>99</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 68, 140.

<sup>100</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 142.

<sup>101</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 144.

<sup>102</sup> Karen Leader, "On the Book of My Body: Women, Power, and 'Tattoo Culture,'" *Feminist Formations* 28, no. 3 (2016): 178, <https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2016.0048>.

<sup>103</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 144, 154.

highlights her appropriation of animal life as symbolic material for human healing. The sense of Lucy “becom[ing]” alone produced by her physical healing and yet sustained sense of bodily disconnection, followed by Lucy’s recognition that she “needs company” because “she’s lonely now that her octopus has frozen,” emphasises that art alone cannot resolve the deep dissatisfaction that pervades her sense of self.<sup>104</sup> The contrast between the octopus tattoo that “stretches” and then is “stilled,” highlights Lucy’s desire for a living connection to others.<sup>105</sup> This ink, impregnating her body and marking her transformation, parallels the ink in the novel’s print medium. Both forms of ink serve as liquid ‘commons:’ one embodying Lucy’s search for relationality and the other extending the “hydrocommons” to the textual realm, linking humans and more-than-humans through shared communication.<sup>106</sup> While finding that “octopuses, with their grossly female and alien bodies, somehow resonate with her and her sense of self,” and that the tattoo both literally and symbolically reveal Lucy’s changed embodiment, Hortle accentuates that Lucy’s dissatisfaction comes from her inability to fully commune with octopuses.<sup>107</sup> Hortle sustains this tension in Lucy’s ungrounded identity until she finds community with Flo and Flo’s son Harry.

### Mutton-Birding to Belong

Lucy’s participation in mutton-birding exemplifies settler appropriation of Indigenous traditions and reduces them to symbolic markers. Hortle critiques Lucy’s replication of Indigenous cultural practices, exposing the coloniality of her self-discovery. This underscores the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples, as articulated by Patrick Wolfe’s work on the complexity of settler subjecthood. By framing settler-colonialism as a “structure” rather than an “event,” Wolfe’s “logic of elimination” sees the continuation of colonial violence and the dispossession of Indigenous peoples in the maintenance of settler communities.<sup>108</sup> Wolfe highlights the ongoing tensions and contradictions within settler-colonial societies, explicit when the settler subject’s sense of belonging is constructed in opposition to the Indigenous subject’s belonging. Hortle invites us to ask how white belonging can be forged in Tasmania, a place shaped by disregard for pre-existing Indigenous lives and culture. Lucy’s limited empathy and appropriation of Indigenous practices reveal care’s superficiality without deeper acknowledgement of cultural contexts.

Lucy does not directly engage with First Nations individuals but makes claims to, and appropriates, the cultural practices of the Palawa and Paredarerme people. Mutton-birding is the seasonal harvesting of shearwater chicks, a practice that sustains Palawa and Paredarerme kinship and connection to Country.<sup>109</sup> In light of this cultural background, the reasons leading up to Lucy’s desire to go mutton-birding appear superficial. Following the tattooing process, Lucy seeks out Flo, who recalls mutton-birding as a family

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<sup>104</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 155, 154.

<sup>105</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 144, 154.

<sup>106</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>107</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 210.

<sup>108</sup> Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1999), 2.

<sup>109</sup> “Muttonbirding,” The Orb, The Tasmanian Government, 2022, <https://www.theorb.tas.gov.au/living-cultures/muttonbirding>.

Easter tradition before there were “regulations” and before the “Bloody Greens [began] locking Tassie up.”<sup>110</sup> Lucy requests that they mutton-bird together “for old time’s sake” and they plan their rendezvous.<sup>111</sup> When reflecting on the similarities between ‘octopussing’ and mutton-birding, Lucy asks herself, “why does it feel permissible to kill a baby bird, but not a pregnant octopus?” before later revealing, to the discomfort of readers, “the narcissistic truth: that the octopuses . . . resonate with her and her sense of self in a way that the concept of a baby bird, or even a bird family unit, simply doesn’t.”<sup>112</sup> Lucy’s overpowering desire is to participate in “the oldest living culture,” and she justifies her actions: “[t]hose baby birds have been plucked from burrows for millennia, and what’s tradition if not that? What’s it to be human, in this place, if not that?”<sup>113</sup> Hortle amplifies Lucy’s carelessness in the ambivalence she holds towards Indigenous tradition and the birds themselves. Encouraged by Flo and Harry to “flick it” to break the bird’s neck: “Lucy grins frenziedly from Flo to Harry and then . . . raises the writhing bird above her head and flicks it down like she’s a starter at a school athletics carnival. A ribbon of vomit arcs from the bird’s beak and sloshes its way down the length of her body.”<sup>114</sup> In the chick’s “vomit” that “sloshes . . . down . . . her body” and the crazed way Lucy kills the bird, Hortle harnesses liquid materiality to convey the violence embedded in Lucy’s actions.<sup>115</sup> The vomit becomes tangible evidence of Lucy’s detachment from the ethical weight of her actions. Repulsed, Lucy “tries to brush it from her clothes, but really, all she’s doing is rubbing the orange gunk further into the fabric,” and confesses to Flo that she “can’t get the smell off my hands. I kept rubbing and rubbing, but it was all greasy and the water couldn’t cut it.”<sup>116</sup> As a material testament to violence, the vomit parallels the ink that stains Lucy while ‘octopussing.’ Hortle accentuates the carelessness behind Lucy’s violent decisions through her own admission that “[s]he wasn’t even thinking,” that although “she does feel a bit guilty about killing them,” “she didn’t feel bad enough to not kill them.”<sup>117</sup> When reflecting on the difference between saving the octopus and killing the mutton-birds, Lucy evaluates her differing levels of empathy towards each animal. Lucy claims that she had ‘enough’ empathy to “throw [herself] in front of a car in an attempt to save a pregnant octopus” but not “[e]nough to refrain from breaking the neck of a baby bird,” and instead focuses on how “she’ll deal with [the emotional fallout] later—right now, she’ll love her body.”<sup>118</sup> Hortle indicates that Lucy’s reliance on ‘feeling’ is deficient; for in a robust ethics of care, a comprehensive sense of responsibility is more important than empathy. Hortle critiques Lucy’s actions within this framework, portraying her shallow adoption of mutton-birding as emblematic of a broader colonialist logic that appropriates Indigenous practices without engaging with their cultural significance.

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<sup>110</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 186.

<sup>111</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 186.

<sup>112</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 209–210.

<sup>113</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 210, emphasis in original.

<sup>114</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 219.

<sup>115</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 219.

<sup>116</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 220, 226.

<sup>117</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 222.

<sup>118</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 222.

Hortle extends Lucy's moral ignorance when she reflects: "laughing with Flo and Harry; mutton-birding with the Seabornes. She was alive, with her arm thrust in a burrow. She was alive."<sup>119</sup> For Lucy, the result of feeling "alive" outweighs the ethics of submitting to "regulations" that respect and protect Indigenous culture and animal lives.<sup>120</sup> Exposing the continuum of colonial violence, the scene raises uncomfortable questions about white Australian belonging, as Lucy appropriates Indigenous practices and animals for her self-healing. A police officer, Mitch, intervenes and intensifies the violence of the scene. Appearing at the dock, Mitch inspects Harry's boat. Harry contemplates: "Mitch will be loving this—being the centre of attention, being the man with the power."<sup>121</sup> Hortle pairs Harry's observation of Mitch's enjoyment of patriarchal authority with the officer's demonstration of his masculine "power" in his response to Flo's plea to turn a blind eye: "I know you know it's illegal, Flo," he says, pointing his finger at her imperiously, brandishing it as if it wielded all the power of the law."<sup>122</sup> In response to Harry's similar pleas to let them off, Mitch "turns the finger that had been pointing to Flo on [Harry], jabbing himself in the chest with it, imbibing himself with that power."<sup>123</sup> Hortle articulates how Mitch's aggressive masculinity is contrived through his "power" of surveillance as a police officer.<sup>124</sup> Mitch enjoys it, clear in the rapid shift between his domineering masculinity when "brandishing" his finger at Flo and then "grinning" when agreeing to, "for old time's sake ... only write one of [the trio] up."<sup>125</sup> Concluding the act of mutton-birding with public exposure and legal ramifications administered through Mitch's expression of domineering hypermasculinity presents both the legitimate ethical problems of the trio's actions, *and* discomfort at power wielded so aggressively.

The interspecies implications of violence surface in the anthropomorphic voice of a mutton-bird father returning to his stolen chick—the chick we assume Lucy has killed. The father's voice provides an alternative nonhuman perspective and centres on familial care, challenging anthropocentric notions of responsibility. His distinctly male role in nurturing the chick exemplifies the possibilities for care in human male roles. Its reminder that "no bird is only an I" reflects the consequences of careless environmental treatment, illustrates a sense of relational responsibility, and becomes a truth that Lucy eventually arrives at herself.<sup>126</sup> Hortle's narrative innovation lies in her depiction of the mutton-birds as a collective.<sup>127</sup> The repetition of collective pronouns—"their," "they," "we," "us"—amplifies that the bird's identity is shaped by "familial bonds."<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 223.

<sup>120</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 223, 186.

<sup>121</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 236.

<sup>122</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 236, 237.

<sup>123</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 237.

<sup>124</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 237.

<sup>125</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 237.

<sup>126</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 242.

<sup>127</sup> Dominic O'Key explores the challenges of depicting collective animal narration in novels. He observes the absence of "a single long-form narrative voiced by an animal collective," an absence he sees as "surprising considering the fact that billions of animals live out a collective species life, in flocks and herds and swarms." While O'Key suggests that the novelistic form tends to prioritise individual human voices and "pressurize multispecies storyworlds into adopting a sole authorial," Hortle's use of the mutton-bird's perspective pushes against these limitations. See Dominic O'Key, "Animal Collectives," *Style* 54, no. 1 (2021): 81, <https://doi.org/10.5325/style.54.1.0074>.

<sup>128</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 241, 68.

The bird reveals the family partnership: “[w]hen [the egg] wasn’t beneath him he was hunting the ocean for krill to share and when it wasn’t beneath her she was hunting the ocean for krill to share.”<sup>129</sup> The repetition of the bird “wait[ing]” for its chick highlights its unwavering commitment to its offspring, making the tragedy of the chick’s death—and Lucy’s role in it—even more poignant.<sup>130</sup> The choice to separate the animal-perspective chapters from Lucy’s first-person narrative emphasises the gulf between humans and animals. Lucy’s guilt arises when she confides in Kat:

I feel so awful about the fact that we took their lives needlessly ... I feel more awful about them getting confiscated than I do about us getting caught ... Like we didn’t kill them for anything in the end. It’s just such a waste and so unnecessarily destructive. You know, those birds are family units—they pair up for life and come back to the same burrow every year.<sup>131</sup>

Hortle reveals that by killing the chick, Lucy has not only ended its life but also disrupted a lifelong familial bond. Lucy’s justification that her actions were “unnecessarily destructive” only because the birds were “confiscated” demonstrates her belief in necessary destruction, an idea explored by van Dooren.<sup>132</sup> He writes that in “conservation,” “care for some ... translates into suffering and death for others,” a context that does not apply to Lucy mutton-birding.<sup>133</sup> By implying that the birds’ deaths might have been acceptable if they had served a purpose, Lucy centres human utility in her ethical framework, overlooking the animals’ intrinsic value. The ripple effects of Lucy’s carelessness are accentuated through the paired mutton-birding and bird-perspective chapters, where the bird’s endless waiting becomes a metaphor for the environmental disruption and irreparable damage caused by humans.

Hortle conveys Lucy’s carelessness and limited empathy when Lucy tries to mitigate her guilt and justify the appropriation. After Flo takes the fine for the illegal act, Lucy seeks to “make amends” and implores Flo to “look back through [her] family tree” to see if she has “Aboriginal heritage” so she might “get excused on cultural grounds.”<sup>134</sup> Flo refuses to lie and challenges Lucy, reasoning, “it’s not my history.”<sup>135</sup> Hortle acknowledges the distinctly human social implications of Lucy’s “narrow-minded[ness]” and “racis[m]” when she tries to mitigate her guilt, justify the appropriation, and seek Aboriginal heritage for Flo.<sup>136</sup> Flo’s refusal to enable Lucy highlights how settler appropriation can be disguised as environmental, cultural, or personal engagement. Later in the novel, Hortle articulates these problems in Jem’s confrontation with Lucy and his critique of “white people mutton-birding.”<sup>137</sup> With “genuine grief,” Jem interrogates Lucy: “[h]ow could you do that? They fly all the way from the Bering Sea to have their chicks here. Half of them starve on the way because we’ve fucked the planet up so much there’s not enough food.”<sup>138</sup> Hortle contrasts Lucy’s flawed care with Jem’s environmental ethics. Yet Jem’s characterisation is complicated by the novel’s

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<sup>129</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 241.

<sup>130</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 243.

<sup>131</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 257–258.

<sup>132</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 258.

<sup>133</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292.

<sup>134</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 259.

<sup>135</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 258, 259.

<sup>136</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 259, 258.

<sup>137</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 307.

<sup>138</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 307.

framing, which juxtaposes him with Harry—the ‘salt-of-the-earth’ man Lucy ultimately connects with. While Jem adheres to an ethical code prioritising care towards animals, his character is undermined by his contradictions and careless actions, positioning him as a hypocritical environmentalist. Hortle navigates settler-colonial and environmental complexities by portraying her characters’ flaws. Through both Lucy and Jem’s actions, Hortle illustrates the ripple effects of ethical deficiencies.

### Barriers to Male Care

Hortle extends her exploration of settler-colonial violence to consider its imbrication with patriarchal violence. Hortle reveals that the violence committed by the men in the novel is rooted in problematic codes of masculinity that rely on aggression, exploitation, and cruelty. However, Hortle complicates the binary of care as feminine and violence as masculine by contrasting Lucy’s journey from thoughtless violence to care with the sustained carelessness of male characters, which perpetuates further violence. This juxtaposition underscores that care is not inherently feminine, nor is violence exclusively masculine, challenging traditional gendered assumptions. Hortle contrasts Jem’s care for animals with men who intentionally harm animals. When reflecting on childhood memories of fishing, Jem remembers his father explaining, “[i]f you’re going to take a life, Jem, then you need to do it quickly. Fast is humane ... Never leave an animal to suffer, even if it’s just a fish.”<sup>139</sup> Hortle juxtaposes this ethical modelling with Jem’s memories of local boys Shayne, Rob, and Pete, three brothers who would “leave fish to drown in air, catching more than they’d need and kicking the bodies, which had turned leathery in the sun, back into the water as they mooched away.”<sup>140</sup> Jem “learnt all sorts of other things from those boys as well. He learnt that if you acted like you owned a place, maybe you did,” and that “you needed a plan of attack” when it came to sexual encounters with girls.<sup>141</sup> The behaviour of these young boys is underpinned by a masculinity that involves gratuitous animal cruelty, a colonial attitude towards land ownership, and misogyny, both in the form of carelessness and overt violence. Like Ned in *Limberlost*, Jem distances himself from acts of animal cruelty and exploitation that are attached to problematic masculine codes.

From the perspective of Jake, a local boy and the son of Shayne the fisherman, Hortle links hypermasculinity to alcohol abuse, gun violence, and an inconsistent ethical code, connecting patriarchal and colonial violence in Tasmania. Jake’s initiation into manhood during a fishing trip with his father and uncles culminates in the violent killing of a seal pup, a rite of passage tied to hegemonic masculinity, reinforcing the notion that becoming “a man” is tied to the exclusively male practice of tuna fishing.<sup>142</sup> While there exist plenty of culturally appropriate rites of passage, Hortle gestures at the problems in rituals that urge boys to discover their manhood by testing and demonstrating courage through violent means.

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<sup>139</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 127.

<sup>140</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 128.

<sup>141</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 129.

<sup>142</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 115.

Preceding the fishing trip, Hortle depicts the pup's search for food, encounters with other seals, and dreams of a future as a "beta" seal.<sup>143</sup> Hortle emphasises the innocence and playfulness of the seal who is "perplexed" at why the tuna he is hunting is "trying to race in one direction" but being "pull[ed] ... in the direction of the boat" before concluding the scene abruptly:

he launches himself up into the air at it, breaching his head and shoulders up high enough to reach the dangling fish. He sinks his teeth into its rich, fatty flank. For a brief moment, his eyes meet the eyes of a human-half-pup who is standing in the boat. The human-half-pup's expression of surprise is so distinct, so seal-like, if it weren't for the fish in his mouth he would have barked a laugh. Syrupy blood trickles down his throat.<sup>144</sup>

In viewing Jake's "expression" as "seal-like," Hortle flips an anthropomorphic expectation of animals having human-like qualities and challenges an anthropocentrism that relies on human comparison.<sup>145</sup> By presenting the seal pup's rendition of the encounter first, Hortle emphasises the cruelty of the fishermen's treatment of the seal. In retrospect, we become aware that the seal's account ends here because it is immediately killed after snatching the tuna. Following the seal's account, Hortle introduces Jake who, while luring the tuna, is directed by his father to gaff the fish. Before he can secure the catch, the seal pup "grabs hold of the fish's flank," "look[s] right at Jake," and "begins to tug the tuna back down into the sea, yanking the gaff from Jake's sweaty grasp."<sup>146</sup> Like the octopus who looks directly at Lucy before she kills it, Hortle uses the gaze between humans and animals to emphasise the seal's sentience. Hortle identifies that without the fish as a commodified trophy, the initiation ritual is incomplete. Thus, Rob, Jake's uncle, shoots the seal:

the shock of a bullet rings out. Jake scrambles to his feet and peers out from behind Rob's beefy shoulder. The sleek lump is already floating away from the boat; thick clouds of blood bloom after it ... Jake looks at the tuna. It's still dangling from the line. The gaff is still stuck in its cheek. Its eyes have quietened and shrunk back into its head. Blood seeps from its serrated flank into the water, then spirals away in loose tendrils.<sup>147</sup>

In this grisly scene, Hortle emphasises the vulnerability of animal bodies and the contrasting human responses in Jake's shock and the older men's nonchalance. In the images of the "sleek lump ... floating," "thick clouds of blood," and the tuna with its "serrated flank," "dangling" by its hooked "cheek," Hortle underscores the violence with images of base materiality.<sup>148</sup> Hortle reminds us of the ripple effects of carelessness in the seal's blood—liquid and material evidence of the violence.

The nuanced rendering of animal communication in the novel is extended by the juxtaposition of animal and human perspectives of the same encounter. By focusing on the seal's sentience—its gaze, its attempts to reclaim the tuna, and its vulnerability—Hortle critiques the human tendency to view nonhuman animals as commodities or objects to be consumed. The seal's struggle, paired with Jake's internal conflict,

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<sup>143</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 91.

<sup>144</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 92.

<sup>145</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 92.

<sup>146</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 122.

<sup>147</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 122.

<sup>148</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 122.

underscores the profound disconnection between the animal's innocence and the desensitised, violent masculinity represented by the adult men. Through this, Hortle not only explores the individual moral dilemmas faced by characters like Jake, but also critiques the broader, systemic forces of patriarchal and colonial violence that shape their attitudes toward power, ownership, and control over nature. The novel's animal communication is a critical tool for examining a culture of violence that spans both personal actions and historical legacies. Immediately following the gruesome description of the seal's death, Hortle shifts to the completion of Jake's initiation that involves a celebration of the violence. Instructed to hold the fish up and "[s]mile, mate" for a photo as evidence of the catch, "Jake's dad murmurs, 'You're a man now.'"<sup>149</sup> A father's act of taking his son fishing, seen as a symbolic rite of passage, is acceptable until it is overlaid with hegemonic masculinity that hinges upon male entitlement, control, and harm to others. The men return to shore and are confronted by Jem, the "eco-warrior," who enquires after the gunshot and half-dead seals he had seen.<sup>150</sup> Jem is troubled by the "recreational" aspect of fishing, the gratuitous killing of the seals, the fishermen who are "rolling drunk at the boat ramp," and the "tuna arriving earlier," a sign of disrupted environmental patterns.<sup>151</sup>

Similarly to Arnott's construction of hypermasculinity in the images of drunk, tree-felling men in *Limberlost*, Hortle links drunkenness, domestic violence, boy-to-man initiation, and reckless fishing, suggesting that expressions of hypermasculinity are tied to ecological destruction. While critiquing this male trope, Jem ironically fails to see his own place within the chaotic performance of hypermasculinity imagined in acts of abandon and violence, himself drunk and recklessly oiling the Eaglehawk Neck boat ramp with his friend Zach. Hortle deepens this irony by mirroring Jem's earlier critique of Shayne, Pete, and Rob in his own conduct: "[b]oys will be boys, Jem learnt, and he knows the type of men those coarse, careless, boofhead boys would have grown into. Just having a laugh. Always laughing, never caring."<sup>152</sup> Here, Jem's memory of the boys is replicated as Jem "laugh[s]" at Zach.<sup>153</sup> Hortle highlights the hypocrisy in Jem's carelessness through stream-of-consciousness narration: "[a]nd there's Zach. Look at him as he tests the ramp with his foot, look at him as it slips out and he nearly does the splits; you can almost hear his groin muscle ripping. Laugh at him. Go on: laugh at him!"<sup>154</sup> Hortle exposes Jem's contrarian ethics by pairing his critique of violence in other men with a demonstration of his own carelessness, even as he claims to act out of justice for the seals. The dark irony is that Jem's actions lead to Shayne's death. Despite revealing that in his childhood he learnt "that if you acted like you owned a place, maybe you did," Jem fails to connect his own actions with learned patriarchal conduct.<sup>155</sup> Confronted by Lucy, Jem justifies: "[w]e were high. It wasn't just me. It was a prank. It wasn't ... it wasn't my fault—our fault."<sup>156</sup> Hortle deepens her critique by

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<sup>149</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 123.

<sup>150</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 129.

<sup>151</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 289.

<sup>152</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 129.

<sup>153</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 290.

<sup>154</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 290.

<sup>155</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 129.

<sup>156</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 337.

juxtaposing Jem's environmental advocacy with his reckless actions. Jem's oiling of the boat ramp, leading to Shayne's death, reveals his complicity in cycles of violence. This act exemplifies the ripple effects of carelessness, as Jem's reckless behaviour not only results in direct harm in the literal and figurative spilling of blood but also perpetuates broader patterns of patriarchal violence. Jem's inability to confront his carelessness results in Lucy's desire to separate from him. Hortle's novel resists providing clear resolutions to the many ethical questions it raises, particularly those involving complex relationships between self, others, animals, and place. Jem is portrayed as multifaceted—while he holds moral absolutes about preserving animal life and reducing harm, he exhibits a recklessness that culminates in the gruesome death of a fellow fisherman. Unlike Ned in *Limberlost*, whose caring masculinity is endorsed by Arnott and contrasted with problematic masculinity, Hortle's characterisation of Jem ultimately failing to confront his responsibilities exposes the flaws in his expressions of masculinity. Hortle's strength here is in sustaining character complexity.

While Hortle critiques patriarchal violence effectively, her framing of Jem and Harry raises questions about how masculinity is valorised or problematised in the novel. Jem, depicted as a 'green' boyfriend who is hypocritical, overly sensitive, and reckless with human lives, reinforces stereotypes about environmentalists as misanthropes. His eventual downfall—as the architect of Shayne's death and his deteriorating relationship with Lucy—seems disingenuous when contrasted with Harry, who is framed as an intuitive, grounded partner accepting of Lucy's transformed body and lifestyle. This contrast risks positioning Lucy's personal growth as contingent upon her finding a 'better' man—one whose masculinity is constructed as more 'natural' and attuned to the land. Unlike the novel's self-awareness in addressing Lucy's appropriation of Indigeneity, here Hortle does not acknowledge the implications of this framing. Combined with the suggestion that Lucy 'finds' herself by aligning with Harry, the novel risks reinforcing the idea that a masculinised connection to the land is the 'natural' resolution to her struggles. Hortle effectively illustrates the entanglement of patriarchal and colonial systems in the depiction of Shayne and the fishermen, yet the novel's resolution of these tensions feels uneven. While Jem's hypocrisy is thoroughly exposed, Lucy's appropriation and recklessness are more readily forgiven, creating an imbalance where his failings are punished while hers are contextualised and excused. In this way, Hortle's exploration of masculinity and care risks reaffirming, rather than dismantling, patriarchal norms. However, the novel's unresolved tensions invite further interrogation of how settler-colonial and patriarchal frameworks shape narratives of care and harm.

### Reckoning and Recovery

Hortle marks the shift from carelessness to care by contrasting the opening car crash with Lucy and the octopus successfully crossing the isthmus in a scene that demonstrates a united sense of care for self, others, and animals. Unlike the novel's opening scene, Lucy makes it in time before an oncoming car reaches them.

She “lunges and scoops the octopus into her arms before it can drag itself out onto the bitumen,” the car passes, and the octopus climbs onto her back.<sup>157</sup> As Lucy “reaches the water, lowers her body into it, and feels the octopus’s weight slip away with a lingering, coiling caress,” Hortle orients Lucy within the “hydrocommons.”<sup>158</sup> In seawater, Lucy’s desire to belong and desire for “immersion” are finally granted as it does not rely on cultural appropriation.<sup>159</sup> Hortle depicts a moment of symbolic rebirth: “[Lucy’s] blind arms search for the slimy body, for one last touch because she knows it’s going to die ... Her eyes are smarting with salt and tears. It breaks in a heavy slap, crunching her and throwing her under with empty lungs.”<sup>160</sup> Both the octopus and Lucy are immersed in “a flurry of bubbles,” however, Hortle accentuates the inhospitable “crunch” and “throw” of the “saltwater” that “chok[es]” and “burn[s]” Lucy.<sup>161</sup> In this state of vulnerability, Lucy reveals: “the octopus is swimming out, full of eggs and then it will die. She’s alive and it’s gone. Something in her chest, on her chest, releases. She’s alive and it’s gone to give its life for its eggs.”<sup>162</sup> Lucy’s failed and now successful attempts to care for the octopus in its journey across the isthmus, followed by the recognition that the octopus “will die,” relies on a celebration of life and knowledge of the reality of death.<sup>163</sup> Here, Hortle engages ethical value-systems and depicts the complexity of ethical care that acknowledges the octopus’s life of sacrifice for its eggs. By helping life endure, Lucy experiences a deeper, more genuine sense of being truly “alive.”<sup>164</sup> In the absence of ink, vomit, and blood, Hortle demonstrates Lucy’s careful engagement with the octopus that includes a more careful approach to herself.

Over the course of the novel, Lucy’s journey to care involves reckoning with her body and identity post-cancer, a journey Hortle pairs with an ethical confrontation with Lucy’s relationships to self, to others, to animals, and to place. After saving the octopus and emotionally contending with its departure, Lucy expresses that “[s]omething *in*” and “*on* her chest, releases.”<sup>165</sup> This “release” relates to her inner emotional state, her mastectomy, and the octopus tattoo.<sup>166</sup> Hortle thus articulates how an ethics of care informs Lucy’s development for, after caring for the octopus, she experiences catharsis. Lucy’s transformed sense of self is afforded by her *letting go* of fixed ideas about identity, womanhood, and femininity, and by confidently asserting that “she’s alive,” a claim signifying the resolution to her disconnected sense of self.<sup>167</sup> Mourning the octopus’s departure: “Lucy is all spiralling suckered limbs and hooded eyes and chains of round bruises and sand and vomit and snot and pubic hair and grief.”<sup>168</sup> This is language that echoes the descriptors for the octopus and that emphasise Lucy’s vulnerability and need for care. Lucy finds sanctuary

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<sup>157</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 342.

<sup>158</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 344; Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>159</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 68.

<sup>160</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 344–345.

<sup>161</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 345.

<sup>162</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 345.

<sup>163</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 3.

<sup>164</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 345.

<sup>165</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 345, emphasis in original.

<sup>166</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 345.

<sup>167</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 345.

<sup>168</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 346.

with Flo. After Lucy reveals that she has left Jem, Flo, in turn, “sits Lucy in the bath and turns on the shower then leaves her with warm water cascading over her as she sobs, to put the kettle on.”<sup>169</sup> Flo’s intimate and compassionate washing and clothing of Lucy, just as a mother would its new-born, are acts of maternal care. Flo makes her home available to Lucy and offers her son Harry’s room, a gesture of love and welcome that amplifies the maternal relationality between Flo and Lucy. In separating from Jem and moving in with Flo, the conclusion to Lucy’s journey is accomplished through relational care. Flo’s home is distanced from the nuclear family dynamic and rather signifies the generative possibilities and importance of non-familial caring relationships. Through focusing on and concluding with Lucy and Flo’s relationship rather than Lucy and Harry’s, Hortle privileges a relationship of platonic care that reflects a feminist ethics of care in its recognition of responsibility and interdependency as an essential aspect of our relationship to the nonhuman world. In doing so, the novel affirms the transformative potential of relationality, extending its implications beyond human interactions to encompass our ethical responsibilities toward the nonhuman world, particularly animals.

Focusing on the perspective of a pregnant seal in the final chapter, Hortle concludes her novel with evocative imagery of motherhood and maternal care. The seal’s movements and the sensations in her pregnant belly illustrate the multiple layers of watery bodies: “[t]here are crabs and crayfish and octopuses and squid and great forests of swaying weed ... And in between all these things there is so much water ... There are currents and other currents, crisscrossed with gyres and undercurrents and eddies, muddled by tides and swells.”<sup>170</sup> The accumulative description of the myriad animals that comprise the water builds a rich vision of a “thick, saturated description of lived embodiment” comprised of connected lives in the “hydrocommons.”<sup>171</sup> The seal’s viewpoint is distinguished by a focus on the territories and harems that influence where she can go, and her awareness of “the pup in her belly.”<sup>172</sup> Hortle renders the particularities of the seal’s social colony and its mammalian embodiment through the sensations of “rubb[ing]” bodies and of a “quivering belly,” further developing a sense of the “hydrocommons” through “entanglements of gestation, childbirth, and lactation,” and “networks of care, and material and affective patternings of bodies, subjects, communities, and worlds” that transcend the human.<sup>173</sup> Hortle continues:

there the octopus was: folded into a maze of limbs that didn’t start or finish, that simply curled and flowed in a mess of pulsing suckers ... She is hovering, watching the octopus ... her pup writhes inside her. It’s so beautiful. The octopus is so attentive to them: her eggs, her tapestry of swaying pearls. She won’t abandon them.<sup>174</sup>

The absence of a human perspective is notable in this scene. Notable, too, is the intra-species encounter and observational communication between the seal and octopus that envisions multispecies community existing apart from human recognition of it. Through the seal, Hortle strategically reorients our attention

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<sup>169</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 346.

<sup>170</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 349–350.

<sup>171</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 349–350; Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 31.

<sup>172</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 352.

<sup>173</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 351–352; Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86, 16.

<sup>174</sup> Hortle, *The Octopus and I*, 354–355.

and sympathies to that of the animal other, not the human self, and illustrates the many bodies and lives that populate our intertwined, watery, multispecies “hydrocommons.”<sup>175</sup> The novel’s opening and closing animal perspectives invite readers to imagine nonhuman subjectivity, to engage with perspectives unlike our own, and witness the experiences of maternal animals whose lives embody care. It is *valuable*, in Hortle’s view, to consider the subjectivity of animals, for the consequences of failing to do so leads to the preservation of carelessness and the practice of violence.

Many novels provide polemic responses to these contemporary problems, yet for Hortle, fiction has limits—it can expose ambiguities but cannot offer the solace of resolution to the most complex ethical questions. Through the avant-garde poetics of animal voice that feature in Hortle’s animal communication portraying harm by humans, and in depictions of liquid ink, vomit, and blood, Hortle emphasises the material consequences of carelessness and its comprehensive effect on the “hydrocommons” of Eaglehawk Neck.<sup>176</sup> By focusing specifically on the space of Tasmania, Hortle critiques structural violence in contemporary colonial relationships to land and emphasises care amid climate crisis. In contrast to Arnott’s nostalgic view of Tasmania after the Second World War, Hortle addresses modern colonial and environmental violence through depictions of animal deaths: octopuses stranded by human infrastructure, a seal pup killed by demonstrations of hypermasculinity and gun violence, and mutton-bird deaths exposing white belonging and cultural appropriation. These deaths symbolise broader patterns that shape Tasmania’s identity. *The Octopus and I* exemplifies how contemporary Australian writers adapt realism to examine human-animal relationships and ethical care in a settler-colonial context during climate change.

The concept of ‘ripple effects’ offers a compelling analytical framework, capturing the interconnected consequences of actions within the “hydrocommons,” as Hortle illustrates how carelessness extends beyond individuals, affecting ecosystems, social structures, and interspecies relations.<sup>177</sup> This perspective aligns with care ethics, emphasising interdependence, and anti-colonial critiques that expose settler-colonial harm. Ripples embody ambiguity—actions may dissipate, intersect, or be disrupted, reflecting the unpredictability of ethical relations. From the seal pup’s death to Shayne’s death, alongside Lucy and Jem’s fractured relationship, Hortle illustrates how violence reverberates through ecosystems and human connections alike. While Hortle resists providing solutions, she suggests that small acts of care—rooted in interdependence and mutual respect—can counter entrenched violence. *The Octopus and I* underscores the far-reaching influence of human actions within Tasmania’s “hydrocommons,” offering insights into ethical relations, place-based responsibility, anti-colonial agency, and the evolving poetics of animal communication in hyper-contemporary Australian literature.<sup>178</sup> Genre plays a critical role in shaping these insights. Hortle blends realism with avant-garde poetics to interrogate human-animal relationships. The

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<sup>175</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>176</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>177</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>178</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

novel foregrounds ethical stakes in these relationships, prompting readers to reckon with the ethical and moral complexities of coexisting with animals in a time of climate crisis. Hortle's negotiation of gendered and cultural dynamics leaves unresolved tensions, inviting further interrogation of how settler-colonial and patriarchal frameworks shape narratives of care and harm. By expanding traditional realist approaches to include experimental and poetic techniques, Hortle's novel exemplifies how, particularly in the context of ecological crisis and colonial legacies, contemporary Australian fiction is actively contributing to ethical discourse, rather than merely reflecting it.

## Chapter 3: “*We’re the monsters:*” Morality and Ambiguous Ethics in Charlotte McConaghy’s *Once There Were Wolves*

In *Once There Were Wolves* (hereafter *Wolves*), Charlotte McConaghy leverages popular genre modes—realism, melodrama, crime, noir, thriller, and romance—not only for entertainment value, but also to engage with serious ecological and ethical concerns. Set in the present day, *Wolves* follows Inti Flynn, an Australian biologist, as she leads a contentious wolf rewilding operation in the Scottish Highlands.<sup>1</sup> Written by an Australian author and set in Scotland with a protagonist from Sydney, *Wolves* exemplifies how literary themes can transcend national boundaries and illustrates how contemporary writers are exploring the interconnectedness of ecological and social issues on a global scale. Heightening her capacity to feel the pain of humans and animals alike, Inti’s mirror-touch synaesthesia functions as a non-realist device in an otherwise realist narrative. This embodied sensitivity brings the question of moral response to the fore. McConaghy situates within an ‘aesthetics of care’ an insistence that animals be represented mimetically.<sup>2</sup> My primary interest in this chapter is to explore how McConaghy’s seemingly oppositional deployment of melodrama and noir shapes the novel’s animal communication and advances her preoccupation and conflicting treatment of morality in the context of climate crisis. Ghosh critiques traditional realist fiction for its human-centric focus which, he argues, fails to capture the urgency of the climate crisis.<sup>3</sup> He suggests that popular genres like melodrama, often dismissed from the “mansion of serious fiction,” possess the imaginative capacity to address vast, nonhuman scales.<sup>4</sup> The “expulsion of hybrids” reflects a cultural hierarchy that devalues genre fiction, dismissing it as “contaminated” material.<sup>5</sup> I argue that McConaghy’s layering of realism with melodrama and crime conventions in *Wolves* responds consciously to the constraints Ghosh identifies. McConaghy intertwines melodramatic intensity with noir’s characteristic ambiguity, expanding the narrative’s capacity to grapple with ethical dilemmas related to ecological restoration and violence against both humans and animals. In the novel, Inti embodies melodramatic tendencies, particularly in her binary thinking, a trait linked to her neurological disorder of mirror-touch synaesthesia that allows her to feel empathetically and physically what other humans and animals feel. Inti’s synaesthesia can be read not simply as metaphor but as a mimetic device that enacts a form of care-based ethics by collapsing the distance between human and animal suffering. This chapter will explore how Inti’s

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<sup>1</sup> McConaghy is one of many authors writing about rewilding wolves specifically. See Sarah Hall, *The Wolf Border* (HarperCollins, 2015); Derek Gow, *Hunt for the Shadow Wolf: The Lost History of Wolves in Britain and the Myths and Stories that Surround Them* (Chelsea Green, 2024). Parallels have been drawn between Hall and McConaghy, in terms of their depiction of protests directed at the wolf reintroduction project. In his review of *Wolves*, James Bradley observes similarities in premise between McConaghy’s novel and Hall’s, as both focus on projects to reintroduce wolves, with Hall concentrating on the north of England before the wolves eventually end up on Scotland, and McConaghy concentrating on Scotland. See James Bradley, “Open your heart to this gripping novel and rediscover a sense of wonder,” review of *Once There Were Wolves*, by Charlotte McConaghy, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, September 10, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 173.

<sup>3</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 66.

<sup>5</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 66, 72.

synaesthesia functions as a form of animal communication and a mode of melodramatic “excess” that amplifies her emotional responses and moral sensitivity.<sup>6</sup> Alongside the device of synaesthesia, McConaghy’s representation of animal communication also involves gaze, behaviour, and audible sound. Through the novel’s crime and noir elements, Inti is confronted with the complexities and ambiguities of real-world morality and grapples with her moral absolutism in the face of complex ethical dilemmas. While melodrama seeks resolution and moral clarity, noir thrives on unresolved tensions and the inability to categorise right and wrong neatly.<sup>7</sup> Inti’s moral absolutism, shaped by her heightened sensory perception, is challenged by the novel’s noir elements, which force her to confront ethical dilemmas that resist simple moral binaries. This generic divergence is crucial to the novel’s conclusion and negotiation of justice.

The main plot of Inti’s involvement in the rewilding project is accompanied by a secondary narrative in which Inti cares for her twin sister Aggie, who suffers from traumatic mutism following a sexual assault. The novel includes flashbacks to Inti and Aggie’s past in Vancouver, Alaska, and Sydney, which layer multiple storylines, revealing the sisters’ traumatic histories, their father’s disappearance, and their relationship with their mother, a police detective specialising in domestic violence. This structure allows McConaghy to build in broader resonances to the central conflict: local resistance to the rewilding project, fuelled by fears that the wolves will attack livestock. This culminates in the death of Stuart, a local farmer, whose murder—along with the attack on Duncan, the local police chief—positions Inti as both suspect and investigator. Aligning with Jo Lindsay Walton and Samantha Walton’s concept of the “ecological detective,” Inti attempts to navigate a landscape shaped by intra-species conflict and human culpability.<sup>8</sup> In this way, the novel resonates with Deborah Bird Rose’s notion of “Anthropocene noir,” where humans are simultaneously “criminals,” “detectives,” and “victims” in an era of environmental crisis.<sup>9</sup> In this context, all people are complicit in environmental degradation and so, in Rose’s words, “we are [all] detectives trying to figure out what is [really] going on.”<sup>10</sup> The novel ultimately resolves its central mystery: Aggie, Inti’s sister, is revealed to have killed Stuart and attacked Duncan. To protect the sisters, Duncan falsely attributes both attacks to a wolf. While McConaghy’s conclusion ostensibly restores order, the unresolved moral tensions generated by Aggie’s disappearance and Duncan’s deception blur distinctions between “criminal,” “detective,” and “victim,” complicating notions of justice.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on Christine Gledhill’s analysis of melodrama as an aesthetic mode that synthesises intense emotional engagement with moral critique, this

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<sup>6</sup> Panpan Yang, “Repositioning Excess: Romantic Melodrama’s Journey from Hollywood to China,” in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Columbia University Press, 2018), 220, <https://doi.org/10.7312/gled18066-016>.

<sup>7</sup> As Lucas Hollister argues, the Anthropocene challenges traditional narrative structures, exposing their limitations in representing ecological complexities and uncertainties. In this context, the unresolved tensions and moral ambiguities central to noir fiction align with the narrative demands of a world where clear resolutions and categorical distinctions often prove inadequate. See Lucas Hollister, “The Green and the Black: Ecological Awareness and the Darkness of Noir,” *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association* 134, no. 5 (2019): 1012–27, <https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2019.134.5.1012>.

<sup>8</sup> Jo Lindsay Walton and Samantha Walton, “Introduction to Green Letters: Crime Fiction and Ecology,” *Green Letters* 22, no. 1 (2018): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14688417.2018.1484628>.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” *Arena Journal* 41/42, (2013): 215, <https://www.proquest.com/magazines/anthropocene-noir/docview/1645367509/se-2?accountid=14757>.

<sup>10</sup> Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” 215.

<sup>11</sup> Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” 215.

chapter argues that McConaghy's use of melodrama does more than amplify emotional stakes; it interrogates patriarchal and anthropocentric systems.<sup>12</sup> By intertwining melodrama's moral distinctions, crime's pursuit of justice, and noir's emphasis on ambiguity, *Wolves* challenges ethical certainties in a world defined by ecological and interpersonal violence.

McConaghy's writing career began in fantasy and romance, genres relegated to the "outhouses" of literature in their categorisation as non-serious modes.<sup>13</sup> However, *Wolves*, published by Penguin's Hamish Hamilton in August 2021, marked McConaghy's transition into literary eco-fiction, achieving immediate success as a *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post* bestseller.<sup>14</sup> The novel won the 2022 Indie Book Award for Fiction and the 2022 Nautilus Gold Award and received praise from climate-engaged authors such as Jeff VanderMeer, Emily St. John Mandel, and James Bradley.<sup>15</sup> Lorraine Berry describes *Wolves* as responding to an "apathy born of helplessness" in the face of climate change, highlighting its "intelligent perspectives" on rewilding and attempts to "persuade people they should care about the fate of animals."<sup>16</sup> She also notes the novel's engagement with "deeper questions of epistemology," including the "limits of language" and "limits of empathy."<sup>17</sup> Clodagh Robinson-Watts similarly classifies the novel as a "bare-your-teeth, feminist thriller," while James Bradley described *Wolves* as possessing a "new urgency," animated by the reality of "a world now shaped by human activity and defined by hastening ecosystem collapse and extinction."<sup>18</sup> Bradley argues that the novel offers a mirror to reality: "as our gaze is reflected back at the human world, what we find is not easy to look at: cruelty, violence, and, perhaps most importantly, a lack of empathy, not just for other species, but for each other."<sup>19</sup> Bradley's observation aligns with what Laura Joyce identifies as a growing cultural hunger for narratives that "bear witness" to contemporary crises, particularly gendered violence.<sup>20</sup> Joyce notes that "domestic violence takes centre stage in fiction, film, and television in 2017," with bestselling works *Big Little Lies* (2014), *The Power* (2016), and the television series *The Handmaid's Tale* (2017) reflecting a broader cultural reckoning, as the #MeToo movement gained momentum.<sup>21</sup> These works reveal that audiences seek representations of "horrors they already experience, in order to bear witness and effect change."<sup>22</sup> *Wolves* continues this trend, blending popular genre modes to

<sup>12</sup> Christine Gledhill, "Melodrama's Modern," *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film* 48, no. 2 (2021): 162–79, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17483727211039464>.

<sup>13</sup> Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 24; McConaghy began with *Arrival* (2009), then four series—*The Avery* (2013–2016), *Fury* (2014), and *The Cure* (2014–2016)—before releasing her debut literary fiction novel *Migrations* in 2020 and *Wolves* in 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *New York Times* bestsellers must sell at least 5,000–10,000 books in one week across America using multiple retailers. See Alexandra Alter, "Best Sellers Sell the Best Because They're Best Sellers," *The New York Times*, September 19, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/19/books/penguin-random-house-madeline-mcintosh.html>.

<sup>15</sup> "Once There Were Wolves: Charlotte McConaghy," *Penguin*, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/once-there-were-wolves-9780143779803>.

<sup>16</sup> Lorraine Berry, "Review: As Species Vanish, a New Novel Asks: Can 're-Wilding' Help Civilize Humans?," review of *Once There Were Wolves*, by Charlotte McConaghy, *Los Angeles Times*, August 6, 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Berry, "Review."

<sup>18</sup> Clodagh Robinson-Watts, "Review: *Once There Were Wolves* by Charlotte McConaghy," review of *Once There Were Wolves*, by Charlotte McConaghy, *Readings Books*, August 1, 2021; Bradley, "Open your heart."

<sup>19</sup> Bradley, "Open your heart."

<sup>20</sup> Laura Joyce, "Introduction," in *Domestic Noir: The New Face of 21st Century Crime Fiction*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Springer International Publishing, 2018), 7, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5>.

<sup>21</sup> Joyce, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>22</sup> Joyce, "Introduction," 7.

explore environmental and domestic violence as interconnected forms of harm. Through Inti's synaesthesia, McConaghy amplifies the affective weight of this violence, challenging readers to engage deeply with embodied engagement. Like the cultural texts Joyce references, *Wolves* appeals to a broad audience through its genre hybridity and by combining its urgent social critique with plot-driven immediacy. Unlike these predominantly positive reviewers, Harriet Lane critiques McConaghy's "strange and unconvincing Scotland," arguing that "plot and characterization seems rushed and scrappy, a vehicle for environmental messaging."<sup>23</sup> While Lane praises the novel for its timely response to urgent environmental themes and for gaining traction as an exciting "eco-thriller," she sees the "rushed" quality of the novel as a weakness.<sup>24</sup> Ken Gelder discusses how popular fiction often operates through "pace and escalation" and "wilful immersion in rapidly proceeding scenes and events."<sup>25</sup> He notes the accessibility and visceral appeal of popular genres, which engage wide audiences and respond quickly to contemporary issues. *Wolves* exemplifies this approach, blending generic modes to create a narrative that is both stylistically appealing and thematically resonant with the current environmental crisis.

McConaghy's genre hybridity in *Wolves* is the vehicle for her examination of morality and shapes the novel's animal communication. Melodrama, as Gledhill observes, "overlaps and competes with realism and tragedy" but offers distinct stylistic and narrative strategies.<sup>26</sup> Gledhill, like Ghosh, observes that "realism and tragedy" are often seen as more "serious" modes, while melodrama is traditionally regarded as a more exaggerated, emotionally charged mode.<sup>27</sup> She identifies melodrama's "narrative enactment of [M]anichean moral conflicts meshed with an aesthetics of the visible," allowing it to dramatise the "persistent clash of moral polarities by exploiting its shifting relations with realism."<sup>28</sup> While realism seeks to "resolve" conflicts through "truth and authentication," melodrama's "excess" amplifies moral polarities, dramatising what realism might suppress.<sup>29</sup> Both Gledhill and Linda Williams assert that melodrama is "not the opposite of realism but an ongoing engagement with it," as both modes evolve to represent shifting social realities.<sup>30</sup> Williams, drawing on Gledhill and Peter Brooks, emphasises that "melodrama is grounded in the conflicts and troubles of everyday, contemporary reality" and dramatises "the afflictions and injustices of the modern, post-Enlightenment world."<sup>31</sup> McConaghy employs melodramatic conventions to highlight ethical dilemmas in human-animal relationships. Her genre hybridisation directly responds to Ghosh's call for

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<sup>23</sup> Harriet Lane, "Human and Animal Predators Together in the Scottish Highlands," review of *Once There Were Wolves*, by Charlotte McConaghy, *The New York Times*, August 3, 2021.

<sup>24</sup> Lane, "Human and Animal Predators."

<sup>25</sup> Ken Gelder, *New Directions in Popular Fiction: Genre, Distribution, Reproduction* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-52346-4>.

<sup>26</sup> Christine Gledhill, *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film* (BFI Pub., 1987), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 22, 32.

<sup>29</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 7, 31–33.

<sup>30</sup> Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, "Introduction," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 10, <https://doi.org/10.7312/gled18066>.

<sup>31</sup> Linda Williams, "Melodrama Revised," in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (University of California Press, 1998), 53, <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520918559-005>.

innovative narrative strategies to address climate change, combining realism's authenticity with melodrama's heightened moral stakes.

Crime, too, emerges from and overlaps with realism, and shares melodrama's preoccupation with morality. Whereas McConaghy's use of melodrama articulates the "[M]anichean" logics of good and evil, her use of crime situates these extremes in circumstances of justice and injustice, care and violence.<sup>32</sup> Crime fiction, as Stephen Knight observes, frames morality around the binary of right and wrong, often revolving around a murder or transgression that disrupts the social order.<sup>33</sup> The detective's role is to uncover the truth, restore order, and ensure that justice is served. Knight highlights how crime fiction frequently casts criminals as "without moral sense and rejecting the practices of normal society."<sup>34</sup> Agatha Christie, for example, "saw 'evil' as the motivating force in a criminal," and critic George Grella described crime fiction as a 'comedy' where "resolution . . . restor[ed] order to a threatened social calm."<sup>35</sup> Knight's understanding of crime fiction focuses on the theme of moral restoration, where the exposure of guilt purifies the community. However, feminist crime fiction complicates this binary, particularly in its engagement with justice and gendered violence. Adrienne E. Gavin argues that "the central concern of feminist crime fiction remains violence against women" and that it "makes a gendered protest" by exposing how patriarchal systems perpetuate harm rather than ensuring justice.<sup>36</sup> Rather than restoring order, feminist crime fiction questions, "if even the detective figure is violated and attacked, is justice possible?"<sup>37</sup> The representation of 'crime' within *Wolves* ranges from the historical extinction of wolves in Scotland, to significant moments of domestic abuse—Inti and Aggie's father physically harming Aggie, Aggie's experience of sexual violence, Stuart's abuse of his wife—as well as the death of Stuart and three wolves at the hands of humans. This effectively merges human and animal vulnerabilities and issues of environmental degradation and systemic violence. As will be discussed, McConaghy complicates the moralisation of crimes and violence in the novel by drawing on noir elements, exposing the tension between human, social, and economic interests, and ecological conservation. This aligns with broader literary trends addressing the intersection of care and violence in the context of climate crisis, a theme evident in both Arnott and Hortle's works. In light of this trend, it is unsurprising that crime fiction has attracted eco-critical scholarship. In his introduction to the *Routledge Handbook of Crime Fiction and Ecology*, Nathan Ashman asserts:

[f]rom the sublime, snow-bound settings of Nordic noir to the enclosed, rural enclaves of the Golden Age cosy, all crime fiction is, to some extent, troubled by questions of ecology. I do not necessarily mean this in the sense of offering a conscious or political interrogation of the relationship between living organisms and the natural world (although some do), but rather as

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<sup>32</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Stephen Knight, "The Golden Age," in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 88, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521803993>.

<sup>34</sup> Knight, "The Golden Age," 88.

<sup>35</sup> Knight, "The Golden Age," 88.

<sup>36</sup> Adrienne E. Gavin, "Feminist Crime Fiction and Female Sleuths," in *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Charles J. Rzepka and Lee Horsley (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 268, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444317916.ch20>.

<sup>37</sup> Gavin, "Feminist Crime Fiction," 268.

being unavoidably enmeshed in certain historical and ideological understandings of the physical environment.<sup>38</sup>

Ashman highlights how ecological concerns are woven into crime fiction. This is seen in *Wolves*, as McConaghy embeds the murder mystery within biodiversity loss and the ethics of rewilding. The novel also aligns with Stewart King's concept of 'climate fiction,' which critiques environmental harm through crime fiction's narrative structures, framing ecological destruction as a matter of culpability and justice.<sup>39</sup> However, McConaghy resists simplistic legal binaries by confronting the moral conflicts inherent in prioritising human interests over ecological needs.

McConaghy's noir further disrupts conventional moral clarity in a context of climate change. As Andrew Pepper explains, "[l]iterary noir defies straightforward categorization."<sup>40</sup> Noir's defining trait is its resistance to clear moral resolutions, a characteristic that mirrors the broader challenges of the Anthropocene. Lucas Hollister argues that noir engages with "violence in capitalist modernity" and should be understood "less as a noun describing a set of generic conventions than as a transitive verb, an active effort to fictionalize forms of violence that appear to defy coherent representation or explication."<sup>41</sup> Hollister develops Morton's notion that "the darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir" to argue that both noir and ecological thought grapple with similar dilemmas of violence, responsibility, and the entanglement of actors and consequences.<sup>42</sup> While Arnott's *Limberlost* resonates with Morton's concept of "dark ecology" through its revision of the pastoral, McConaghy draws on the "darkness of Noir" to blur moral boundaries and reveal the entanglement of human and ecological crises.<sup>43</sup> As I argued in Chapter One, the pastoral mode has long been entwined with colonial mythologies of "retreat and return," but recent critics such as Heather Sullivan have shown how it can be refigured as a "dark pastoral" that acknowledges environmental degradation and loss.<sup>44</sup> McConaghy's use of noir echoes this shift: just as *Limberlost* intensifies the pastoral's inherent tensions between nostalgia, idyll, and unease, *Wolves* mobilises noir to confront systemic collapse, resisting resolution and exposing the tensions between care, violence, and environmental destruction. The application of these generic modes in the texts thus performs a similar critical function—amplifying the pastoral's underlying disquiet and refusing its consolatory harmonies by insisting on conflict, rupture, and unresolved entanglements. Joyce highlights how domestic noir, a feminist subgenre, critiques power structures through crime narratives. She describes it as a genre that "re-enacts existing tropes and mythologies, whilst offering

<sup>38</sup> Nathan Ashman, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Handbook of Crime Fiction and Ecology* (Routledge, 2024), 1, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091912>.

<sup>39</sup> Stewart King, "Climate Fiction and the Environmental Imagination of Place," *Journal of Popular Culture* 54, no. 6 (2021): 1236, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13083>.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Pepper, "The American Roman Noir," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521199377.006>.

<sup>41</sup> Hollister, "The Green and the Black," 1018, 1014.

<sup>42</sup> Hollister, "The Green and the Black," 1012; Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 9.

<sup>43</sup> Hollister, "The Green and the Black," 1012; Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, rev. ed. (Routledge, 2019), 55; Heather Sullivan, "The Dark Pastoral: Material Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene," *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities* 1, no. 1, (2020): 27, <https://doi.org/10.46863/ecocene.16>.

a particular, specific index of the current cultural anxieties which produce these narratives.”<sup>45</sup> Joyce argues that domestic noir exposes “how important it is to analyse reality in the same way as we might fiction, and to analyse fiction as an index of our political realities.”<sup>46</sup> McConaghy’s *Wolves* exemplifies this approach. While its plot builds momentum toward resolution and justice, noir disrupts this trajectory by obscuring crime and resisting “narrative closure.”<sup>47</sup> McConaghy draws on melodrama, crime, and noir to “force into aesthetic presence” urgent moral and environmental dilemmas.<sup>48</sup> Violence, while framed as immoral, is also presented as an inevitable consequence of an entangled ecological and social system shaped by complicity and exploitation. This refusal to impose clear accountability echoes noir’s engagement with “nonresolution” and crime as “a symptom of a broader sociopolitical sickness.”<sup>49</sup> In this way, McConaghy challenges simplistic narratives of good and evil, demonstrating how ecological and social crises complicate blame and justice. Ultimately, her blending of genres that are often dismissed as popular rather than literary expands climate fiction’s reach by engaging readers who may not otherwise encounter the mode with urgent ethical and environmental concerns.

### Synaesthesia and Melodramatic Morality

McConaghy leverages Inti’s neurological condition of mirror-touch synaesthesia as a melodramatic tool to intensify networks between human and animal worlds. Inti’s condition allows McConaghy to emphasise the seriousness of, and morally evaluate, harm, while also operating as a vehicle for animal communication. Synaesthesia is a rare medical phenomenon that predominantly affects the human-to-human vicarious perception of touch, involving “the conscious experience of tactile sensations induced by seeing someone else touched.”<sup>50</sup> It is at the “extreme end-point of a normal neural mechanism,” and comprises “disturbances in the ability to distinguish the self from others.”<sup>51</sup> A small set of studies have shown that sensation can be evoked through touch to other humans and to objects without specific recognition of human-to-animal perception, while another set of studies dispute the claim that mirror-touch synaesthesia enhances empathy.<sup>52</sup> In *Wolves*, McConaghy stretches the bounds of realism to dramatise the sensory effect of synaesthesia, creating an intimate, heightened connection between Inti, animals, and people.

The opening line of *Wolves* dramatically conveys Inti’s experience of the condition. While witnessing her father skinning a rabbit, Inti narrates: “[w]hen we were eight, Dad cut me open from throat to stomach.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Joyce, “Introduction,” 2.

<sup>46</sup> Joyce, “Introduction,” 3.

<sup>47</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1014.

<sup>48</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 33.

<sup>49</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1021.

<sup>50</sup> Jamie Ward and Michael J. Banissy, “Explaining Mirror-Touch Synesthesia,” *Cognitive Neuroscience* 6, no. 2–3 (2015): 119, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17588928.2015.1042444>.

<sup>51</sup> Ward and Banissy, “Mirror-Touch,” 119, 120, 123.

<sup>52</sup> Ward and Banissy, “Mirror-Touch,” 119; Simon Baron-Cohen et al., “Mirror-Touch Synaesthesia Is Not Associated with Heightened Empathy, and Can Occur with Autism,” *PLoS One* 11, no. 8 (2016): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0160543>.

<sup>53</sup> Charlotte McConaghy, *Once There Were Wolves* (Penguin, 2021), 1.

Here, synaesthesia performs what Brooks describes as the “intense, excessive representations of life” that expose fundamental conflicts.<sup>54</sup> The collective pronoun ‘we’ evokes shared subjectivity, collapsing the boundaries between Inti and her twin sister Aggie. The pronoun also aligns with McConaghy’s broader interest in empathy, drawing attention to how individual experiences are shaped by, and inseparable from, shared relationships. This emotional intensity resonates with Alexa Weik von Mossner’s observation that “readers are, through the mechanism of strategic authorial empathizing, encouraged to build moral allegiance” with characters.<sup>55</sup> By immersing readers in Inti’s sensory experience, McConaghy fosters “moral” engagement not only with her but later with the animals she seeks to protect.<sup>56</sup> As Weik von Mossner suggests, “we tend to feel stronger emotions when we simulate the excruciating experiences of a character we like and want to succeed.”<sup>57</sup> McConaghy crafts Inti’s sensory experiences as a “mechanism of liberated embodied simulation” to make our alignment with her not only possible but inevitable.<sup>58</sup> This opening simultaneously implicates the reader in the visceral immediacy of Inti’s perspective and signals McConaghy’s focus on connection and complicity. As children, Inti and her sister Aggie observe their father’s subsistence hunting, “a space of innocence” that later evokes both “[n]ostalgia for a lost innocence” and “[p]athos ... from the audience’s awareness of this loss.”<sup>59</sup> Alexander instructs them on how to skin a rabbit at which point Inti discovers her acute sensitivity:

[t]he tip of his blade went to the fur of the rabbit’s throat and I knew I had made a mistake. Before I could slam my eyes shut the knife opened my throat and sliced my skin in one long swift motion to my tummy ... I screamed and screamed ... Aggie dropped and she pulled me tight against her ... in her skinny arms I was intact again. Myself, with no blood and never in fact a wound at all.<sup>60</sup>

While Inti’s father approaches hunting with respect and a focus on maintaining ecological balance—“[w]e hunt only what we need and we give back to the ecosystem ... So we pay our respects to this creature and thank it for sustaining us”—Inti’s visceral reaction to the skinning of the rabbit highlights the cost of treating nature as a resource, even when approached ethically.<sup>61</sup> This encounter echoes Ned’s hunting and skinning of rabbits in *Limberlost*. While Arnott captures some of Ned’s empathy and discomfort at the grisliness of seeing rabbits and other animals in pain, McConaghy embellishes Inti’s hyper-sensitivity through her synaesthesia. Later in *Limberlost*, Ned experiences a deep, embodied empathy for an injured cow, dissolving distinctions between human and animal suffering. Both Arnott and McConaghy use these heightened interspecies connections to interrogate empathy, morality, and ethical responsibility. Inti’s condition causes her to feel all harm inflicted, making it difficult for her to tolerate the suffering of others.

<sup>54</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 3, <https://doi.org/10.7312/broo91978-002>.

<sup>55</sup> Alexa Weik von Mossner, “Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion,” in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (De Gruyter, 2016), 547, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110314595-029>.

<sup>56</sup> Weik von Mossner, “Environmental Narrative,” 547.

<sup>57</sup> Weik von Mossner, “Environmental Narrative,” 547.

<sup>58</sup> Weik von Mossner, “Environmental Narrative,” 547.

<sup>59</sup> Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 29; Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 65.

<sup>60</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 1–2.

Her condition amplifies her moral perception, leading her to view ethical issues in stark terms of right or wrong:

I am unlike most people. I move through life in a different way, with an entirely unique understanding of touch ... To make sense of it, it is called a neurological condition. Mirror-touch synaesthesia. My brain re-creates the sensory experiences of living creatures, of all people and even sometimes animals; if I see it I feel it, and for just a moment I am them, we are one and their pain or pleasure is my own. It can seem like magic and for a long time I thought it was, but really it's not so far removed from how other brains behave: the physiological response to witnessing someone's pain is a cringe, a recoil, a wince.<sup>62</sup>

McConaghy's portrayal of synaesthesia captures both Inti's capacity for empathy and its overwhelming burden, aligning with Haraway's argument that ethical engagement emerges through direct, situated encounters rather than abstract principles. Haraway's concept of the "contact zone," where "touch ramifies and shapes accountability," resonates with Inti's heightened sensitivity: her body literally enacting the "knots" of entanglement Haraway describes, in which humans and animals are bound by shared histories and reciprocal affect.<sup>63</sup> Beyond the contact zone, Haraway's theory of "becoming with" offers a framework to reconsider the human-wolf relationship in *Wolves*.<sup>64</sup> Rather than situating humans as stewards or dominators of nature, "becoming *with*, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake," suggests that ethical co-existence emerges through sustained, multispecies entanglement.<sup>65</sup> Inti's synaesthesia makes her register animal pain as her own, unsettling conventional notions of human-other divides. This enactment of kinship resists the logic of making animals "killable" (a concern McConaghy foregrounds in the novel's treatment of violence).<sup>66</sup> By dramatising Inti's visceral responses, McConaghy transforms interspecies' relations into an ethical site where care, responsibility, and harm are inextricably linked through the material, affective entanglements that define "becoming with."<sup>67</sup>

Gledhill writes that melodrama's "haptic aesthetics" and focus on the "tortured body" draw readers into a "vicarious" experience.<sup>68</sup> McConaghy's depiction of synaesthesia exemplifies this aesthetic approach, as every act of violence becomes a personal, embodied experience, sharpening the divide between moral good and evil. McConaghy complicates Inti's distress towards witnessing violence and harm to others by confronting the limits of empathy, particularly the limits of her ability to share in the pain and trauma of others. Inti acknowledges the risks of her condition: "I had always known there was something different about me, but that was the day I first recognised it to be dangerous."<sup>69</sup> Her heightened sensitivity disrupts the conventional human ability to compartmentalise and rationalise harmful actions. While Inti's

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<sup>62</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 6.

<sup>63</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244.

<sup>64</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 244.

<sup>65</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 244.

<sup>66</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 80.

<sup>67</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 244.

<sup>68</sup> Gledhill argues that the "realignment of Christian theology with a newly emerging humanism" shifted the concepts of "good and evil" to matters of "individual conscience and action." This change led to a "haptic" aesthetics in melodrama, where moral conflicts were "enacted upon and through the bodies of feeling characters and feeling spectators." Gledhill, "Melodrama's Modern," 165–166.

<sup>69</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 2.

synaesthesia leads her to adopt a rigid moral perspective, McConaghy's characterisation of Inti's father, Alexander, offers a more complex portrayal of morality. A gentle man, Alexander teaches his daughters that "*All creatures know love*," yet later reveals, "I wasn't always the man you know."<sup>70</sup> Once a tree logger, he abandoned his career at twenty-five, unable to participate further in the destructive work of deforestation. Like Arnott, McConaghy is part of a growing body of authors who attend to deforestation and the life-value of trees.<sup>71</sup> The extreme empathy Alexander develops for trees results in emotional turmoil and violent outbursts, particularly towards Aggie, as he struggles with his inability to prevent further harm. This is similar to Hortle's characterisation of Jem that reveals the troubling contradictions in his ethics, as his commitment to environmental advocacy coexists with reckless, destructive behaviour towards others. Both characters exemplify how deep concern for the nonhuman can, paradoxically, manifest as harm toward humans. Inti initially witnesses Aggie's abuse in solidarity, triggering her synaesthesia, but soon realises she must protect them both from Alexander's escalating violence. Inti's condition, which makes "[M]anichean moral conflicts ... visible," intensifies the reader's condemnation of Alexander.<sup>72</sup> Inti and Aggie's vulnerability aligns with melodrama's "[M]anichean" world, where virtuous protagonists defend against evil.<sup>73</sup> After weeks of abuse, Alexander disappears: "we knew that he had taken himself off to die quietly and without fuss, like an animal. Maybe to put an end to whatever he was becoming ... Or maybe to protect us in the only way he knew how."<sup>74</sup> His self-exile is not a resolution but a desperate act to mitigate further violence as well as a symbolic retreat from justice. Later, noir elements complicate the notion of innocence, revealing how morality can shift toward criminality and complicity, and how acts first perceived as 'evil' may, in certain contexts, be morally justified.

### Justice and Injustice, Care and Violence

Through heightened emotions and exaggerated conflicts, McConaghy emphasises the ethical struggles her characters face, while the melodramatic structure challenges readers to confront the consequences of moral and ethical failures. The novel's melodramatic structure also spectacularises the "slow violence" of ecological degradation, transforming protracted harm into visceral, emotionally charged scenes that foreground animal vulnerability.<sup>75</sup> In the present, McConaghy introduces Inti and her team's rewilding project to the Highlands' community. Anne Barrie, "head of the Wolf Trust," presents the case for wolf reintroduction, explaining that Scotland's ecosystem is in crisis:

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<sup>70</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 8, emphasis in original, 16.

<sup>71</sup> See Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (Norton & Company, 2018); Michael Christie, *Greenwood* (Random House, 2020); Elif Shafak, *The Island of Missing Trees* (Bloomsbury, 2021); Ash Davidson, *Damnation Spring* (Simon & Schuster, 2021); Marie Mutsuki Mockett, *The Tree Doctor* (Graywolf Press, 2024). For nonfiction titles, see Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* (Black Inc, 2016); Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (Penguin, 2021); Ben Rawlence, *The Treeline: The Last Forest and the Future of Life on Earth* (Penguin, 2022).

<sup>72</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 22.

<sup>73</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 22.

<sup>74</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 91.

<sup>75</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674061194>.

[k]illing the wolves was a massive blunder on our part. Ecosystems need apex predators because they elicit dynamic ecological changes that ripple down the food chain, and these are known as ‘trophic cascades.’ With their return the landscape will change for the better—more habitats for wildlife will be created, soil health increased, flood waters reduced, carbon emissions captured.<sup>76</sup>

The process of reintroducing the wolves into land that once was forest but is now agricultural farmland is fraught: the land is now occupied by humans and their cattle, wolves are absent, and yet the modern composition of the land is untenable. McConaghy’s depiction of “trophic cascades” and the importance of “keystone predator species” aligns with research in *The Journal of the Society for Ecological Restoration* in which Joseph W. Bull et al. simulate the reintroduction of grey wolves to the Scottish Highlands.<sup>77</sup> Like Bull et al., McConaghy identifies key parameters for maintaining a “viable wolf population” and controlling red deer densities through “top-down forcing.”<sup>78</sup> The study highlights how logging and deer management have shaped the current landscape, noting that “public attitudes toward wolf reintroduction in Scotland were generally positive, but farmers and organizations representing rural issues were negative,” concluding that “[r]eintroductions require local support to be successful.”<sup>79</sup> In this way McConaghy engages with rewilding in ways that counterbalance often abstract and intangible discourses about climate change. In various interviews, McConaghy has noted that despite lacking a formal scientific background, she conducted extensive research, particularly on the complex reintroduction of, and public opposition to, wolves in Yellowstone National Park.<sup>80</sup> McConaghy also stages the rewilding debate as a struggle between pastoral ideals and ecological necessity. The farmers’ objections—“it’s costing me land I could be grazing sheep on” or that wolves “would destroy the Highlander way of life”—echo what Terry Gifford describes as pastoral’s traditional emphasis on agricultural stewardship and rural order.<sup>81</sup> Wolves threaten not only livestock but also the idyllic coherence of a pastoral landscape in which humans, herds, and land exist harmoniously.

Community dissent shapes the novel’s key conflict. One farmer protests: “[t]hat’s all well and good for nature ... but ... [a]griculture is the third-largest employer in rural Scotland. You threaten that, and you threaten the entire community.”<sup>82</sup> Another demands, “[w]ill it take one of our kids getting killed before you decide the ‘experiment’ has failed?”<sup>83</sup> Here, McConaghy dramatises the tension between pastoral nostalgia and ecological imperatives, depicting how resistance is often rooted in economic survival and cultural heritage. Evan, one of the biologists with the Cairngorms Wolf Project, tries to reassure them: “[i]f you can prove the wolf was attacking your livestock, you’re permitted to shoot it. You can also report it to us, and

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<sup>76</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 23.

<sup>77</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 23; Joseph W. Bull et al., “Fences Can Support Restoration in Human-dominated Ecosystems When Rewilding with Large Predators,” *Restoration Ecology* 27, no. 1 (2019): 198, <https://doi.org/10.1111/rec.12830>.

<sup>78</sup> Bull et al., “Rewilding,” 198.

<sup>79</sup> Bull et al., “Rewilding,” 201.

<sup>80</sup> Midge Raymond, “Interview with author Charlotte McConaghy,” *EcoLit Books*, August 3, 2021, <https://ecolitbooks.com/2021/08/03/interview-with-author-charlotte-mcconaghy/>; Julie Carrick Dalton, “Six Questions for the Author: *Once There Were Wolves*,” *Orion Magazine*, August 4, 2021, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/six-questions-for-the-author-once-there-were-wolves/>.

<sup>81</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 24; Gifford, *Pastoral*, rev. ed. (Routledge, 2019), 56.

<sup>82</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 24.

<sup>83</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 24.

we have a legal obligation to gather evidence and destroy it ourselves. But if you kill one for sport, that's punishable by fines and jail time."<sup>84</sup> Evan's response stresses the complexities of coexistence. Inti then offers her divisive perspective:

'[w]hat's dangerous ... is the unwarranted spreading of fear ... If you truly think wolves are the blood spillers, then you're blind ... *We* do that. We are the people killers, the children killers. *We're* the monsters.' I sit down within the silence. The cold seems to have deepened in the auditorium. My eyes are drawn to the man by the door. He's watching me and I realize what he was searching for in the crowd because he seems to have found it in me. A disruption. A threat.<sup>85</sup>

Inti's words cast humans as the true agents of violence, unsettling the pastoral fantasy of benevolent stewardship. The "silence" that follows, the "cold" atmosphere, and Inti's observation that she is both a "disruption" and "threat" transforms the community meeting into a theatrical confrontation producing "sudden stillness and silence ... interrupting spectators' absorption and calling on them to pause, to shift their orientation toward the representation, and to interpret the picture."<sup>86</sup> The scene operates as a kind of "tableau of recognition" that "punctuat[es]" the "dramatic action."<sup>87</sup> McConaghy stages this scene as a moral confrontation, one that crystallises the novel's broader interrogation of justice, violence, and responsibility.

An interaction between Inti and Red, a local farmer, exemplifies how the novel employs melodramatic conventions to frame the ecological and social tensions of rewilding. After the meeting, Red warns Inti:

'if one of those wolves takes a bite out of a single one of my sheep ... I will take myself and my people into that forest and I won't stop until I have hunted down every last one of them.'  
'Sounds like you might be looking forward to it, Red.'  
'Well now maybe I am.'<sup>88</sup>

Here, Red's reference to "my people" suggests a tribalism that sees wolves—and those who defend them—as threats to tradition.<sup>89</sup> Inti's accusation that he is "looking forward to" a revenge killing spree is equally provocative, exposing his aggression as performative and predictable.<sup>90</sup> In response, Inti studies him:

I've met him so many times I could laugh, except that I will not make the mistake of underestimating the damage an angry man can do, not again. I straighten off the wall. 'You went on in there like there's still something to be decided. It's done. The wolves are protected. You hunt them, you go to jail. I'll make sure of it.'<sup>91</sup>

Her recognition of him as yet another "angry man" she had "met ... so many times" signals a critical awareness of the destructive potential in this common display of masculinity.<sup>92</sup> McConaghy employs melodrama's heightened emotional intensity and its tendency toward "simplistic moral stereotyping,"

<sup>84</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 24.

<sup>85</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 26, emphasis in original.

<sup>86</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 26, emphasis in original; Carolyn Williams, "Melodrama and the Realist Novel" in *The Cambridge Companion to English Melodrama* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 216.

<sup>87</sup> Williams, "Melodrama and the Realist Novel," 218.

<sup>88</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 27.

<sup>89</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 27.

<sup>90</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 27.

<sup>91</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 27.

<sup>92</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 27.

casting Red as a villain whose aggression embodies both environmental and masculine violence.<sup>93</sup> By linking threats to wolves with violent patriarchal codes, she critiques how “disruption[s]” and perceived “threat[s]” are often met with visceral hostility.<sup>94</sup> Timothy Clark discusses the “challenge of representation” in Anthropocene fiction, noting that “readers’ imaginations are still so much more easily engaged and drawn in by the human drama, with its humour, suspense, love interest and psychological identification, than by the environmental one.”<sup>95</sup> McConaghy navigates this challenge through melodrama and realism, employing dialogue, first-person narration, and dramatic confrontations out of “heterogeneous material” to immerse readers in ecological concerns.<sup>96</sup>

### The Ecological Detective

McConaghy’s fusion of melodrama and crime elements shapes her depiction of the novel’s present-day violence: Stuart’s abuse of his wife Lainey, his death, and the killing of three wolves. These crimes foreground human and animal vulnerabilities and expose the ethical dilemmas of justice in each circumstance. Walton and Walton argue that climate change “cuts across familiar categories of the economic and environmental, cultural and natural, individual and collective, local and global,” requiring “ecological detectives ... to bear witness, diagnose, organise, protest, persuade, suffer, mourn, and act.”<sup>97</sup> Drawing on Rose, they connect “Anthropocene noir” to a world of looming catastrophe, where “we are all criminals, all detectives, and all victims, entangled in destructive systems that we both investigate and perpetuate.”<sup>98</sup> Aligning with “classic noir” and its depiction of protagonists as “part criminal, part detective, part victim,” this model complicates notions of justice and accountability.<sup>99</sup> McConaghy engages with these ideas in her portrayal of Inti, an implicated protagonist who occupies all three roles—“criminal,” ecological “detective,” and “victim.”<sup>100</sup> Inti’s synaesthesia heightens her moral and sensory responses, positioning her as an intuitive investigator, while also blurring the boundary between perception and reality. Her conviction that humans are “monsters” leads her to protect animals with an unwavering moral code, but this certainty fractures as the novel unfolds, particularly in terms of her role in Stuart’s death.<sup>101</sup> David Farrier asserts that “Anthropocene noir” resists simple resolutions because ecological crimes “are at the same time incalculable and urgently in need of recognition.”<sup>102</sup> In *Wolves*, the crime of Stuart’s murder is entangled with broader violence—against Lainey, against wolves, and against the landscape itself. Farrier extends Rose’s concept by questioning how crime fiction can represent crimes that have no “singular scene, culprit or victim,” as

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<sup>93</sup> Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” 77.

<sup>94</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 27.

<sup>95</sup> Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2015), 178, 179, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474217484>.

<sup>96</sup> Gledhill, “Melodrama’s Modern,” 171.

<sup>97</sup> Walton and Walton, “Crime Fiction and Ecology,” 3.

<sup>98</sup> Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” 215.

<sup>99</sup> Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” 215.

<sup>100</sup> Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” 215.

<sup>101</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 26.

<sup>102</sup> David Farrier, “Animal Detectives and ‘Anthropocene Noir’ in Chloe Hooper’s *A Child’s Book of True Crime*,” *Textual Practice* 32, no. 5 (2018): 879, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2016.1275756>.

ecological destruction is “[d]elocalised in its causes, incalculable and potentially irredeemable in its effects.”<sup>103</sup> Inti’s role as a detective is complicated by the fact that she, too, becomes a suspect. Her pursuit of justice is complicated by her increasing entanglement in the very violence she seeks to confront.

Stuart’s control of Lainey and his eventual fate exemplify the novel’s noir-inflected examination of power and harm. We first meet Stuart and Lainey at the beginning of the novel after Inti attempts to buy their lame horse. Stuart intends to put the horse down, and during a conversation with the local vet and police chief Duncan, Inti recognises signs of domestic abuse. She describes Stuart’s intimidation of Lainey as having “the hard edge of anger in it.”<sup>104</sup> This initial encounter foreshadows the violence that will unfold and positions Stuart as a clear antagonist in the novel’s melodramatic framework. His control of Lainey, revealed through small gestures and pointed comments, creates a sense of looming threat, setting up a confrontation between Inti’s moral conviction and the social structures that enable Stuart’s abuse. Inti’s synaesthesia—a melodramatic device—dramatically affects Inti’s response to Lainey’s suffering. The following morning, Duncan and Inti find Lainey, severely injured, in the hospital. Lainey’s battered face triggers Inti’s synaesthetic response:

one entire side of her face is swollen so badly that her eye has disappeared in a pulp of blue and black, and the tissue around my own eye begins to tingle and swell and I lose the vision in it, it slips away, leaving me half shrouded in dark ... I spin away and press my spine to the wall. Here. Here is your body. I recentre myself ... Not your pain. Not your body. A trick.<sup>105</sup>

This moment exemplifies how McConaghy amplifies the emotional and moral stakes of violence in the novel.<sup>106</sup> Inti’s heightened empathy, enhanced by her neurological condition, makes her feel responsible for Lainey’s suffering and fuels her desire for justice, even as she struggles with the limitations of the law in addressing domestic violence. Later, Duncan refuses to arrest Stuart, citing the difficulties in prosecution, escalating the melodrama as Inti’s frustration reaches a breaking point: “I need to find someone to ask, to corroborate, except that I don’t need that because if I found out he really does beat her up I’m going to want to kill him.”<sup>107</sup> Her moral certainty collapses into personal vengeance, blurring the line between justice and retribution as her desire to protect Lainey gives way to a more volatile, personal reckoning.

McConaghy also frames violence as systemic rather than isolated, exposing how gendered and ecological harm are sustained by complicity. This is particularly evident in the confrontation between Stuart, Red, and Inti at the pub, which heavily draws on melodramatic elements. Red and Stuart mock the rewilding project, toasting the wolves’ release: “[a]s of today the wolves have all walked free into the Cairngorms.”<sup>108</sup> An intoxicated Red taunts Inti and her team further, saying “[d]rink this now, while there’s anything left to drink

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<sup>103</sup> Farrier, “Animal Detectives,” 879, 875.

<sup>104</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 30.

<sup>105</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 35.

<sup>106</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 35.

<sup>107</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 36.

<sup>108</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 54.

to,” predicting ominously, “[c]ause soon enough it’ll be murder and mayhem that rule this place.”<sup>109</sup> When he tells Inti, “[n]o point threatening animals ... You got a problem with one of them ... only thing to do is to show your animal who’s stronger,” his words double as a justification for both violence against animals and male dominance over women.<sup>110</sup> Inti ignores the threat and asks those in the pub, “[a]nyone here think it’s a strong man who beats his wife?,” bringing the underlying issue of domestic violence to the forefront and breaking the silence that often surrounds such abuse.<sup>111</sup> Stuart’s reaction, quickly shifting from faux friendliness to aggression with the command, “[s]hut your mouth, and keep it shut,” reinforces his role as the melodramatic villain whose power is sustained by violence and intimidation.<sup>112</sup> By calling out Stuart’s abuse in public, Inti provokes outrage, illustrating how domestic violence, like ecological harm, is sustained by silence and acquiescence. After Red and Stuart leave the pub, Duncan warns Inti: “[p]erhaps consider the wisdom of antagonising him.”<sup>113</sup> Her realisation, “have I just earned Lainey another punishment?,” underscores the consequences of confronting injustice in a system that often fails to protect victims and instead shields abusers.<sup>114</sup>

The fallout from Inti’s public confrontation is immediate and includes the death of wolf Number Nine. Here, melodrama’s fascination with the proximity of “horror” and “the reality of evil” works alongside Hollister’s reading of noir through an ecological lens.<sup>115</sup> As Hollister argues:

[t]he great emblem of crime fiction is the dead human body, and this fact neatly encapsulates crime fiction’s narrow focus on the concerns of human bodies ... Although ecological awareness does not nihilistically evacuate the capacity to think about violence at a bodily or human scale, it does trouble the simple narrative resolution of violent conditions (as well as crimes) and thus forces us to rethink the interplay between the event of crime and the social and political space against which or in which that crime takes place. Noir, therefore, might actually take us much closer to ecological awareness than many other forms of crime fiction.<sup>116</sup>

Hollister’s argument that ecological awareness “troubles the simple narrative resolution of violent conditions” resonates with McConaghy’s novel, where the wolf’s death is not merely an individual act of cruelty but a reflection of entrenched systems of control and harm.<sup>117</sup> As the perpetrator, Red expresses a sense of misplaced authority and power by killing a creature that posed no real threat. Red’s indifference, dismissing the killing by stating “[w]e’ll show you to the carcass and you can get the damn thing off my property” and claiming that he “thought it was a wild dog,” exemplifies an ingrained entitlement, a callous disregard for the life he ended, and a lack of remorse for his illegal and immoral conduct.<sup>118</sup> Farrier’s analysis

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<sup>109</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 54.

<sup>110</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 55.

<sup>111</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 56.

<sup>112</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 55.

<sup>112</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 56.

<sup>113</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 55.

<sup>113</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 57.

<sup>114</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 57.

<sup>115</sup> Gledhill, “Melodrama’s Modern,” 173.

<sup>116</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1020.

<sup>117</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1020.

<sup>118</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 67.

of “Anthropocene noir” illuminates my reading of how McConaghy employs animal death to explore crime’s broader implications.<sup>119</sup> He observes that, in noir narratives shaped by the Anthropocene, “it is *widespread animal death*, on a scale which exceeds the capacity to imagine, that occupies the place of the absent-but-real story of the crime.”<sup>120</sup> McConaghy positions Nine’s death within this broader framework, making it emblematic of “widespread animal death” rather than an isolated act.<sup>121</sup> The emotional impact on Inti is palpable: “I sink to the ground beside Nine and place my trembling hands in his fur as I never would have done when he was alive.”<sup>122</sup> The theatricality of Inti’s reaction exemplifies melodrama’s capacity to produce dramatic encounters “at moments of maximum impact.”<sup>123</sup> Inti’s grief, intensified by her synaesthetic connection with the wolf—“all I am is this wolf, all I see is the beauty of him, and the power even now, even so reduced”—emphasises the novel’s insistence on interwoven human and nonhuman suffering.<sup>124</sup> The lifeless image of Nine—his “power ... so reduced,” “his eyes ... open and glassy and his tongue ... lolling out”—cements the inevitability of his death: “[t]his feeling is why we don’t give them names. Why we don’t get too near to them. Because they are so fragile.”<sup>125</sup> In this scene, animal communication is depicted through tactile and emotional resonances that connect Inti to Nine’s suffering. Hollister’s notion of the “dead human body” as a central emblem of crime fiction is here recontextualised through the death of a nonhuman body, disrupting the genre’s usual focus on human suffering and culpability.<sup>126</sup> In this way, McConaghy leads readers to reconsider the significance of violence in an ecological framework. Nine’s silent, lifeless body is paralleled with the prolonged mourning of wolf Six: “[she] has not stopped howling for two weeks, from dusk until dawn ... I try to explain that she’s a wild creature in mourning. But the thought of a beast grieving her mate in such a confronting, almost human way is too much for most folk.”<sup>127</sup> The community’s frustration at the wolf’s grief—demanding that Inti “shut her up”—reflects a broader cultural detachment from animal emotions, reinforcing Robles’ claim that animals in literature have always “been speaking ... even if they have not always been audible.”<sup>128</sup> The dismissal of the wolf’s mourning, likened to a failure of “discipline,” underscores a persistent reluctance to recognise animals as speaking beings, instead relegating them to the category of “noisy animals.”<sup>129</sup> Here, McConaghy makes animal suffering impossible to ignore. Inti’s demand that Red be charged is met with Duncan’s pragmatic refusal, as he argues that without “evidence to contradict [Red’s] word,” accusing him “so soon after the wolves have been freed is just gonna disrupt my people further. I have to show them solidarity.”<sup>130</sup> Duncan’s reluctance to prosecute Red reflects the complicity that sustains both domestic and environmental violence.

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<sup>119</sup> Farrier, “Animal Detectives,” 879.

<sup>120</sup> Farrier, “Animal Detectives,” 883, emphasis in original.

<sup>121</sup> Farrier, “Animal Detectives,” 883.

<sup>122</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 67.

<sup>123</sup> Gledhill, “Melodrama’s Modern,” 166.

<sup>124</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 67.

<sup>125</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 67.

<sup>126</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1020.

<sup>127</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 69.

<sup>128</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 69; Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (Routledge, 2016), 144, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880389>.

<sup>129</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144.

<sup>130</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 77.

In this, McConaghy contrasts Inti's clear ethical stance, which draws firm distinctions between right and wrong, with Duncan's pragmatic, socially controlled policing, and Red's self-serving justifications.

In *Wolves*, crime tropes foreground violence against animals and women. Casey A. Cothran argues that “[d]etective fiction has the potential to explore examples of slow violence—subtle yet deeply destructive crimes against marginalised or minority individuals, or natural spaces—crimes that are not defined as illegal by the cultures that these groups inhabit.”<sup>131</sup> McConaghy makes this structural violence visible through parallel acts of harm: Red's impulsive killing of wolf Number Nine and Stuart's deliberate domestic abuse. Both acts emerge from a system of entitlement and domination that extends across human and nonhuman victims, reinforcing Cothran's claim that mystery fiction primes readers to “consider larger social problems” rather than “feel sympathy for a person or place who has been harmed.”<sup>132</sup> McConaghy's novel also engages with domestic noir, a subgenre that, as Emma Miller argues, challenges the trope of women as “inert bod[ies] to be looked at, dissected, and penetrated,” instead granting them agency.<sup>133</sup> Within the novel's violent, male-dominated world, Inti, Lainey, and Aggie must navigate both physical and psychological threats. By linking gendered and ecological violence, McConaghy—like the domestic noir narratives Miller discusses—disrupts traditional crime fiction's focus on individual perpetrators, exposing the structures that sustain harm while allowing space for female resistance. Stuart's murder, the killing of wolves, and the broader ecological crisis resist moral binaries. McConaghy's novel challenges readers to confront the uneasy intersections of crime, responsibility, and complicity in a world where ecological and gendered violence are inseparable.

### Ethical Codes and Compromises

Inti's discovery of Stuart's mutilated body is a pivotal moment that intertwines the melodramatic, crime, and noir elements central to *Wolves*. In this scene, McConaghy suspends conventional “causal logic” to focus on the emotional and moral consequences of the crime, creating a heightened moment of “shock, drawn-out suspense [and] vacillation between hope and the inevitable.”<sup>134</sup> Inti's discovery of Stuart's body after a night at Duncan's house epitomises melodrama's orchestration of “coincidence, chance, or fate” to stage “shock” or “suspense.”<sup>135</sup> Here, Stuart's death is less an outcome of a clear moral or psychological trajectory than a pretext for amplifying “suspense” and intensifying Inti's entanglement in cycles of violence and retribution.<sup>136</sup> Finding Duncan missing in the early morning, Inti stumbles upon the scene:

[h]is guts are open and spilling. Mine are tumbling out of me. I slam my eyes closed. The first thundering thought: *What if teeth did that?* ... It looks like they killed him. It looks very much

<sup>131</sup> Casey A. Cothran, “Mystery and Detective Fiction and Ecofeminism,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Ecofeminism and Literature*, ed. Douglas A. Vakoch (Routledge, 2023), 467, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003195610-46>; Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 2.

<sup>132</sup> Cothran, “Mystery and Detective Fiction,” 458.

<sup>133</sup> Emma Miller, “How Much Do You Want to Pay for This Beauty?: Domestic Noir and the Active Turn in Feminist Crime Fiction,” in *Domestic Noir*, ed. Laura Joyce and Henry Sutton (Springer International Publishing, 2018), 90, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69338-5_6).

<sup>134</sup> Gledhill, “Melodrama's Modern,” 166.

<sup>135</sup> Gledhill, “Melodrama's Modern,” 166.

<sup>136</sup> Gledhill, “Melodrama's Modern,” 166.

like that. This is how they attack, either at throat or guts, the two most vulnerable spots. But I know they didn't do this, they wouldn't, they don't attack people. Someone has murdered Stuart Burns and left him here. And that someone either wanted Stuart dead, or they wanted the wolves dead. I make a very dark choice. Or it makes me. I bury his body.<sup>137</sup>

Unlike her empathetic surrender to grief over wolf Nine, here, Inti actively suppresses her synaesthesia, preventing herself from initiating a sensory experience. In doing so, she compartmentalises her emotional and ethical responses, prioritising strategic intervention over emotional response. Three generic elements are at play here: the product of the crime—the body—is found; McConaghy's melodramatic vehicle of synaesthesia immerses Inti in the violence; and Inti hides the evidence of the crime. McConaghy presents “[t]he great emblem of crime fiction”—“the dead human body”—and yet in Inti's belief that “[i]t looks like [the wolves] killed him,” McConaghy “trouble[s] the simple narrative resolution of violent conditions (as well as crimes) and thus forces us to rethink the interplay between the event of crime and the social and political space against which or in which that crime takes place.”<sup>138</sup> Believing the wolves will be blamed—“[t]his will kill them” and that “then the ancient forest will go too”—Inti prioritises their survival.<sup>139</sup> In imagining the cascade effect, Inti's reflection exemplifies the novel's central tension toward balancing human and nonhuman interests while negotiating rewilding efforts. Inti's decision to bury Stuart's body ironically confirms her ethical code that initially claimed, “[w]e're the monsters,” and echoes noir's moral blurring.<sup>140</sup> Her narration, “I make a very dark choice. Or it makes me,” signals Inti's role as the “ecological detective”—“villain,” “accomplice,” “disruptive ... force,” and figure who “present[s] solutions that are wrong.”<sup>141</sup> Through Inti's immoral actions, McConaghy highlights how the crime against Stuart is less significant to Inti than its potential impact on the wolves and the rewilding project.<sup>142</sup> While she has no pity for Stuart, her “terror for [her] wolves” compels Inti to compromise her principles, highlighting her inconsistent ethics and willingness to go to extreme lengths to protect the wolves and the rewilding project.<sup>143</sup> The escalation of violence that follows—the killing of wolves Four and Five and a farmer's retaliation in the brutal mutilation of wolf Fourteen—deepens Inti's ethical compromise. Her grief turns to retribution: she vandalises the farmer's car and assaults him. These acts, driven by emotion rather than moral clarity, contribute to the melodramatic intensity of the narrative and the ambiguity of Inti's role as “ecological detective.”<sup>144</sup> While avoiding legal repercussions, she faces heavy fines as a personal and ethical cost to her actions. Inti's unyielding commitment to the wolves, even as their threat to the community and its livestock grows, forces her to confront the ethical dilemma of balancing the wolves' survival with the livelihoods of those around her. Her resolve to identify and eliminate the wolf responsible for the livestock attacks illustrates her conflicted sense of duty, as her empathy for the wolves clashes with the broader responsibilities of protecting both human and animal lives.

<sup>137</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 98–99, emphasis in original.

<sup>138</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1020.

<sup>139</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 99.

<sup>140</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 26, emphasis in original.

<sup>141</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 99; Walton and Walton, “Crime Fiction and Ecology,” 2.

<sup>142</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1020.

<sup>143</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 99.

<sup>144</sup> Walton and Walton, “Crime Fiction and Ecology,” 3.

At first, Inti assumes the wolves are responsible for Stuart's murder and hastily conceals his body, but when Duncan is later discovered gravely wounded alongside his dog, her suspicions shift toward him. As Inti searches for answers, she grapples with her own reluctance to accept the truth, reflecting:

[i]f Lainey didn't do it, if I didn't and Duncan didn't, then who [killed Stuart]? Who could have? The answer has been here all along, the entire town saw the answer but I refused to. I was too stubborn, too wilfully blind, keener to accuse the man I love than to accuse the animals I brought here ... And now Duncan has paid for my denial.<sup>145</sup>

Rather than reaffirming her belief in the wolves' guilt, this moment marks a turning point: Inti realises she had been blinded by her own assumptions and overlooked the real perpetrator. Convinced that a wolf is responsible, Inti goes out to hunt and kill wolf Ten. Here, McConaghy frames moral struggle within her broader history of guilt: she has long blamed herself for failing to protect Aggie from their father and Aggie's ex-husband, which she views as both weakness and failure. McConaghy depicts Inti's evolving sense of agency and her desire to correct past mistakes and assert control by defending her loved ones in the present. Inti prepares to shoot the wolf: "I have the rifle to my eyeline, aimed at her chest ... Once I wasn't strong enough to make things right but I am now, I will be. I turn off the safety. She doesn't ready herself to attack. She just watches me. My hand on the trigger stalls."<sup>146</sup> Initially, McConaghy frames the confrontation as being driven by Inti's belief that this is a justifiable act of strength and that killing Ten is a necessary act of justice: "[s]he took something beloved from the world. From me."<sup>147</sup> However, as the moment unfolds, her desire for revenge unravels as she realises that Ten is neither human nor a criminal: "[s]he's not a person, who understands right and wrong ... She didn't kill because she was cruel. She killed because there are instincts in her body telling her to do so, to protect against threats, to survive, sustain herself, live on."<sup>148</sup> In this, McConaghy contrasts human notions of justice with animal "instincts," complicating the justification of punishing the wolf for her 'crimes.'<sup>149</sup> The novel "forces us to rethink the interplay between the event of crime and the social and political space against which or in which that crime takes place."<sup>150</sup> Human morality and criminal frameworks cannot be applied to animal instincts. Moreover, as Hollister suggests, if we "radically empty ... out the gendered, racialized, narrowly human" aspects of traditional crime narratives, we can reframe the notion of culpability in ecological terms.<sup>151</sup> Inti's realisation challenges binaries of innocence and culpability: is it justifiable to kill an animal for following its instincts?

Despite this moment of clarity, Inti pulls the trigger, driven not by a desire for punishment but by necessity: "if she isn't put down they all will be. Because this is my job, an awful part of it."<sup>152</sup> This decision reflects the harsh realities and ethical compromises involved when the welfare of wild animals has to be balanced

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<sup>145</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 230.

<sup>146</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 237.

<sup>147</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 237.

<sup>148</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 237.

<sup>149</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 237.

<sup>150</sup> Hollister, "The Green and the Black," 1020.

<sup>151</sup> Hollister, "The Green and the Black," 1023.

<sup>152</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 237.

by the protection of people. Inti's sorrow and regret are palpable as she closes her eyes, knowing she will be "less when [she] open[s] them again."<sup>153</sup> For Inti, killing is not empowering and is complicated by an embodied experience, captured in her first-person, present-tense perspective. As Ten is dying, Inti crosses the clearing to her, feeling the bullet's impact via her synaesthesia: "I can feel it in [my neck], sharp and radiating."<sup>154</sup> Inti's connection to Ten is physical and emotional and she kneels to stroke the wolf's fur, whispering, "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry."<sup>155</sup> Ten's final interface with Inti is conveyed through their mutual gaze: "[h]er eyes look up at me and I open myself to her completely, lay myself bare for her to see, and she does, and dies."<sup>156</sup> While previously, Inti has simply witnessed the pain of others, now she is the instigator of Ten's pain and death. Through this, McConaghy foregrounds the complexities of violence and moral responsibility in the Anthropocene. Berger's notion that the animal gaze reveals unsettling truths about our relationships with animals is reflected in this moment of mutual recognition. He argues that the animal's gaze highlights a gap between humans and their surroundings that language cannot bridge. While language connects humans, the silent gaze of an animal enacts a different form of communication: "[t]he animal has secrets which, unlike the secrets of caves, mountains, seas, are specifically addressed to man."<sup>157</sup> In McConaghy's portrayal of the wolf, the gaze transcends an exchange of mere observation. It becomes a form of spiritual connection, where Inti witnesses the wolf's passage into death. In *Wolves*, animal communication integrates physical, emotional, and spiritual expressions and is deployed to elevate the consequences of violence and harm, and amplify ethical responsibility. While Inti believes she is providing justice, McConaghy highlights ethical ambiguity. In the context of rewilding and environmental conservation, McConaghy points to the broader, systemic issues at hand and the need to address human capacity for, and justification of, cruelty and violence.

### "Happy Endings"

McConaghy leverages a melodramatic structure to move the narrative beyond the moral ambiguity of noir towards a hopeful conclusion. Williams argues that "melodrama provides its audiences with a way to think about real-world issues and events; the messy middle of a melodrama engages these issues in complex ways, even if the happy endings may seem to gloss over the very complexity that has been engaged in the middle."<sup>158</sup> McConaghy's novel follows a similar pattern with a "messy middle" of ethical dilemmas followed by a seemingly neat emotional resolution.<sup>159</sup> In a mythical, dream-like course of events, Inti gives birth in the woods and is protected by a pack of wolves. The "trees whisper" to Inti, "[k]eep on. A little further

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<sup>153</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 237.

<sup>154</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 238.

<sup>155</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 238.

<sup>156</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 238.

<sup>157</sup> John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?," in *About Looking* (Pantheon, 1980), 3.

<sup>158</sup> Carolyn Williams, "Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism," *English Literature (Venezia. Online)* 6, no. 1 (2020): 102, <https://doi.org/10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2019/01/006>.

<sup>159</sup> Williams, "Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism," 102.

now” and Inti’s horse is spooked by her moans of pain and disappear.<sup>160</sup> Delivering her child alone—“bit[ing]” her own umbilical cord—she continues to walk, “[l]eaving a trail of red behind.”<sup>161</sup> The scene echoes the melodramatic protagonist’s “virtues” of “perseverance, nobility, and self-sacrifice.”<sup>162</sup> When Inti collapses and wakes hours later, a pack of wolves encircle her:

she doesn’t attack me, this smallest of the wolves, nearly grown now but still white as the day I held her in my hands. She lies her body next to mine. And as the rest of her pack move to join her, pressing their warmth around us and saving us from the cold, I lower my face into the white of her neck and I weep.<sup>163</sup>

As Inti is unsure if the vision was “real,” the scene reflects the excess of melodrama and transcends realism.<sup>164</sup> Soon after, Aggie finds Inti and rescues the child while Red carries Inti home. In shock at Red’s assistance, Inti reflects, “I know nothing about hatred or love, about cruelty or kindness.”<sup>165</sup> Red’s transformation from antagonist to protector is solidified in his confession of guilt over killing wolf Nine: “[t]he moment I pulled that trigger, I know it was evil I’d done.”<sup>166</sup> Unlike Jem in *The Octopus and I*, whom Hortle critiques for embodying a masculinity that combines moral integrity with reckless harm, Red exhibits patriarchal traits—entitlement, control, power over women and animals—but also displays regret for past violence, as well as demonstrating compassion. Donovan’s ‘aesthetics of care’ framework draws attention to the ethical problem of how melodrama resolves itself. Donovan argues that literary animals are too often reduced to “stand-in[s] ... whose pain is ... trivialized and effaced.”<sup>167</sup> McConaghy’s melodramatic ending exemplifies this double bind: wolf Nine’s death, and later the scapegoating of Ten, become the emotional and moral fuel that enable Inti’s reconciliation with Red *and* Red’s redemption. This is the ethical impasse Donovan identifies—the way literary representations of animal suffering aim to cultivate empathy and moral reflection, yet simultaneously appropriate that suffering to serve human emotional or narrative ends. The wolves’ suffering secures the cathartic closure melodrama demands, but at the cost of instrumentalising them as vehicles of human development. McConaghy’s reliance on melodrama enacts precisely the risk Donovan identifies—violence aestheticised for allegorical effect—even as the novel gestures toward an ethics of care through its insistence on animal communication and embodied interconnection.

Nonetheless, through Red’s remorse and Inti’s evolving perception of “love” and “cruelty,” McConaghy explores gendered representations of care and violence and alerts us to the complexities of ethical responsibility.<sup>168</sup> McConaghy recruits a melodramatic structure, opening with “a sudden storm of bad luck” in the case of the wolves being killed, while positioning the final scenes as the compensatory “outpouring” of emotional catharsis: a “happy resolution of misfortune” where Red expresses regret for his violence; and

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<sup>160</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 240.

<sup>161</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 240–241, emphasis in original.

<sup>162</sup> Noël Carroll, “Film, Emotion, and Genre,” in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, ed. C. Plantinga & G. M. Smith (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 38.

<sup>163</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 242–243.

<sup>164</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 243.

<sup>165</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 245.

<sup>166</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 250.

<sup>167</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 46, 47.

<sup>168</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 245.

where Inti finds hope and reconciliation through her connections with animals and humans alike.<sup>169</sup> McConaghy implements these melodramatic tools to push her readers toward emotional and moral engagement with the ecological themes of the novel, highlighting both the potential for redemption and the lingering consequences of past violence.

McConaghy provides further closure through the discovery of Stuart's real killer and Duncan's attacker, offering resolution even as the novel scrutinises its own ethical complexities. In hospital, Aggie confesses to Inti that, on the night of the murder, she mistook Stuart for her abusive ex-husband, Gus. In a moment of fear and rage, she attacked: "[t]here isn't a doubt in her mind that it's what she's been waiting for: Gus has found her."<sup>170</sup> Yet, as she strikes, "a jolt of dissonance" occurs and "the man's face changes," revealing not Gus, but another abusive figure.<sup>171</sup> Despite recognising her mistake, Aggie continues to stab Stuart: "some instinct makes her arm jerk. She stabs and slashes with her serrated knife. Then she turns and walks home. Simple as that."<sup>172</sup> Aggie later explains her attack on Duncan in similar terms as an attempt to protect Inti: "I was so tired of feeling afraid ... I didn't want that prison for you, too ... *I thought it was happening again.*"<sup>173</sup> McConaghy frames Aggie's violence as both self-defensive and pre-emptive, exposing how trauma informs ethical choices. Instead of revealing the truth, Inti chooses to protect her sister: "[p]romise me you'll never tell anyone ... If he's ever found, we'll let them think it was Number Ten who killed him, and I'll admit I was the one who buried him because I wanted to protect my wolves."<sup>174</sup> The novel's convenient conclusion reinforces melodramatic closure while maintaining noir's moral ambiguity. Portrayed as a romantic hero, Duncan aids this deception by falsifying a police statement:

Duncan has written a statement declaring he was attacked by a wolf, as everyone thought. They don't look further into the type of wounds he was given—a sharp blade instead of animal teeth, a slice not a tear. They don't question, because he is the police chief and because this is the outcome that makes sense to them, a crime that has already been punished. I killed the monster, after all. Number Ten lies dead upon a lie. Upon my mistake. She will become legend and the wolves will suffer for it, because it was not them who came to this place and spilled blood. It was my sister and me.<sup>175</sup>

This decision absolves Aggie and Inti while scapegoating Ten, reinforcing the novel's central critique: that humans displace blame onto nature for their own violence onto nature. Inti acknowledges her moral failure but justifies it, recognising that Ten was condemned regardless: "I will never forgive myself for this mistake, but in the end, Ten would have had to be destroyed anyway, because she drew a map of dead livestock and

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<sup>169</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, "One Suffers but One Learns: Melodrama and the Rules of Lack of Limits," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, ed. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (Columbia University Press, 2018), 152, <https://doi.org/10.7312/gled18066>.

<sup>170</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 247.

<sup>171</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 247, emphasis in original.

<sup>172</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 247.

<sup>173</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 248–249, emphasis in original.

<sup>174</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 248.

<sup>175</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 252.

the fury of man is absolute.”<sup>176</sup> While the novel does not offer public “recognition of where guilt and innocence really lie,” it provides internal moral resolution—one of melodrama’s key features.<sup>177</sup>

McConaghy adopts traditional detective tropes—an investigator seeking justice—but subverts them by prioritising emotional rather than legal resolution. Inti, despite her “passion for justice,” ultimately suppresses the truth, choosing personal loyalty over systemic accountability.<sup>178</sup> Though motivated by a desire to protect, Aggie’s violent acts complicate the novel’s ethics of care. McConaghy highlights the pervasiveness of complicity in both human and environmental violence, gesturing toward noir’s moral ambiguity: “[t]hat is the situatedness of the Anthropocene—everyone is contributing to it, everyone is affected by it, everyone is guilty.”<sup>179</sup> While much of the novel engages with noir’s murky ethical terrain, McConaghy ultimately moves toward reconciliation, employing a melodramatic structure that contrasts with noir’s refusal to resolve moral tensions. The “happy ending ... gloss[es] over the very complexity that has been engaged in the [messy] middle,” offering closure where noir would typically leave “ambiguity.”<sup>180</sup> Aggie’s sudden departure parallels their father’s earlier disappearance:

[m]aybe it’s guilt for the violence. Maybe it lives in you in a way you can’t ignore ... I wake one morning to find you gone. You have left a note on the table. It reads simply, *Gone home. X* ... You have gone the way Dad did, like the animals do. You have gone into the wild to die. Or, maybe, you have gone to live.<sup>181</sup>

Neither Aggie nor Alexander, their father, face justice, and wolf Ten remains the scapegoat. This ending disrupts crime fiction’s expectation that “good will triumph,” providing “narrative closure” without resolving the deeper moral questions at play.<sup>182</sup>

Unlike Hortle and McKay who embrace irresolution as a means of provoking deeper ethical reflection, McConaghy prioritises emotional catharsis. Hollister’s argument that “ecological awareness confronts fiction with the potential insufficiency of its current stories” is relevant here: while McConaghy attempts to reconcile personal and ecological narratives, the novel ultimately succumbs to genre expectations.<sup>183</sup> The epilogue attempts to balance optimism with lingering uncertainty, closing with an image of ecological restoration: “[i]t is spring now, and the hills have changed colour. The deer are on the move. Things are growing again. The wolves have come home. And by some miracle, or perhaps it’s simply the natural way, the people of this land are becoming accustomed to them.”<sup>184</sup> The wolves have become agents of change. Their reintegration suggests a tentative harmony, while the birth of Inti’s child reinforces continuity: “[m]y daughter squirms in her sling over my back ... We reach the survey grounds ... hoping to see new growth

<sup>176</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 250.

<sup>177</sup> Gledhill, *Home*, 30.

<sup>178</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 48.

<sup>179</sup> Rose, “Anthropocene Noir,” 215.

<sup>180</sup> Williams, “Tableaux and Melodramatic Realism,” 102; Aeon J. Skoble, “Moral clarity and practical reason in film noir,” in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, ed. M.T. Conard (University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 41.

<sup>181</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 254, emphasis in original.

<sup>182</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1014.

<sup>183</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1014.

<sup>184</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 254.

... “Come and look,” I say, and she runs to see, tracing her fingers over the brave new shoots we have been waiting for. “Willow and alder,” I say.”<sup>185</sup> This imagery reflects melodrama’s arc toward redemption—suggesting that, despite the novel’s tragedies, life endures. Yet, as Morton and Hollister argue, the Anthropocene resists neat resolutions.<sup>186</sup> While McConaghy employs melodrama’s hopeful trajectory, she leaves key ethical questions unresolved. Throughout the novel, McConaghy’s animal communication is deeply entwined with suffering; Inti’s synaesthetic empathy forcing her into constant confrontation with the ethical stakes of violence. Yet, in the end, nature—embodied by wolf Ten—is scapegoated for human crimes. This unresolved contradiction exposes the novel’s core tension: its ethical framework remains at odds with the demands of genre.

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<sup>185</sup> McConaghy, *Wolves*, 255–256.

<sup>186</sup> Hollister, “The Green and the Black,” 1012; Morton, *Dark Ecology*, 9.

## Chapter 4: Weird Realism in Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country*

Laura Jean McKay's *The Animals in That Country* is a decisive turn away from conventional realism, pushing into speculative terrain through what I term 'weird realism.' While Arnott, Hortle, and McConaghy remain tethered—albeit differently—to realist frameworks, McKay employs the conceit of the 'zoo flu' virus to imagine direct transspecies communication, unsettling realism while preserving a realistic attention to embodied animal life. This hybrid mode demonstrates that realism can be reconfigured rather than abandoned. The key question is: does McKay's weird realism succeed in registering animal subjectivity, or does it risk reducing animals to allegorical figures that dramatise human concerns? Donovan warns that "using animal death and agony to dramatize, symbolize, or comment upon the emotional state of the human protagonists continues to be a standard fictional device," where "the moral reality of the animals' own suffering is elided."<sup>1</sup> McKay's speculative poetics therefore occupy an uneasy space, granting animals textual presence through cryptic, unsettling voices, but also staging human dread, estrangement, and taboo through those voices. Weird realism manifests from the very tension Donovan identifies between aesthetic exploitation and ethical attentiveness.

The function of genre as a communicative tool is key to how each novel analysed in this thesis performs animal communication. In *Limberlost*, Arnott refrains from direct representation of animal voices, staying firmly within the bounds of realism. In *The Octopus and I*, Hortle similarly refrains from direct human-animal dialogue, yet renders animal consciousness through avant-garde poetics. In *Wolves*, McConaghy blends realism with elements of eco-crime and melodrama, using Inti's mirror-touch synaesthesia as a device to bridge human and animal experiences without granting animals a direct voice. This layered approach allows McConaghy to foreground the emotional and sensory dimensions of human-animal relations while still tethering the narrative to a realist framework. Donovan's framework makes visible how these genre variations enact or fail to enact care: realism's reticence to give animals a direct voice often slides into the "stand-in" logic she critiques, whereas McKay's speculative weird realism both risks and resists this move by rendering animal voices partially opaque rather than fully assimilable into human narratives.<sup>2</sup> McKay extends beyond realism and employs the speculative mode to allow human comprehension of animal voices and transspecies communication through the 'zoo flu' virus. This virus enables humans to understand animal calls, movements, and scents as a form of language, presented in the text as brief, cryptic poems in a bold typeface. By referring to humans as 'it' in these poems, McKay flips the typical human objectification of animals and, in questions phrased as short statements—"I know it / stranger. Hello. / 'Yeah, hi, Sue.' / My pack. It / wants something. / I'll get / it Mum / (Yesterday)"—she adds ambiguity, making the animals' communication seem

<sup>1</sup> Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 46, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 46.

only partially understandable.<sup>3</sup> The animals who become understandable to humans each have a unique style of messaging that aligns with their specific biological traits and reflects their state of confinement or freedom. Animal communication in McKay's novel manifests through multiple modes, including 'zooflu,' the animal gaze, behavioural cues, and human-animal empathetic relationships. These forms of communication are informed by and contribute to the novel's weird realism, a genre mode that, while speculative, remains anchored in the genuine communicative capacities of animals.

In a recognisable and yet strange space in north-western Australia, McKay establishes a crisis that troubles the classic human aspiration: *if only we could talk to animals*. The familiar and yet wild sounds of Australia—the dingo's howl, the buzz-saw siren of cicadas, the kookaburra's laugh, and shrieking of fruit bats—are reimagined uncomfortably as McKay makes audible and visible through literary aesthetics and typographical style the *animality*—the differing intelligence, emotions of pain, fear, rage, the savagery, and sexual behaviour—and *agency* of animals. Through unsettling moments that edge toward taboos like bestiality, McKay provokes us to consider what and why certain aspects of human-animal relationships are acceptable. The animals who 'speak' are from a range of human-assigned categories: dingos and crocodiles confined to sanctuaries, pet dogs and cats, mice bred as food for other animals, cows and pigs bred as livestock for milk and meat. McKay gives voice to animals exploited through captivity, experimentation, industrial agriculture, and habitat degradation. The story follows Jean, a fifty-one-year-old Australian who works as a guide in an animal sanctuary, as she and Sue the dingo search for Kimberly, Jean's granddaughter, who has been abducted by Lee, Jean's son. Sue is one of three dingoes who resides at the wildlife sanctuary, whom Jean rescued from the desert when she was a pup. Through Jean's first-person narration, McKay illustrates how the presence, absence, and disappearance of animal voices shift as Jean contracts and then recovers from the virus. As 'zooflu' amplifies the novel's chorus of animal voices, Jean's awareness of the sentience behind each voice grows. 'Zooflu' introduces interruptions to Jean's dominant narration, meaning McKay develops a multispecies storyworld comprised of multiple senses and multiple viewpoints.<sup>4</sup> We can note that 'zooflu' and its contribution to the novel's animal communication is the only aspect of the novel that is speculative—that is, exceeding mimetic representation of our world. Distinguishing between the real and unreal aspects of the speculative text prompts us to consider what aspects of the 'real' McKay reflects, weakens, subverts, or transgresses. 'Zooflu' reveals already-present dysfunction, a method McKay employs to emphasise her speculative plot's foundation in realism. Robles argues that animals in literature, often dismissed as mere "noisy animals," must be recognised as "speaking beings" through a politics of reading that makes their voices audible.<sup>5</sup> McKay's portrayal of animal voices in *The Animals* exemplifies the political significance of animal communication.

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<sup>3</sup> Laura Jean McKay, *The Animals in That Country* (Scribe, 2020), 114. I have emulated McKay's varying typeface here.

<sup>4</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 280; Tschakert et al., "Multispecies Justice," 1.

<sup>5</sup> Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (Routledge, 2016), 144, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880389>.

By holding closely to realism's main aim of mimesis and yet deviating from reality through the speculative 'zooflu,' McKay constructs weird realism. McKay makes reality and the speculative transformation of reality strange through moments that amplify the *strangeness* of our relationships with animals. In *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson observed that "spring now comes *unheralded* by the return of the birds, and the early mornings are *strangely silent* where once they were filled with the beauty of bird song."<sup>6</sup> Carson's focus on what is tragically lost through human industrial endeavours, and specifically the silence wrought by human intervention, is transformed in McKay's novel to encompass what lies beneath "the beauty of bird song," prompting a consideration of the "strange[ness]" of a more philosophical silence humans succumb to through inattentive relations with animals.<sup>7</sup> I pair Carson's observation of the "strangely silent" with Mark Fisher's conceptualisation of "the weird" to illustrate how McKay constructs weird realism.<sup>8</sup> Fisher offers a nuanced understanding of the often ambiguous and uncanny phenomena collocated under the terms "weird" and "eerie," and how they are deployed in literature.<sup>9</sup> By engaging with the works of H.P. Lovecraft, Algernon Blackwood, and M.R. James, as well as film and television such as Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) and David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991), Fisher identifies the conceptual characteristics of 'the weird and the eerie' but also explores their broader implications for culture, society, and our perceptions of reality.<sup>10</sup> Distinct and yet linked, he frames the two concepts as relating to presence and absence. I will primarily focus on Fisher's conceptualisation of the weird to demonstrate how McKay conjures weird encounters that provoke discomfort, elicit strange affects, and that seek to unsettle a sense of normality. Fisher describes "the weird" as relating to that "which does not belong," or more specifically in "the conjoining of two or more things which do not belong together."<sup>11</sup> Fisher argues that the allure of the weird "has ... to do with a fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience. This fascination usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread—but it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying."<sup>12</sup> In McKay's novel, reality is made weird through specific moments that confront us with the covert violence, cruelty, and objectification that exist in our relationships with animals. This aligns with Badia et al.'s concept of "climate realism," which emphasises how the disorientation and unpredictability of the Anthropocene are reshaping humans' perception of the world.<sup>13</sup> They argue that climate realism "weirds the coherence of the world" by redefining what it means to observe and make meaning.<sup>14</sup> McKay's weird realism extends this concept by integrating animal communication, recruiting 'zooflu' as a speculative tool that reshapes the human understanding of reality through cross-species interactions. In this way, McKay's work both reflects and intensifies the kind

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<sup>6</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Penguin, 1999), 50, my emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 50.

<sup>8</sup> Carson, *Silent Spring*, 50.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (Repeater Books, 2016), 10–11.

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 10–11.

<sup>11</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 10–11.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 8–9.

<sup>13</sup> Lynn Badia et al., *Climate Realism: The Aesthetics of Weather and Atmosphere in the Anthropocene* (Routledge, 2020), 5, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429428289>.

<sup>14</sup> Badia et al., *Climate Realism*, 5.

of ‘weirding’ described by Badia et al., creating a reality that is not only unpredictable but also unsettling in its ethical implications concerning animals.

McKay’s ‘zooflu’ gives voice to animals in ways that resist typical anthropomorphism and elicit feelings of apprehension and dread. By animating voice, experience, pain, and reaction through the weirdness of ‘zooflu,’ McKay blurs distinctions about the role and function of animals, challenging readers to reframe human-animal boundaries. Initially, the human ability to understand animals seems like an anomaly, with ‘zooflu’ as the novel’s primary expression of the weird. However, as the novel develops and as more and more animals are given voice—crows, pigs, cows, cats, rats, whales, mosquitos—McKay troubles the “sense of wrongness associated with the weird—the conviction that this does not belong” and reveals the deeper wrongs that are present in the world of the novel.<sup>15</sup> The effect of the weird comes through the journey of entry into, and return to reality from, the speculative world of ‘zooflu.’ By enabling and then silencing the voices of animals and returning to a more familiar state of reality, the effect of the weird is to prompt a consideration of right and wrong and what the “wrongness” of animals voicing their experience actually reveals.<sup>16</sup> By applying Fisher’s conceptualisation of the weird, this chapter explores how McKay performs a philosophical enquiry into dominant systems that control animals (like capitalism), prompting us to think through moral certainties, and pushing the boundaries that separate humans and animals to challenge conventionality.

The weird realism in McKay’s novel shapes its focus on how care manifests between humans and animals. Through the novel’s animal communication, McKay challenges us to think about the systems with which we assign categories, practise care, and formulate ethics in relation to animals. Through weird instances that unsettle and provoke discomfort, the novel encourages readers to question what is morally acceptable. Drawing inspiration from Anna Tsing’s call to notice the multifaceted and imbricated lives that shape our world, Marianne E. Lien argues for a shift in scholarly perspective and narrative approach in her work on care, enchantment, and commitment.<sup>17</sup> Foregrounding that “ethical conduct calls for relational interspecies commitment beyond mere affect” and arguing that “enchantment offers no guarantee of animal welfare,” Lien focuses on the contrast between a brief experience of wonder and the drawn-out act of “day-to-day welfare.”<sup>18</sup> Lien posits that “vernacular arts of noticing” which rely on “situated, relational, and contextual” knowledge challenge conduct motivated by apathy, ignorance, or naivete.<sup>19</sup> As discussed by Lien with reference to van Dooren and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, an ethics of care which begins with “enchantment,” shifts to attentiveness, and moves to a recognition of responsibility towards animals, is strengthened

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<sup>15</sup> Badia et al., *Climate Realism*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Badia et al., *Climate Realism*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 22; Marianne E. Lien, “What’s Love Got to Do with It? Care, Curiosity, and Commitment in Ethnography beyond the Human,” *Environmental Humanities* 14, no. 2 (2022): 457–474, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9712511>.

<sup>18</sup> Lien, “Care,” 457, 461.

<sup>19</sup> Lien, “Care,” 458.

through focusing on animal needs and behaviour.<sup>20</sup> Lien notes how stories of ethnographic encounter “take time, are relationally grounded” and involve what Andrew Mathews describes as a “rewiring [of the] senses.”<sup>21</sup> Lien argues that stories of proximity can give voice to vernacular environments, promoting understanding and action, enabling deeper and long-lasting generative cross-species relationships that often unfold quietly and unexpectedly in various settings.<sup>22</sup> In her novel, McKay “rewire[s]” human senses through her ‘zooflu’ in a way that amplifies myriad animal voices, fosters an appreciation of listening and comprehension, and underscores the human inability to completely unveil the intricacies of animals and interspecies relationships.<sup>23</sup>

Lien specifies that the “entanglement of domination, exploitation, and care is as relevant to human-animal relations in the Domus as it is to family relations in the household” and argues that “[d]omestication often involves relations of exploitation and domination.”<sup>24</sup> McKay explores the fraught nature of domestication through Sue, a semi-domesticated dingo, to whom Jean relates in a relationship variously defined by “domination, exploitation, and care.”<sup>25</sup> Unlike *Limberlost*, *Wolves*, and *The Octopus and I*, where enchantment plays a significant role in fostering care, in *The Animals*, McKay confronts animal suffering and patterns of “exploitation and domination” that appear in human-animal relations.<sup>26</sup> The ‘zooflu’ virus enables those infected to “see things. Visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory,” which, when paired with Fisher’s conceptualisation of the weird, can be described as strange experiences that do not overtly prompt shock, but rather evoke quieter emotional responses that slowly unsettle both Jean and the reader.<sup>27</sup> Through Jean, McKay frames ethical responsibilities and challenges typical understandings of care, illustrating how it differs across species. Rather than presenting polemic environmental discourse or explicit philosophical musings, McKay employs Jean’s perspective to convey ethical conundrums relating to animals, reflecting a model of care aligned with attentive and “passionate immersion.”<sup>28</sup>

McKay’s novel is innovative in representing the felt experiences of animals through a multisensory interpretation of their embodiment rather than the ability to ‘speak’ in human terms. The viral ‘zooflu’ allows humans to receive nonverbal, multisensory communication from animals which is “encod[ed]” in the text through varying typographical representations and faultily “decod[ed]” by Jean, McKay’s narrator, and the reader.<sup>29</sup> As a non-oral form of communication that is unlike spoken human language and which attempts to reflect authentic animal methods of communication, ‘zooflu’ is equally strange for those

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<sup>20</sup> Lien, “Care,” 457.

<sup>21</sup> Lien, “Care,” 474; Andrew S. Mathews, “Coming into Noticing: On Being Called to Account by Ancient Trees,” in *Intertwined Histories: Plants in Their Social Contexts*, ed. Jim Ellis (University of Calgary Press, 2019), 106.

<sup>22</sup> Lien, “Care,” 474.

<sup>23</sup> Lien, “Care,” 474.

<sup>24</sup> Lien, “Care,” 461.

<sup>25</sup> Lien, “Care,” 474.

<sup>26</sup> Lien, “Care,” 461.

<sup>27</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 32.

<sup>28</sup> Thom van Dooren, Eben Kirksey, and Ursula Münster, “Multispecies Studies: Cultivating Arts of Attentiveness,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3527695>.

<sup>29</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 39.

infected and strange for readers to comprehend visually on the page. McKay accesses “the forces which govern mundane reality, but which are ordinarily obscured” by merging the real and speculative in the weird aspects of the virus.<sup>30</sup> On a broader narrative level, McKay’s use of an infectious flu that facilitates access to animal multisensory communication and that is ‘cured’ at the novel’s conclusion, exposes assumptions about what the real crisis is in the novel. Initially, the crisis appears to be the flu itself, prompting reactions of fear and abhorrence, highlighting animal agency and sentience, and provoking discomfort through the destabilisation of assumed human-animal bonds. Ironically, however, in returning to the pre-virus state of reality where, as we read through Jean, humans can no longer understand animals, a sense of crisis remains. Exploitation of animals still exists at the novel’s conclusion, and we come to see that the virus enabled an intimate and uncomfortable depiction of animal voices and bodies who are subject to human exploitation.

As the winner of the 2021 Victorian Prize for Literature, the 2021 Victorian Premier’s Literary Awards Prize for Fiction, a *Slate* and *Sunday Times* Book of The Year, and the 2021 Arthur C. Clarke Award, *The Animals* has garnered widespread acclaim for its imaginative exploration of human-animal relationships.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have examined its revised anthropomorphism, representation of cross-species empathy, and engagement with current environmental crises.<sup>32</sup> Probyn-Rapsey argues that the novel dismantles the fantasy of harmonious multispecies communities, particularly in controlled environments like wildlife parks.<sup>33</sup> She links this critique to extinction narratives, quoting Matthew Chrulew and Rick De Vos to highlight the “tragic irony” that “our growing awareness and documentation of this mass extinction event coincides with a dawning recognition of animals’ own cognitive and cultural abilities.”<sup>34</sup> Jessica Murray highlights how McKay “explicitly centres the animal other’s experiences and voice in a context where they are oppressed and consistently misrecognised and misunderstood” and advocates for “alternative ways of listening.”<sup>35</sup> Murray notes that “McKay is ... speaking for the animals she represents in her novel” but asserts that this “approximates respectful engagement and facilitates a move towards meaningful ways of

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<sup>30</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 7.

<sup>31</sup> “*The Animals in That Country*,” Scribe Publications, accessed June 10, 2023, <https://scribepublications.com.au/books-authors/books/the-animals-in-that-country-9781925849530>.

<sup>32</sup> See Tessa Laird, “Zoognosis: When Animal Knowledges Go Viral. Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*: Contagion, Becoming-Animal, and the Politics of Predation,” *Animal Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2021): 30–56,

<https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol10/iss1/5>; Joan Gordon, “Ventriloquizing Animal Voices to Acknowledge Indigenous Voices in Sorensen’s *The Lucky Galah*,” *Antipodes* 36, no. 2 (2022): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1353/apo.2022.a944861>; Marco Caracciolo, “Animals squawking their mysteries: Narrative, poetic form, and the nonhuman in Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*,” *English Text Construction* 15, no. 2 (2022): 118–137, <https://doi.org/10.1075/etc.00053.car>; Jessica Phillips, “Proximities and Cross-Species Empathies in Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*,” *Narrative* 31, no. 3 (2023): 255–272, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/nar.2023.a908401>; Josephine Browne, “Dystopian or utopian fiction?,” in *Human-Animal Relationships in Times of Pandemic and Climate Crisis*, ed. Josephine Browne and Zoi Sutton (Routledge, 2024), 168–186, <http://doi.org/10.4324/9781003257912-14>; David Tierney, “‘The Poetry of a Dingo’s Bite’: Communication within Nonhuman Animal Play in Ursula K. Le Guin’s ‘The Author of the Acacia Seeds’ and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Theroinguistics” and Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*,” *Extrapolation* 65, no.1 (2024): 5–22, <https://doi.org/10.3828/extr.2024.3>.

<sup>33</sup> Fiona Probyn-Rapsey, “Animals and Extinction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*, ed. Adeline Johns-Putra and Kelly Sultzbach (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 102.

<sup>34</sup> Probyn-Rapsey, “Animals and Extinction,” 103; Matthew Chrulew and Rick De Vos, “Extinction: Stories of Unravelling and Reworlding,” *Cultural Studies Review* 25, no. 1 (2019): 24, <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v25i1.6688>.

<sup>35</sup> Jessica Murray, “‘You’ve Got to Know How to Speak Animalese’: Literary Explorations of Engagements with the Animal Other,” *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 15, no. 2 (2023): 3, 12, <https://doi:10.21659/rupkatha.v15n2.20>.

listening.”<sup>36</sup> Through what she terms “deindustrializing the imagination,” Lisa B. Bauer argues that “post-livestock” or “postanimal” characters in McKay’s novel are liberated from their industrial confines, prompting readers to reevaluate their relationships with these animals.<sup>37</sup> Bauer also draws parallels between McKay’s novel and Gene Stone and Jon Doyle’s *The Awareness* (2014).<sup>38</sup> My analysis builds on Bauer’s focus on animals expressing harm but expands the discussion to include diverse modes of animal communication—voice, gaze, behaviour, and empathetic human-animal relationships. Rachel Fetherston critiques the novel’s limited engagement with “human-nonhuman relations *and* Indigenous sovereignty and cultures,” an omission reflecting a broader issue in Australian settler-colonial literature, which often struggles to integrate Indigenous perspectives.<sup>39</sup> Sophia Barnes commends the novel’s innovative depiction of animal language and Justine Jordan praises McKay’s vivid, visceral writing and her exploration of animal “consciousness,” noting that McKay creates “something like dirty realism out of its fantastical premise.”<sup>40</sup> My analysis diverges from these critics’ perspectives in my examination of how McKay’s manipulation of genre shapes animal communication in the novel and contributes to the development of an ethical framework. Building on these readings, Tessa Laird’s essay on “zoognosis” provides a crucial theoretical bridge, framing McKay’s novel as an act of viral transmission of animal knowledges (“zoognosis” being Laird’s creative neologism).<sup>41</sup> Laird argues that McKay’s text constructs language out of smell, sound, and affect, enacting what Jakob von Uexküll calls “Umwelten”—the sensory “bubbles” through which each organism experiences the world.<sup>42</sup> This is not merely metaphorical but a formal strategy that forces readers into a state of becoming-animal. Jean’s ‘zooflu’ compels her to inhabit the perceptual worlds of animals, overlapping “Umwelten” which form what Laird calls a “symphony” of coextensive worlds.<sup>43</sup>

As Chloë Taylor, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Eva Kasprzycka outline in their discussion of the state of animal studies in the context of COVID-19:

[f]rom its genesis to its impacts, animal advocates and critical animal studies scholars have observed that the COVID-19 pandemic, and other zoonotic disease epidemics and pandemics that have preceded it, highlight the devastating repercussions of human exploitation of other animals, and the interlocking of human and animal oppressions.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Murray, “Animal Other,” 12, 13.

<sup>37</sup> Liza B. Bauer, *Livestock and Literature* (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2024), 155, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58116-8\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-58116-8_3).

<sup>38</sup> Bauer writes: “[t]exts envisioning similar thought experiments on human-animal communication, such as Gene Stone and Jon Doyle’s *The Awareness* (2014), typically focus on a so-called *uplifting* of the nonhuman animal species toward becoming capable of human-like language use.” See Bauer, *Livestock and Literature*, 200, emphasis in original.

<sup>39</sup> Rachel Fetherston, ““Muzzle for the Queen”: Settler–Nonhuman Entanglements in Australian Speculative Ecofiction,” in *Animals and Science Fiction*, ed. Nora Castle and Giulia Champion (Springer International Publishing, 2024), 118, emphasis in original, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41695-8\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-41695-8_7); Jack Kirne and Emily Potter, “Settler Belonging in Crisis: Non-Indigenous Australian Literary Climate Fiction and the Challenge of ‘The New,’” *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 30, no. 4 (2023): 952–71, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isab085>.

<sup>40</sup> Sophia Barnes, “Reading the Cues,” review of *The Animals in That Country*, by Laura Jean McKay, *Sydney Review of Books*, January 28, 2021; Justine Jordan, “*The Animals in That Country* by Laura Jean McKay review—an extraordinary debut,” review of *The Animals in That Country*, by Laura Jean McKay, *The Guardian*, October 7, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Tessa Laird, “Zoognosis: When Animal Knowledges Go Viral. Laura Jean McKay’s *The Animals in That Country*: Contagion, Becoming-Animal, and the Politics of Predation,” *Animal Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2021): 30–56, <https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol10/iss1/5>

<sup>42</sup> Laird, “Zoognosis,” 32–33.

<sup>43</sup> Laird, “Zoognosis,” 33–34.

<sup>44</sup> Chloë Taylor, Kelly Struthers Montford, and Eva Kasprzycka, “Introduction: Critical Animal Studies in an Age of Extinction,” *Animal Studies Journal* 10, no. 1 (2021): 1, <http://doi.org/10.14453/asj/v12i2.1>.

Indeed, by conflating human health and the exploitation of animals, McKay reflects the strain both human and animal life bear under the weight of capitalism. Laird explicitly frames this as a form of “knowledge transfer” that is both revelatory and catastrophic, asking “what are animals trying to tell us?”<sup>45</sup> As in the rise of panic and eventual medicinal solution to the COVID-19 pandemic, McKay’s ‘zooflu’ incites chaos and the disintegration of human civilisation. The medicinal cure sees humans regain a sense of ‘normality’ in the novel, portrayed as a state of sensory disconnection from animals. Following the chaos and sensory overload caused by the flu, this silence is deeply disturbing. Although the crisis in the novel is resolved, McKay suggests that ‘the cure’ provides a solution that fails to engage with the suffering of animals revealed through ‘zooflu.’ Once the voices of animals have been imagined, voices that articulate much of their agency, trauma, and suffering, do we continue with the status quo?

### ‘Zooflu’—Sensory Animal Communication

This section aims to clarify the conceptual landscape leading up to the emergence of ‘zooflu,’ by first exploring established perceptions and dynamics of human-animal communication, as they are presented early in the novel. It examines key aspects such as Kim and Jean’s practice of animal ventriloquism and Angela’s (Kim’s mother and the sanctuary’s manager) warnings against anthropomorphism. By opening the novel in a sanctuary, McKay engages with critiques of animal exploitation and human control. Their ethical differences hinge on underlying purposes and the moral implications of animal captivity. As referred to in chapter three, Berger argues that zoos decontextualise animals, diminishing their essence and individuality.<sup>46</sup> Lori Gruen discusses how zoos were historically created to “amuse, amaze, and entertain visitors,” with enclosures constructed to keep animals “always accessible to the gaze of the zoo visitor.”<sup>47</sup> This setup often reduces animals to “anomalous spectacles” that are subject to near-total control by humans, including restrictions on basic life choices like mating and reproduction.<sup>48</sup> Like zoos, sanctuaries perpetuate human control over animal lives despite providing safety.<sup>49</sup> As Margo DeMello highlights, they offer a “permanent home for ... animals” rescued from exploitation, but as Karen S. Emmerman notes, they still impose “lifelong ... permanent” captivity.<sup>50</sup> While zoos are often critiqued for prioritising human interests and

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<sup>45</sup> Laird, “Zoognosis,” 31.

<sup>46</sup> Berger argues that while zoos claim to educate and preserve species, they primarily serve as a form of human amusement, reinforcing human dominance over animals and perpetuating a disconnect between humans and the natural world. See John Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” in *About Looking* (Pantheon, 1980), 14.

<sup>47</sup> Lori Gruen, *The Ethics of Captivity* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 241.

<sup>48</sup> Gruen writes that “[c]aptives in both prisons and zoos are under almost complete control ... In zoos, even the most basic choices about mating and reproduction are controlled.” See Gruen, *The Ethics of Captivity*, 244.

<sup>49</sup> Dale Jamieson argues that zoos fail to justify the “moral presumption against keeping wild animals in captivity.” He critiques the common justifications—amusement, education, scientific research, and species preservation—suggesting that they do not outweigh the ethical issues inherent in confining animals, such as high mortality rates, poor living conditions, and psychological harm. See Dale Jamieson, *Morality’s Progress: Essays on Humans, Other Animals, and the Rest of Nature* (Oxford Academic, 2002), 109, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199251445.003.0011>.

<sup>50</sup> DeMello discusses the long history of sanctuaries worldwide and discusses the rise of the no-kill movement, which began in India and calls for ending the euthanasia of healthy animals. See Margo DeMello, “Shelters and Sanctuaries,” in *Humans and Animals: A Geography of Coexistence*, ed. Julie Urbanik and Connie L. Johnston (ABC-CLIO, 2017), 299; Emmerman cautions

entertainment over animal welfare, sanctuaries, despite their more ethical intentions, still grapple with significant ethical concerns related to the captivity and autonomy of animals.

Animal sanctuaries are central to the novel as Jean and Kimberly's envisioned "big project."<sup>51</sup> They plan to create a refuge for native wildlife, carefully designing enclosures, selecting appropriate vegetation, and ensuring that "[n]o animal [is] turned away."<sup>52</sup> Jean and Kimberly's fantasy of their ideal animal sanctuary clashes with financial realities: "'Granny, how are you going to pay?'"<sup>53</sup> The 'Park' where Jean works, publicly framed as a conservation space, hides brutal practices like euthanasia and breeding of feeder animals, exposing the uneasy coexistence of care and exploitation. Jean accepts this contradiction:

[i]f it's too sick, or old and broken and not good enough to show, we put it down in the little gas chamber ... costs a lot to keep the mob-loads of wallabies, pythons, ducks, and lizards people bring in every other day. That's not all. We breed mice as livestock too, in the rooms just off the food store. Lab mice. They live a funny life of breeding and dying so we can feed the birds of prey and the snakes. At least they live and die for something.<sup>54</sup>

Jean describes a deeply disturbing reality and yet sees it as unavoidable because while it "[s]ounds bad ... it's just the business."<sup>55</sup> McKay also depicts Jean's direct relationships with animals. Before they are infected, Jean and Kimberly ventriloquise animals, playfully imagining the freshwater whiprays speaking:

their black eyes watch you through the tops of their heads—kind, soft as dogs. Labradors of the river. Kim stares at them, eyes black and gentle too. 'What do you think they're saying?' I make my voice deep and goofy for them. 'Fanx. Fanx, you guys. You got more fish?' Kimberly gives a half smile. Tells them, 'We got no more fish,' but her heart's not in it.<sup>56</sup>

Angela condemns anthropomorphism, arguing that it endangers both animals and humans: "people who anthropomorphise tend to not read cues, and people who don't read cues are dangerous ... to themselves, dangerous to the animals, and dangerous to visitors" before emphasising, "I don't want danger here."<sup>57</sup> Yet McKay's 'zooflu' disrupts this logic. The threat animals can pose and the danger they are exposed to at the hands of humans is at the crux of McKay's experimental anthropomorphism. For Angela, a woman with strong ethical views, 'zooflu' is completely disorienting and she is unable to reconcile her intellectual desire for conservation and recognition of the economic costs involved, with animals who speak and who thus speak into her ethical framework. Initially, Angela responds pragmatically, calling for "[c]ontingency. And preparedness. And transparency."<sup>58</sup> As the infection spreads, she attempts direct communication with

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against viewing sanctuaries "as the last stop in the moral work needed to counter the harm humans cause animals," arguing that even well-meaning institutions face moral challenges. Many sanctuaries allow visitors, which can "replicate" the "public gaze" found in zoos, thereby complicating their mission to prioritise animal freedom and agency. See Karen S. Emmerman, "Sanctuary, Not Remedy: The Problem of Captivity and the Need for Moral Repair," in *The Ethics of Captivity*, ed. Lori Gruen (Oxford University Press, 2014), 215, 218, 224, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199977994.001.0001>.

<sup>51</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 23.

<sup>52</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 24.

<sup>53</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 23, 24.

<sup>54</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 37–38.

<sup>55</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 38.

<sup>56</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 45.

<sup>57</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 11.

<sup>58</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 89.

Bernie the crocodile: “[h]ello, I’m a person ... A human. I want to talk to you.”<sup>59</sup> Jean describes how Angela gets “down on her hands and knees, her ear to the pond and she’s grinning, *grinning*, then she stops. Frowns. Jerks back, dripping. I see something in her eyes. Not fear. Recognition. She didn’t know something—now she knows, and it’s not good.”<sup>60</sup> Angela’s intellectual framework collapses when Bernie’s idea of “play” becomes predatory—he bites her.<sup>61</sup> This reveals the limits of human ethical constructs when confronted with animal instincts. Here, McKay exposes the tension between moral responsibility and the unpredictable realities of animal agency which are not bound by human moral or social codes.

Unlike Angela, Kimberly and Jean respond to ‘zooflu’ intuitively, unconcerned with the ethical debates about anthropomorphism. Kimberly quickly adapts and urges Jean to adjust similarly. McKay conveys both a valuable simplicity and a naivete in Kimberly that allows her to shift her sensitivity and comprehend the animals. When Jean is infected, she describes that “it feels like we’re crossing a minefield of berserko messages,” to which Kimberly responds that the “messages” make sense to her, instructing: “*look* at them, Granny ... You’ve really got to try ... You have to look at all their whole body all at the same time, not just the bits.”<sup>62</sup> It is significant that Kimberly, a child, immediately has a greater grasp of how to read the animals, a representation that Arnott similarly depicts in *Limberlost* through Ned’s extreme sensitivity that informs his interactions with animals over the course of a lifetime. Furthermore, Kimberly seems less unsettled by the strangeness of this new capability of reading the animals. This is a comment, perhaps, on how an adult’s deeper embeddedness in reality’s constructs shapes attitudes and affections towards animals. The ‘zooflu’ language is a visceral, inescapable, “[p]ersonal” experience for those infected.<sup>63</sup> When “a bulk of scent nearly knocks [Jean] flat,” she describes that “all around me, trails of glowing messages have been laid out overnight. In stench, in calls, in piss, in tracks, in blood, in shit, in sex, in bodies.”<sup>64</sup> In *Wolves*, Inti’s mirror-touch synaesthesia allows her to feel imaginatively and physically the sensations and experiences of animals, fostering a deeply embodied form of communication. By contrast, the multisensory disruption caused by ‘zooflu’ resists anthropocentric translation, immersing humans in raw, unfiltered animal existence. Both McConaghy and McKay’s versions of animal communication are relevant to Weil and Gruen’s critique of anthropocentric perspectives that rely on binary practices of “saming” and “othering.”<sup>65</sup> While Inti’s synaesthesia risks “saming” animals by integrating their sensations into her human perception, ‘zooflu’ resists anthropocentric tendencies.<sup>66</sup> Both works underscore the ethical imperative, as articulated by Weil and Gruen, of recognising “the limitations of [human] perspectives, our language, and the resources of our own minds” while “tak[ing] the risk” of representing animals in ways that honour their distinct experiences.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 96.

<sup>60</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 7, emphasis in original.

<sup>61</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 97.

<sup>62</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 91, emphasis in original.

<sup>63</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 79.

<sup>65</sup> Lori Gruen and Kari Weil, “Animal Others-Editors’ Introduction,” *Hyppatia* 27, no. 3 (2012): 480, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2012.01296.x>.

<sup>66</sup> Gruen and Weil, “Introduction,” 480.

<sup>67</sup> Gruen and Weil, “Introduction,” 482.

Jean's exposure to animal "messages" reveals their agency, as in the "big boy wallaroo [who] has rubbed his scent, slick as oil, over the grass at the road edge."<sup>68</sup> Animal communication encroaches on Jean's body and she tries to "[s]hake [her] stupid head to clear it of the meanings"—the "tickle" of night birds on her "skin" and the overwhelming sensory flood of "hops, barks, and whiffs."<sup>69</sup> Infected humans struggle with this intrusion, with Jean finding relief in the "blessed noise" and mechanical hum of a "Park ute"—a stark contrast to the unsettling clamour and sentient presence of animals in proximity to her.<sup>70</sup> McKay unravels Jean's—and the reader's—journey through abrasive exposure to animal voices. Those who are infected only hear the "furry ones" at first, before they come to understand animals more taxonomically different like "birds and reptiles, insects even"—a change that is diagnosed by medical practitioners in the novel as a form of psychosis.<sup>71</sup> In the novel, humans respond to this new ability differently. Many characters frame the pandemic as the realisation of a metaphorical nightmare and respond accordingly by absconding, killing, or despairing. As the virus progresses, Jean shifts from mimicking animal sounds to listening and interpreting actively, a process that includes continual navigation of the increasingly surreal interspecies interactions.

In stark contrast to the playfulness of Kimberly and Jean's anthropomorphism, the first conversion of animal speech that we view through an infected Jean is from mice who express terror. The use of varied typography, capitalisation, italics, and fragmented quasi-poetry create a disorienting reading experience that mirrors the 'zooflu' sufferers' sensory overload. Jean sees a "[y]ellow mist, a sickly gas ... Wisps from the mouse room ... Gas rising, not from the pipes, but from their bodies."<sup>72</sup> She hears the mice speak as a collective and continues to see the "gases push out in clouds and hang around my nose and eyes, jitterbugging my brain."<sup>73</sup> McKay's construction of a kind of olfactory-visual synaesthesia that involves visuals induced by embodied sensation, smell, and taste builds upon the diverse sensory capabilities of animals. The five human senses are integral to McKay's creation of animal communication. As a collection of embodied signals, 'zooflu' directly challenges conventional human language systems that depend on oral expression and more closely resembles the way animals themselves communicate—through non-verbal cues, vibrations, and other sensory signals that often elude human perception.<sup>74</sup> Jean describes how "[t]he mice are whole. I'm going fucking crazy. There's no screaming, just a whole bunch of fat-arsed mice with their noses in the air."<sup>75</sup> The virus' affordance of a "whole" comprehension of the animal conveys McKay's

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<sup>68</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 79.

<sup>69</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 213.

<sup>70</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 78.

<sup>71</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 66.

<sup>72</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 75.

<sup>73</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 78.

<sup>74</sup> Ed Yong explores the sensory worlds of different species, from the vibrations insects use to communicate, to the magnetic fields that guide turtles and birds, to the infrared radiation detected by rattlesnakes. Yong argues that because so much beyond our own human sensory bubbles typically remains unknown, we often have to imagine what life might be like for other organisms—we transpose our "own sensory world" onto their experiences. By detailing the broad array of sensory capabilities for animals, Yong stresses the importance of acknowledging and mitigating the sensory disruptions humans cause. See Ed Yong, *An Immense World: How Animal Senses Reveal the Hidden Realms Around Us* (Random House, 2022), 11.

<sup>75</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 77.

interest in challenging the dissection that occurs when animals are instrumentalised.<sup>76</sup> Jean comprehends the mice saying:

[r]un. / I look around. Someone said it, clear as speech. 'I'm in here,' I call out to Doug. / Run. It's glands from the / body. / It's crops / and / killing and shelter — ... / The small white bodies in the cages shiver. Gases rise off them, and a squeak comes out, and together they make: run ... I run. The door behind me heavy with all those little words. The gases push out in clouds and hang around my nose and eyes, jitterbugging my brain. Everything. The body. Run.<sup>77</sup>

The psychological paranoia induced by the flu pervades the reading experience as we, too, find it difficult to comprehend the true meaning of the new language. Previously detached from their fate as live prey, Jean now feels the mice's fear viscerally. Their command—“[r]un” from the “crops / and / killing and shelter”—pierces through her rationalisations, forcing her to flee, unable to bear the reality of their exploitation.<sup>78</sup>

McKay starkly illustrates the animal economy when Jean and Sue free factory pigs from a transport truck. Unsettled by the pigs' now-comprehensible voices, the farmer admits that he and his wife are going “crazy” from “hear[ing] that *hello-ing* all the way up in the bloody cabin,” but still hesitates, revealing the difficulty of leaving the pigs behind: “[t]hat's good money there.”<sup>79</sup> Jean opens the truck door and sees:

around thirty of them, crammed ear to tail in the hay and shitstrewn bed of the truck. The smell seeps into my scarf—sweet, like they're already dead and cooking. One squints at me, a thick crust of infection in both her eyes. Her tail calls to the pig beside her, an ear for the outside and her snout for my left armpit. I squint, try to see the whole pig.<sup>80</sup>

Jean senses the “meaning bright off that tight skin. All the little bits saying” things like “[i]t brings the / sun,” “is there / more,” “Don't you see / it. Move on. There's / more,” and “More, / more, more” as she watches “them break into a group trot toward the next paddock. Skin rippling. Hooves carolling. Know that heart-in-your-mouth run.”<sup>81</sup> Jean marvels at their pursuit of open space: “[t]hese pigs are half dead, they're stumbling around, blind, mad, and fucking hopeful.”<sup>82</sup> McKay exposes the violent absurdity of industrial farming, where animals are reduced to economic units—another version of “death row.”<sup>83</sup> By giving the pigs voices, McKay disrupts the emotional detachment created by capitalist agriculture, prompting a direct and uncomfortable confrontation with animals trapped in the endless cycle of exploitation and death driven by profit. In having Jean free the pigs in this bizarre scene, McKay demonstrates how the weird ruptures the status quo. While Fisher argues that a “fascination [for the weird] usually involves a certain apprehension, perhaps even dread,” acknowledging that “it would be wrong to say that the weird and the eerie are necessarily terrifying,” McKay weaponises unease, compelling readers to confront the disturbing reality of systemic animal exploitation.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>76</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 77–78, emphasis in original.

<sup>78</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 77.

<sup>79</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 122, emphasis in original.

<sup>80</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 123.

<sup>81</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 124–126.

<sup>82</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 126.

<sup>83</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 37, 38.

<sup>84</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 8–9.

By bringing humans and animals into closer proximity through ‘zooflu,’ McKay confronts readers with uncomfortable moments where human lives are prioritised over animals. When a kangaroo collides with Jean’s van, she hears it say, “I know this, / but / it has been / a while.”<sup>85</sup> She reflexively apologises, “[l]ike the roo is some person.”<sup>86</sup> The kangaroo dies from its injuries, but its joey survives, repeating a single word: “[h]ungry.”<sup>87</sup> Jean narrates:

I think about trying to drag the big roo into the van so the joey can feed off her until we find a vet. I think about trying to keep Sue off them. I think about Kimberly and Lee, how every minute is one more from them. In the end, I do what I have to do. Put one hand around the joey’s head and the other around its body. Hungry. / Hungry—Wring sharply until I feel the crack. It goes quiet, limp. I lay the little roo, very slow, next to the big one.<sup>88</sup>

As Jean continues to drive, she “see[s] that roo across it in blood and bone. The echoes of *hungry, hungry* in my head. Clutch the steering wheel so as to stop my shaking hands. Hungry.”<sup>89</sup> The familial relationship of the kangaroo mother and its joey mirrors the familial relationships at the heart of the novel. Here, Jean makes a decision to value the lives of her granddaughter and son above the joey. Despite the visceral imagery of the kangaroo’s “blood and bone” and the joey’s vulnerable voice repeating calls of its hunger, Jean kills the joey, a decision deemed more efficient than “find[ing] a vet” and taking care of the motherless animal.<sup>90</sup> This scene mirrors Inti’s decision to kill wolf Ten in *Wolves*—both protagonists prioritise human welfare over animal life. As van Dooren describes, such moments expose the “inescapable troubles of interdependent existences.”<sup>91</sup> Whether or not these situations were acts of “violent-care,” they similarly underscore the blurred moral lines between compassion and self-preservation.<sup>92</sup> Haraway’s “contact zone” between species is evident, but Jean’s act underscores Haraway’s deeper warning: the real danger is not just killing but “making things killable.”<sup>93</sup> McKay amplifies this moral unease by giving voices to animals who are often collateral damage in human narratives. Her portrayal of mice, pigs, and kangaroos collapses the boundary between species, making strange the suffering that usually goes unheard. Through these voices, McKay exposes the contradictions in human ethics, prompting readers to reckon with the unsettling reality of our entangled existence with animals.

### “(Yesterday)” and “The Queen”

McKay explores the link between civility and ferality through Jean and Sue. By imbuing this relationship with the strange and weird, McKay ultimately challenges readers to think through accepted binaries, taboos,

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<sup>85</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 146.

<sup>86</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 146.

<sup>87</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 146.

<sup>88</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 146–147, emphasis in original.

<sup>89</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 147, emphasis in original.

<sup>90</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 147.

<sup>91</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292.

<sup>92</sup> van Dooren, “Care,” 292.

<sup>93</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 41.

and hierarchies. Both domestic and wild, Sue embodies the dingo's paradoxical role in Australia—as a significant figure in Indigenous cosmology, a keystone species, and the subject of cultural and ecological controversy. Archer-Lean et al. highlight this duality, from the “dingo ate my baby” narrative to its portrayal as both “friend to man” and “cunning pest.”<sup>94</sup> The dingo is seen as both a “pest species,” a “crucial ecosystem regulator,” and “a subject with a common ancestry that sits side by side with Indigenous human beings in Dreaming lore.”<sup>95</sup> Fetherston critiques McKay's omission of Indigenous perspectives, arguing that it results in a “one-sided storying of place” that neglects “Indigenous sovereignty and cultures” and “human–nonhuman relations.”<sup>96</sup> Decolonial and anticolonial methodologies have informed recent dingo studies which emphasise its dual status as companion and wild animal and highlight the diversity of Aboriginal perspectives on the dingo's role.<sup>97</sup> Sue's liminal position leaves the reader in a productive state of tension and refuses a simple resolution, inviting reflection on how human-nonhuman relations might be reimagined beyond colonial binaries of wild and tame. By focusing on Jean and Sue's intimate, embodied bond, McKay engages with the dingo's paradoxical status but overlooks its broader cultural and ecological significance, raising questions about the extent to which McKay's novel interrogates the colonial frameworks that underpin Australian narratives.

McKay reworks the apocalypse road trip trope by pairing Jean, sick with an infection received from Sue's bite, and the dingo. During the trip, Jean must depend on Sue for survival and relies on her knowledge to find Kimberly. The post-apocalyptic road trip trope in literary fiction has evolved into an exploration of humanity's resilience and adaptability in the face of catastrophic events.<sup>98</sup> While certainly including elements of human resilience in her novel and maintaining a sense of constant adversity and possibility for danger, McKay emphasises human vulnerability and dependence on animals who are the more resilient in this scenario, whilst simultaneously highlighting the threat of animals. Before the onset of ‘zooflu,’ Jean initially describes Sue as “a dingo dog. Some wolf, some kelpie camp mutt,” who “acts like a dog” but reveals her wildness when she howls “the saddest song in the world.”<sup>99</sup> Jean interprets the howl's musicality, the embodied effect it has on her own emotions—conscious and subconscious—as Sue's method of declaring “a warning” before Jean anthropomorphically renders Sue's voice.<sup>100</sup> The interpretation is followed by Jean admonishing herself—“rangers here are always telling me, don't talk like that”—in an attempt to dissuade

<sup>94</sup> Clare Archer-Lean, et al., “Representations of the Dingo: Contextualising Iconicity,” *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 22, no. 2 (2015): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14486563.2014.985268>.

<sup>95</sup> Archer-Lean et al., “Representations of the Dingo,” 190, 191, 186.

<sup>96</sup> Fetherston, “Australian Speculative Ecofiction,” 118.

<sup>97</sup> Bindi Bennett and Clare Archer-Lean, “Understanding Camp Dogs: The Relationship between Aboriginal Culture and Western Welfare,” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 19, no. 2 (2023): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801231167671>.

<sup>98</sup> Novels like McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) exemplify this theme, where survivors traverse desolate landscapes, grappling with the remnants of a shattered world. The post-apocalyptic road trip trope is not limited to literary fiction and has found resonance in film, TV, and video games, exemplifying its enduring allure. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015) and video game and TV series *The Last of Us* bring the post-apocalyptic road trip to the screen, vividly portraying the harsh realities and moral dilemmas survivors face in their quest for safety or salvation. See Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (Pan Macmillan, 2006); Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (Pan Macmillan, 2014); *Mad Max: Fury Road*, directed by George Miller (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2015); *The Last of Us*, created by Greg Spence and Cecil O'Connor, aired January 15, 2023, on Binge.

<sup>99</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 113, 1.

<sup>100</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 1.

herself from imagining that Sue might “know something about the world that you and me haven’t ever thought of.”<sup>101</sup> Later, Jean guides a tour of the animal sanctuary’s dingo enclosure. She discovers that Sue’s paw has been caught in the fence and reads Sue, noting her body language, as tense from being trapped:

[d]ingoes wear their fur like feelings: all sleek and shiny when they’re relaxed, a thick bank of heckle when they get wound up. Sue is wound up. Her fur so spiked it’s like an echidna has taken up residence on her neck. She looks bigger, meaner—rough patches and teeth behind it all.<sup>102</sup>

McKay’s animal communication relays Jean’s observation of Sue’s animality as she rescues her from the fence. Sue briefly accepts Jean’s help before biting her, revealing the limits of their trust and Sue’s instinct for self-preservation. Their interaction underscores human-animal estrangement—Jean wants to help, but the enclosure and Sue’s need to defend herself from human threats result in harm. McKay takes great care to neither victimise nor demonise Jean, focusing rather on Jean’s comprehension of what the bite communicates. Jean hides the bite from the tour group watching, and “[m]ake[s] [her] voice high and feathery, like a wild dog tail,” translating that Sue has said, “‘Jenie-girl: you’re my best friend.’”<sup>103</sup> Privately, Jean objectively rationalises that it was “a warning bite—Dingo Sue’s way of saying, ‘You’re in my face, bitch.’ What a thug.”<sup>104</sup> Again, Jean reads Sue and, amused, perceives the bite as a cautionary act of defence. Here, McKay highlights that Sue exists in a liminal state of being both wild and domesticated.

Jean’s flu-produced ability to comprehend the multisensory aspect of animal communication transforms her relationship with Sue. This is first expressed when Jean, taking Kimberly’s advice, stops to “[r]eally take a look” and *listen* to Sue.<sup>105</sup> As Vinciane Despret explains, this methodological move is not about ‘feeling for’ the other but about creating the conditions of contact: “empathy is not experiencing with one’s own body what the other experiences, but rather creating the possibilities of an embodied communication.”<sup>106</sup> Jean describes how:

[s]he isn’t talking through her mouth or her mind but, like the mice and the things in the trees, through her whole damned body—upright and narrow, very proper in her way. Her voice isn’t made of words either. She’s speaking in odours, echoes, noises with random meanings popping out of them. A twitching rear paw. Creaking sounds of welcome in her throat that don’t say what they should say. No hello or hi, no formal greetings. It’s: / My front end / takes the food / quality. / Muzzle for / the Queen / (Yesterday).<sup>107</sup>

Attempting to see Sue holistically “through her whole damned body” upends and expands Jean’s expectations for dialogue with the dingo.<sup>108</sup> Sue “isn’t talking” with words but rather is “speaking” through an integration of senses.<sup>109</sup> McKay conveys this language in a smaller typeface, awkward enjambed lines,

<sup>101</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 1.

<sup>102</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 13.

<sup>103</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 15.

<sup>104</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 14, 15.

<sup>105</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 83.

<sup>106</sup> Vinciane Despret, “Responding Bodies and Partial Affinities in Human-Animal Worlds,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 7–8 (2013): 51, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276413496852>.

<sup>107</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 72, emphasis in original.

<sup>108</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 72.

<sup>109</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 72.

and abstract references to “the Queen” and “(Yesterday).”<sup>110</sup> McKay highlights Jean’s incompetency and inability to fully understand Sue, as Jean relies on assumptions, believing she (Jean) is “the Queen.”<sup>111</sup> Jean recognises that while she (Jean) has “[her] mouth, [Sue’s] got all her flesh and bones. I’m reading her body like some language I barely remember from a high school textbook.”<sup>112</sup> Jean goes on to describe Sue’s position between two worlds and how, despite spending “the last seven or so years staring at Sue, [Jean] never saw her white chest talk two ways.”<sup>113</sup> In having Sue straddle realms of the wild and domestic, McKay highlights the different ways Sue communicates according to the realm she inhabits: “[o]ne for the open road, the time of the whole world, the wild dogs out there. The other way for inside the cage, the safety of locked doors and a hand on her back.”<sup>114</sup> Jean recognises that while she can comprehend the animals’ external “messages,” their conscious thoughts remain a mystery.<sup>115</sup> Jean reflects that “[e]ven while [Sue’s] body is bursting with messages, there are still things in her head. Dingo things I don’t know about,” noting that she, too, has “human things [Sue] doesn’t know about either.”<sup>116</sup> McKay depicts a linguistic divide that complicates the negotiation of empathy and care in Jean and Sue’s shifting relationship, while also emphasising their deep bond.

On the road to find Kimberly, Jean asks: “[w]hy are you helping me, Sue? I mean, why aren’t you with your brothers?” She peels her nose from the window. Amber eyes swirling. / Its whole face is / a desert with water. It’s / whole (Yesterday) / mouth / the sky.”<sup>117</sup> Recalling the expedition out to the desert when Jean had rescued Sue and her siblings as abandoned pups, Jean identified that there were three “fat puppy bodies . . . but it was Sue, the small and tan, that I reached for. Picked her up. They say not to do that. I picked her up and put her in my bra.”<sup>118</sup> While this is ostensibly a gesture of care, McKay’s novel orients us to think through the deeper, more complex ethics of human interactions with animals. Jean and the rangers choosing to save the pups is another intervention that alters Sue’s status as a wild animal. Jean describes how alongside the messages that depict Sue’s “fur and her spit, the tick in her eye, there is a feeling for that time all those years back.”<sup>119</sup> Jean interprets Sue’s ‘words’ as a vision of her first memory, for when Sue’s “eyes split, she squinted, and there [Jean] was, sniffing in that good sweet hot milk baby smell. My face. A desert with water in it,” noting without absolute credibility that it might be a “[b]ig compliment, coming from Sue.”<sup>120</sup> McKay highlights the maternal connection between them, oscillating between Sue labelling Jean as “Mother,” “Yesterday,” and “Bad Dog,” to then reiterating “I’m the / Queen. It’s / the baby.”<sup>121</sup> These names resist clear interpretation and yet Jean interprets that they relate to Sue’s “ideas about me as her pack. Some old shiny thing from yesterday.

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<sup>110</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 72.

<sup>111</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 72.

<sup>112</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 85.

<sup>113</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 83.

<sup>114</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 83.

<sup>115</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 223.

<sup>116</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 223.

<sup>117</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 113, emphasis in original.

<sup>118</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 113.

<sup>119</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 113.

<sup>120</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 113.

<sup>121</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 150, 215.

Ancient monarch in tatty robes.”<sup>122</sup> Closer attention to Sue’s use of “yesterday” reveals a connection with Jean’s regrets about the past.<sup>123</sup> Early in the novel, prior to the spread of the virus, Jean narrates, hungover, that “[y]esterday rushes at me. I have trouble swallowing it back down.”<sup>124</sup> Jean’s constant rumination over memories, both regretful and cherished, seem to inform Sue’s appraisal of Jean and shapes the terms she uses. The use of “Mother” clearly articulates the bond Sue feels towards Jean; however, at different times the pair appear to each other as predator or prey.<sup>125</sup> There is a pragmatism to McKay’s recognition of Sue’s alterity. At the beginning of their journey together, Jean describes having a “[h]eart to heart with a hairy dingo,” sharing with Sue that she “[w]ant[s] to find my kin” to which Sue responds: “[h]ere. / I’m here. / I flop down again. ‘Not you. The real ones.’ Her body goes so quiet. It’s just a tan ghost that slinks off to sit up shotgun ... She’s disappeared into her own body.”<sup>126</sup> Sue responds to Jean’s blunt declaration that Sue is not her “real” kin through silence and retreat.<sup>127</sup> In this, McKay projects and conveys emotion onto Sue. While foregrounding Jean and Sue’s bond, McKay illustrates how Jean, like Sue, straddles a liminal zone between human and animal realms, exploring how both Jean and Sue negotiate their belonging to these realms.

Jean’s care grows through a more holistic comprehension of, and deepened respect for, the *nonhumanity* or *animality* of animals—animals as they are, unanthropomorphised. Accompanying this is Jean’s negotiation of the varied expressions of human behaviour, ranging from acts of care to instances of cruelty. Jean grows closer to Sue, who takes on the role of protector, and yet Sue also asserts her dominance. Jean narrates, “[t]he bed stinks only a bit of dingo wee. I sleep. Sue comes to lick my face in the night. Territory.”<sup>128</sup> They sleep side by side but McKay resists placing Sue in the role of pet. McKay depicts Sue’s care for Jean and yet captures how their relationship is shaped by Sue’s independence, wildness, and animality. Jean and Sue stop in a town and draw a small crowd at the sight of a “real dingo.”<sup>129</sup> Jean sees the possibility of a quick cash grab and reproduces the spectacle of the dingo enclosure, announcing, “[f]ive bucks a question.”<sup>130</sup> The audience interrogates Sue, asking, “[d]o you eat babies? Do you know the dingo that ate the babies?,” “[w]hy do you kill my chickens?,” and accuses her with the remark, “[t]hey’re not even native, you know that? You’re not even from here.”<sup>131</sup> Sue, alarmed and tense, responds: “[o]nly / eat them / when they’re / gone.,” followed by “Sitting. / Staying. / (Surprise.)”<sup>132</sup> Jean sees Sue “[p]anic” and imagines the “blood and ... how [Sue’ll] make it,” feeling a contagious “fear in her hairy armpits.”<sup>133</sup> Here, Jean positions Sue as an animal on display, demonised and interrogated. McKay captures both Sue’s wildness and her connection to Jean as the virus

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<sup>122</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 143.

<sup>123</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 150.

<sup>124</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 35.

<sup>125</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 150.

<sup>126</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 144, emphasis in original.

<sup>127</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 144.

<sup>128</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 144.

<sup>129</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 167.

<sup>130</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 167.

<sup>131</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 167.

<sup>132</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 167.

<sup>133</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 168.

facilitates in Jean a synaesthetic-like empathetic response in Jean. She experiences the “[f]eel of their hands on my fur, leather around my face, tight on my neck” as someone tries to “touch one of Sue’s white paws,” before Sue “darts around, her mouth stopping just short of my hand,” and withdraws to the campervan.<sup>134</sup> While the “people startle” and “back off,” Jean remains composed.<sup>135</sup> Moments later, Jean draws on her friendship with Sue and the trust that has developed, embracing her after she flees, startled by the crowd. McKay depicts both Jean’s acknowledgement of Sue’s untamed nature and her affection for the dingo: “I grab Sue. Bring her big rib cage close to my heart. Her body isn’t made for holding, but she knows me. She knows who I am.”<sup>136</sup> In moments of weird familiarity and strange estrangement, McKay examines the expression of care by both Sue and Jean, revealing the complexities of human-animal bonds and divisions that shape how care is expressed.

### Subverting Familiarity and Enchantment

McKay concludes Jean and Sue’s journey on Australia’s south coast in a scene that seems poised to offer resolution, particularly with Jean reuniting with Kimberly and thus achieving the purpose of their journey. Instead of a haven, however, the seaside is menacing, as whale calls lure humans to their deaths. McKay’s rendering of the sea as inhospitable constitutes a negative inversion of the “hydrocommons,” disrupting the interdependent, life-sustaining relations I trace in Hortle’s work.<sup>137</sup> In *The Octopus and I*, Hortle’s “hydrocommons” frames Eaglehawk Neck as a site of marine, human, and animal entanglement, where water materially links bodies, fostering connection and ethical interdependence.<sup>138</sup> By contrast, McKay presents the sea as inhospitable and hostile, rupturing the bonds of co-presence. This subversion of peaceful seaside tropes dismantles human superiority and reinforces the novel’s apocalyptic overtones, where water no longer nourishes but estranges. Whales, introduced earlier through Lee, Jean’s son, are depicted as “wild and free,” singing “[r]efrains” and “notes so sad and so happy those words don’t even begin.”<sup>139</sup> McKay employs the whales’ mysterious song to explore human-animal difference, the porous boundaries between predator and prey, and the treacherous nature of enchantment, reimagining Lien’s idea that “enchantment offers no guarantee of animal welfare.”<sup>140</sup> As Jean and Sue find Lee amidst thousands drawn to the coast, Jean hears the whales’ song: “Home is here ... Come home it / has been away / too long.”<sup>141</sup> Believing it to be an invitation, humans respond, crazed, “babbling. Remembering things we don’t remember.”<sup>142</sup> McKay reworks folkloric imagery of mermaids luring sailors to their deaths, as Jean is absorbed into a whale-like “frequency,” recalling

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<sup>134</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 168.

<sup>135</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 168.

<sup>136</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 190.

<sup>137</sup> Astrida Neimanis, *Bodies of Water: Posthuman Feminist Phenomenology* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 86.

<sup>138</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 86.

<sup>139</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 102.

<sup>140</sup> McKay’s depiction tallies with Lien’s notion that “enchantment is a treacherous emotion.” By reinterpreting the notion that enchantment is a human-controlled experience, McKay reimagines Lien’s notion that “enchantment offers no guarantee of animal welfare” and Mathews’ idea of “rewiring your senses” through alternative attunement. See Lien, “Care, Curiosity, and Commitment,” 460, 474; Mathews, “Coming into Noticing,” 106.

<sup>141</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 193.

<sup>142</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 193.

a “tail,” “quiet,” and “[p]lankton falling.”<sup>143</sup> McKay’s depiction of the whales’ song as an irresistible call to “come home” evokes a deeper, almost primordial bond between humans and the ocean, alluding to the aquatic origins of the human species.<sup>144</sup> Yet, despite this shared connection, McKay suggests that humans have become so estranged from the sea that returning ‘home’ is impossible. Rather than representing a return to a nurturing origin, the ocean is depicted as alien and perilous, complicating the idea of homecoming and deepening the novel’s unsettling exploration of human-animal entanglement. The ambiguity of whether the song is an invitation, misinterpretation, or death lure heightens its menace. McKay positions whales as threats, reversing contemporary human-animal dynamics: whether knowingly or not, whales call humans to their deaths, mirroring the mass impact of industrialisation on animals. While in *Limberlost*, Arnott replaces the embellished myth of the vengeful ‘mad whale’ with depictions of its simultaneous familiarity and alterity to humans, in *The Animals*, McKay portrays the whales as distant and utterly estranged from humans.<sup>145</sup> In a context of climate change where microplastics, waste, and noise infiltrate oceans, McKay exposes the fragility of the “hydrocommons” and probes the limits of ethical care.<sup>146</sup> As Neimanis writes, “we make [water] through our anthropogenic material incursions,” yet this “making” also involves “remak[ing] and “unmak[ing]” it in destructive ways.<sup>147</sup> McKay presents water as contaminated and estranged, reinforcing the novel’s apocalyptic overtones where animals inhabit a world shaped by humans.

Through Jean, the novel confronts the apocalyptic ethical dilemma of Lee and many others’ deaths and provides no insight into the whales’ motivation. Instead, McKay underscores the vitality and agency of whales, who remain “wild and free,” estranged yet present.<sup>148</sup> Jean succumbs to the whales’ song but Sue’s “fur whispers, (Bad / Dog). Stay / with its pack,” reminding Jean that her “place / is in the middle ... with its pack,” pulling and biting at Jean to prevent her from drowning.<sup>149</sup> The song’s danger and humans’ inability to join whales exemplify how deeply humans have become estranged from animals. Reworking the phenomenon of stranded whales, McKay depicts how “Lee’s body breaches” and “dead people wash in on the fresh tide.”<sup>150</sup> McKay ironically depicts how the whale’s ominous call is interrupted by a boat engine: “[a]t the sound of it, the whales splinter like someone has thrown a rock at a song ... Their giant confusion sends shock waves over the bay, people crawling out of the water ... Calling, not for us now, but for each other.”<sup>151</sup> The imagery

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<sup>143</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 193.

<sup>144</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 193; Todd C. Rae and Thomas Koppe, “Sinuses and Flotation: Does the Aquatic Ape Theory Hold Water?” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (2014): 60, <https://doi.org/10.1002/evan.21408>.

<sup>145</sup> Jimmy Packham explores the whale’s silence in Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), referring to “[t]he whale [as] the great emblem of the inscrutability of the seas, [who] swims through the water in ‘pyramidal silence.’” Packham notes how “[e]ven in the fury of a whale hunt, Ishmael laments the ‘dumb brute of the sea’ with ‘no voice save that choking respiration through his spiracle’, who is ‘unspeakably pitiable;’” Ben De Bruyn analyses the “human fantasies of whale song,” its “promises to connect human and nonhuman animals,” “the threat of anthropogenic noise and the militarisation of the ocean.” See Jimmy Packham, “Pip’s Oceanic Voice: Speech and the Sea in *Moby-Dick*,” *The Modern Language Review* 112, no. 3 (2017): 573, <https://doi.org/10.5699/modelangrevi.112.3.0567>; Ben De Bruyn, *The Novel and the Multispecies Soundscape* (Springer International Publishing, 2020), 71, 222, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-30122-4>.

<sup>146</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 2.

<sup>147</sup> Neimanis, *Bodies of Water*, 184.

<sup>148</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 102.

<sup>149</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 194, 195.

<sup>150</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 197, 210.

<sup>151</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 210.

of a “rock” disrupting their song captures the threat of anthropogenic noise to whales’ sonar communication, turning the initial danger to humans into a new danger for whales.<sup>152</sup> McKay contrasts the song’s threat with the human interference that silences it, evoking the treacherous influence humanity exerts over marine life. Concluding with “just the slosh slosh of the waves,” McKay inserts realism into the dystopian scene, lamenting the impact of human intrusion.<sup>153</sup> Reimagining whales as both threatening and threatened, McKay calls for accountability while redefining the relationship between humans, the sea, and its creatures as both estranged and interconnected.

### Wounding

After Jean witnesses Lee’s drowning amidst the chaos, the police at the scene inform Jean that Angela, Kimberly’s mother, has denied Jean’s guardianship of Kimberly and the police take the child home to the sanctuary. Here, McKay highlights Jean’s capacity for harm as she fulfils the expectations held by animals in the novel by displaying aggression towards Sue. As Jean grieves, she is irritated by Sue’s references to buried bodies as “meat stew[ing],” which Jean feels to be insensitive, particularly when Jean’s son is one of the buried.<sup>154</sup> In response to Sue declaring her desire to eat the “meat,” Jean loses control:

I kick the dingo in her side. And again. Pull out that gun in front of everyone, and the whole place starts screaming except for Sue, still as sand. The whispers shift on her pelt but her gaze is steady on me. I don’t wait for the lyrics. Her skull in my sight. Close my eyes on pulling the trigger because I’ve got half a heart and don’t want to see what it does. It doesn’t do anything.<sup>155</sup>

This is the first time Jean has harmed Sue, and the scene contrasts starkly with Jean’s attempt to free Sue’s paw from the wire fence at the novel’s opening. In kicking and attempting to shoot her, Jean exhibits an explosive, careless grief that reflects a broader stereotype of human violence and aggression towards animals. McKay relays Sue’s feeling of betrayal and yet the feeling remains untranslatable to Jean in the image of Sue’s “tail curling nothing words can describe.”<sup>156</sup> When Jean returns to the van after attempting to shoot Sue, she finds the dingo waiting. Rather than apologising or displaying guilt, Jean expresses her understanding that Sue had attempted to prevent her from being drawn into the ocean by the whale’s song: “[y]ou were really trying to save me. I wish you’d gone for Lee, but, anyway, I understand. I forgive you.”<sup>157</sup> Sue reacts by biting Jean’s wounded hand:

[s]inks a tooth right into the rotting cut. I feel the pain in my own teeth. The world stiffens, goes soft, and a vomitus tide of colour sweeps over my face ... Sue, sick of waiting, nips my fingers, my hair. Get up, Bad / Dog. / Sit / up. Now. I don’t. She bites my ear so hard I feel for blood. Get up, Little / Bitch.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 210.

<sup>153</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 210.

<sup>154</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 206.

<sup>155</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 206.

<sup>156</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 206.

<sup>157</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 214.

<sup>158</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 214, emphasis in original.

Here, Sue displays dominance over Jean. In failing to apologise and in her surprise at Sue's callousness, Jean displays her ignorance. Sue reminds Jean: "I'm the / Queen Mum. It eats/ later" before calling her "arse sniffer" and "Bad Dog," outlining "[t]he plan ... to follow. / Watch. Eat what I give. Lower / than me. / Fight when I bite."<sup>159</sup> Sue's aggression and intimidation, biting Jean's hand and ear and referring to her with terms that reveal that to Sue, Jean is an "underling," emphasise that despite the expectation of Jean to take the role of 'master,' Sue is in charge.<sup>160</sup> McKay's depiction of Sue's callousness highlights the thorny negotiation of their relational proximity and estrangement. Sue's use of the phrase "Little Bitch"—which in a canine context is inoffensive—remains unclear.<sup>161</sup> There is aggression in the phrase that follows the bite, and yet soon after, Sue draws her body close to Jean, demonstrating the familiarity between them.

McKay provokes disgust through Jean's festering wound, a visceral reminder of inflicted violence and the ethical burden of care. Ironically, Sue takes on the role of carer, challenging human-animal hierarchies. The wound reflects the "allure" and "dread" of the weird, pushing Jean between her humanity and growing animality.<sup>162</sup> The weird both "repel[s]" and "compel[s]," an effect McKay heightens through Sue's unsettling yet tender care.<sup>163</sup> After biting Jean's "rotting cut," Sue consoles her in an abstract, fragmented exchange: "[i]t's gone. / 'Sue-' / Stop barking. / 'S-' / Shut / It. Listen."<sup>164</sup> McKay conveys that the fragile ties Jean had to Kimberly have grown more tenuous in Angela's instruction to the police that Jean is not "her grandma," that she is no longer Kimberly's "guardian," and that Angela "won't have [Jean] back at the sanctuary."<sup>165</sup> We can interpret Sue as conveying three possible points: Lee's death, Kimberly's departure, and that the connection between Jean and Kimberly, "was here ... Now it's gone" with the truth that they have no biological connection.<sup>166</sup> Sue's poetic, clipped speech disrupts Jean's first-person narration, challenging the singular human perspective. Sue insists on silence, urging Jean to "[l]isten"—a skill Jean has developed through proximity to Sue.<sup>167</sup> Listening, rather than speaking, grants deeper, though imperfect, understanding. Jean describes Sue's care:

Sue gets closer. Jumps up on the couch seat beside me. I cringe from her mouth but inside it is a tender tongue. Nuzzles into my bad hand and begins to lick. It hurts. I start to blubber. She's more gentle, licking the green pus. When she finishes, it's cleaner. Even feels a bit better. Put my face in her furry side, which smells like grime and warmth and beach, and cry my guts out.<sup>168</sup>

There is repulsive intimacy in the image of Sue "licking the green pus," yet Jean accepts Sue's care, drawing close despite her discomfort.<sup>169</sup> McKay further complicates intimacy in a later moment:

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<sup>159</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 215.

<sup>160</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 214.

<sup>161</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 214.

<sup>162</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 4.

<sup>163</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 9.

<sup>164</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 215–216, emphasis in original.

<sup>165</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 201.

<sup>166</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 216.

<sup>167</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 215–216, emphasis in original.

<sup>168</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 215–216.

<sup>169</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 216.

Sue wants to be near me, and she wants to be as far away from me as the road will let her be. Biting distance is too close. But she comes back in the night stinking of carrion and wants to rub her chin over my face. It feels almost sexy, her hard bristled chin all over me like that, but when I try to push her away she pins me with her paw.<sup>170</sup>

McKay deliberately unsettles the reader, describing Sue's touch as "almost sexy."<sup>171</sup> This bizarre, transgressive moment challenges moral boundaries, echoing Roger Luckhurst's view that the weird exists "in perversity and transgression" and "twists or veers away from familiar frames."<sup>172</sup> This moment echoes *The Octopus and I*, where the erotic imagery of Hokusai's print and Lucy's octopus fantasies blur lines between intimacy and taboo. Both McKay and Hortle employ the weird to interrogate ethical limits, challenging readers to confront the discomfiting entanglements of human-animal relationships.

Fisher writes that the weird can lead to a questioning of what sense of normality is being threatened, describing how the affect produces "a sensation of wrongness."<sup>173</sup> In this way, the weird disrupts traditional systems of empathy, creating tension between discomfort and understanding. In the strange description of the perhaps too familiar relationship between Sue and Jean, McKay challenges us to reflect upon the conventional boundaries that categorise animals and the systems that control them. While bestiality is a universal taboo, exploitation of animals in an economic system that puts animals into "death row" is strangely acceptable.<sup>174</sup> Weik von Mossner notes that "some narratives are ... more immersive than others, and the genre conventions of the realist novel are the ones that most deliberately and most consistently seek to ensure an immersive reading experience for the reader."<sup>175</sup> McKay's text, however, disrupts this immersion. Rather than presenting a polemic ethical enquiry into these matters, McKay captures the pull and tug of connection and estrangement to engage with and question accepted systems and hierarchies through which we assign value to animals.

### Silence and the Return to Reality

The conclusion of the novel comes with a comprehensive and uncomfortable silencing effect that suppresses the animal cacophony that developed through 'zooflu.' The final stage of the virus involves the ultimate loss of human language. The pharmacological 'cure' comes with a suppression of animal language, an experience that reverses Jean's sensitivity and exposure to animal voices and their multisensory communication. Jean is asked by the soldier who gives her the pill, "[c]an you speak?" and "[d]o you still have language?" a reminder that the virus has meant that Jean has relied on a range of bodily stimuli to communicate, rather than purely oral speech, a kind of animal-becoming that has developed over the

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<sup>170</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 240.

<sup>171</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 240.

<sup>172</sup> Roger Luckhurst, "The Weird: A Dis/Orientation," *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1052, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1358690>.

<sup>173</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 9.

<sup>174</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 37.

<sup>175</sup> Alexa Weik von Mossner, "Environmental Narrative, Embodiment, and Emotion," in *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, ed. Hubert Zapf (De Gruyter, 2016), 543, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110314595-029>.

novel.<sup>176</sup> After taking the medication, Jean experiences the transformation as instant sensory-deprivation and numbness, and feels an extreme sense of loss. She panics as the ability to comprehend Sue's messages disappears:

I squint at her. Body quiet but not in her wolf way. I can see her tail move, her ears twitch, her eyes on me, but I can't quite make out the words ... The quiet drills into my ear canals until quiet is all I can hear. Nothing from the birds. The bugs gone to ground. The rabbits stunned in their burrows. The sheep hushed in their field. Roos struck mid-bounce ... I'm the / kin, she whispers ... Half-breed dingo show dog trying to say something. Telling me to go somewhere with her, about the food, or the flies. The highway. I grab her. She doesn't say whether that's okay or not so I grab her.<sup>177</sup>

Now prevented from comprehending the animals' embodied messages that were initially uncomfortable, silence and desensitisation become Jean's true and sustained source of discomfort. As the "silence roars," McKay emphasises the profound impact of Jean's return to her previously unaware state, underscoring the devastating nature of this regression.<sup>178</sup> Sue's silence reverberates loudly in this moment as Jean pours out questions that will receive no comprehensible response from Sue:

I always told Kimberly that I'd ask you ... What do you want the most out of anything? You'd want a pack, wouldn't you? A pack of your own to run with. Or all the food you could eat so you wouldn't have to hunt for it. All the food I could eat too. If we had that, you wouldn't have to look after me. Would that be better, Sue? If you didn't have to, you know, mind your Jean?<sup>179</sup>

Despite Sue's acknowledgement of her kinship with Jean, McKay sustains the estrangement between dingo and human and emphasises the sadness in the severing of their communicative ties. No longer able to "taste what Sue's talking about, or feel it in my pores," their relationship is radically altered and Jean returns to imagining Sue's voice again.<sup>180</sup> Jean's reassurance, "I'm right here," falls flat as "[t]he dingo licks her lips, looks away."<sup>181</sup> Rather than referring to Sue by her name, Jean calls her "[t]he dingo," a conclusion to the novel that reasserts Sue's animality.<sup>182</sup> We are left with the question of whether the virus altered how Sue engaged with Jean. In looking away, Sue conveys a sense of detachment from Jean, perhaps because of her new responsibility to her pups. The dingo's final words that Jean imagines Sue saying become more existential as McKay invites us to question "[w]here is it?"—a question McKay may be asking on behalf of Sue about human absence in a context of immense suffering and cruelty.<sup>183</sup>

McKay leaves the novel's conclusion open, without answering the question of whether Jean will return to the sanctuary, if she will attempt to return Sue or remain with her as she breeds her pups, or attempt to reunite with Kimberly. Jean's search for Kimberly and their shared dream of a sanctuary, along with Jean's relationship with Sue, remain unresolved. As the novel returns to a pre-virus reality where humans can no

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<sup>176</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 247.

<sup>177</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 251, emphasis in original.

<sup>178</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 252.

<sup>179</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 276.

<sup>180</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 252.

<sup>181</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 252.

<sup>182</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 252.

<sup>183</sup> McKay, *The Animals*, 252.

longer understand animals, a sense of crisis lingers. The weirdness persists. Fisher writes that “the weird de-naturalises all worlds, by exposing their instability, their openness to the outside,” a sentiment reflected in McKay’s novel in the strangeness that is sustained by the presence and absence of ‘zooflu.’<sup>184</sup> *The Animals in that Country* challenges readers to confront the intimacy, estrangement, and “instability” within human-animal relationships, and the human capacity to enact both harm and care in communicating with animals.<sup>185</sup> McKay’s weird realism shapes the novel’s animal communication and makes instability palpable, prompting us to consider our complicity in the violence embedded in human-animal relations in the context of climate change. By drawing on Donovan, we can underscore the danger of the novel’s return to silence: without the speculative disruption of ‘zooflu,’ animals risk once again becoming what Donovan calls “stand-ins” or metaphors for human emotional states, “the moral reality of the animals’ own suffering ... elided” in favour of “anthropocentric aesthetic design”.<sup>186</sup> Yet McKay complicates this outcome by refusing neat narrative closure. Sue’s silence keeps the figure of the animal present but inaccessible, positioning readers in an uneasy space between aesthetic exploitation and ethical attentiveness. In doing so, the novel dramatises the double bind Donovan identifies—between aesthetic exploitation and ethical attentiveness—and asks what it means to sustain care when the possibility of communication has been foreclosed.

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<sup>184</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 14.

<sup>185</sup> Fisher, *The Weird*, 14.

<sup>186</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 46, 47.

## Chapter 5: Oral Testimony and Irreverence: Chris Flynn’s “motley band of irascible fossils” in *Mammoth*

Chris Flynn’s novel *Mammoth* abandons realism entirely to imagine animal and object communication through the oral testimonies of fossilised beings. In contrast to Arnott’s, Hortle’s, and McConaghy’s realist-hybrid frameworks, and McKay’s ‘weird realism,’ Flynn’s novel situates itself firmly in speculative terrain, where fossils narrate their own histories and afterlives. In *Mammoth*, five fossilised narrators share their deaths and afterlives with one another as they prepare to be auctioned off in a New York gallery in 2007. At first glance, it may seem strange to group *Mammoth*, a New York-set novel written by an Irish-Australian author, with this thesis’s collection of texts. However, as an innovative work of speculative fiction, *Mammoth* exemplifies the trend I have identified of Australian authors experimenting with genre to narrativise animal communication. By reimagining oral testimony through a comedic lens, Flynn positions *Mammoth* at the intersection of serious narrative modes and irreverent humour. Flynn returns subjectivity to commodified objects by allowing them to critique human ideologies, histories of exploitation, and political systems. Donovan’s concern that the moral reality of animal suffering is often subordinated to aesthetic or symbolic design points to the risks of Flynn’s irreverent mode.<sup>1</sup> In choosing humour and parody, does Flynn risk trivialising violence, or does his comic framing open a new pathway to ethical attentiveness by refusing sentimentality? I explore this tension and situate *Mammoth* as a work that both stages and unsettles Donovan’s question of whether literary representations of animals are ethically grounded or lapse into exploitation.<sup>2</sup>

Flynn’s postapocalyptic framework is unconventional, centring not on human collapse but on the aftermath of extinction for species like the mammoth, whose annihilation occurred through human interference. *Mammoth* suggests a broader vision of apocalypse, spanning deep time and revealing human hubris as a recurrent force of destruction. While each narrator reflects on the loss of their lives and the extinction of their species, the humour and irreverence of their testimonies temper the apocalyptic undertones. Alongside the speculative mode of narration, one of the novel’s two epilogues envisions the resurrection of mammoths through genetics, a more traditional implementation of speculative fiction through envisioning the future. A common thread throughout the texts examined in this thesis is the authors’ explicit engagement with the problems of communication and narration, and Flynn’s work is particularly self-reflexive in this regard. By blending speculative conceits with the serious genre of oral testimony, *Mammoth* interrogates the complexities and contradictions inherent in narrating marginalised experiences. In mimicking tropes of orality and testimony, Flynn dignifies his narrators by allowing them to ‘speak,’ even

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<sup>1</sup> Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 46.

as they are commodified and stripped of agency, complicating the relationship between value, care, and voice. In doing so, Flynn invites readers to consider how we assign worth and recognise agency, particularly for beings and objects that exist outside conventional categories of subjectivity.

The novel spans deep time, going back one hundred and fifty million years, and nests nineteenth century history—marked by significant shifts in scientific understanding and cultural perspectives—into this grand sweep of time. The narrative is structured in seven parts: it opens with a letter from Thomas Jefferson dated 1800 that outlines his interest in acquiring mammoth bones to assemble a complete skeleton; and closes on the night before the Natural History Auction in 2007. In the New York auction house, Flynn flips the traditional relationship that positions animals and objects as the observed and instead casts four extinct animals and one mummified hand as the observers of humans. Mammut, the novel's primary narrator, opens the novel by relaying his final days living alongside the newly arrived 'Clovis,' humans who have begun to kill mammoths for their meat and fur. Over the course of the evening, Flynn's five narrators—'Mammut' the mammoth, 'T.bataar' the Tyrannosaurus bataar, 'Palaeo' the prehistoric penguin, 'Pterodactylus' the pterodactyl, and 'Hattie' the mummified hand that allegedly belonged to Pharaoh Hatshepsut—recount their individual deaths and excavations as they await auction. Mammut's testimony guides the narrative as he shares his final days of life, 13, 354 years ago. Alongside his memories of these final days, Mammut shares three interconnected stories located in America, France, and Ireland in the early 1800s, based on events he witnessed due to his bones accompanying the humans in each place. The novel concludes with the narrators' final farewells to one another, an 'Epilogus hominum' accounting for the destinations for each auction piece, and an 'Epilogus mammut' that depicts the futuristic return of mammoths. While in *The Animals*, McKay implements weird realism to open a channel for animal communication and then make strange the closing of this channel, Flynn employs oral testimony and irreverence to interrogate the objectification of animals and their relegation to symbols of human power, strength, and potency.

Flynn is the author of three novels, four children's books, a Museums Victoria exhibition companion for 'Horridus,' Melbourne Museum's Triceratops skeleton, and a short story collection.<sup>3</sup> Flynn's works have grown more experimental, provocative, and environmentally conscious. *Mammoth* has been widely praised for its experimental style and was shortlisted for the 2021 Indie Book Awards and the Russell Prize for Humour. Astrid Edwards describes *Mammoth* as "absurdist and full of humour" and commends "Flynn's wit" at capturing "[h]uman foibles."<sup>4</sup> Ramona Kennedy writes that "Flynn's voicing of the other sits within a rich tradition of animal storytelling," identifying Ceridwen Dovey as Flynn's literary counterpart.<sup>5</sup> Like

<sup>3</sup> Flynn's literary works include: *A Tiger in Eden* (Text Publishing, 2012); *The Glass Kingdom* (Text Publishing, 2014); *Mammoth* (UQP, 2020); *The Quest for Kool* (Museums Victoria Publishing, 2022); *Horridus and the Hidden Valley* (Museums Victoria Publishing, 2022); *Horridus: Journey of a Triceratops* (Museums Victoria Publishing, 2022); *Horridus and the Night Forest* (Museums Victoria Publishing, 2023); *Here Be Leviathans* (University of Queensland Press, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Astrid Edwards, "Mammoth by Chris Flynn," review of *Mammoth*, by Chris Flynn, *Australian Book Review*, May, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Ramona Kennedy, "What Was It Thinking?," *Sydney Review of Books*, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/reviews/what-was-it-thinking>.

*Mammoth*, Tracey Sorenson's *The Lucky Galah* (2018), Stephen Daisley's *Coming Rain* (2015), and Louis Nowra's *Into That Forest* (2012), are also part of the Australian tradition of writing through animal-narrated fiction.<sup>6</sup> Following the novel's publication, Flynn was appointed as the Melbourne Museum's Editor-in-Residence, tasked with giving 'Horridus the Triceratops' "a 'personality,' to bring it to life and to interact with people on social media" which he accomplished through his picture books.<sup>7</sup> Despite its critical success, *Mammoth* has received limited scholarly attention, with Spencer Robins' article being the only academic analysis available. Robins argues that both *Mammoth* and James Bradley's *Ghost Species* are "fables of the long sixth extinction" and construct extinction narratives that position the "human body" as an "ahistorical ... protagonist" of what he terms "Pop Sociobiology."<sup>8</sup> Robins suggests that while these novels present "hopeful glimpses" beyond extinction, they do so by imagining futures that exist "outside the biological boundaries of the human."<sup>9</sup> Robins' critique of extinction fables as dehistoricising narratives is compelling, yet I argue that *Mammoth* resists this tendency by centring testimony as a mode of remembrance. Rather than offering an uncomplicated resolution, by harnessing oral storytelling, Flynn foregrounds the entanglement of human and animal histories, ensuring that past exploitation is neither erased nor abstracted.

University of Queensland Press, the publisher of both *Mammoth* and *Here Be Leviathans*, has a history of launching and nurturing the careers of some of Australia's most respected and award-winning authors such as Melissa Lucashenko, Sarah Holland-Batt, Evelyn Araluen, and Tony Birch. In an interview with UQP discussing how *Mammoth* aligns with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, Flynn outlined his justification for writing the novel:

I ... was disquieted by the notion of fossils as commodities, as symbols of strength from the animal kingdom that, even today, we use for purposes of self-aggrandisement. Once I worked out the fossils should tell their stories, a unique window on human history and our tendency to repeat mistakes opened.<sup>10</sup>

In the *Griffith Review* conversation with Hortle and McKay, Flynn discusses the common critiques of anthropomorphism as "terrible fiction" or "childishness."<sup>11</sup> Flynn challenges this perspective by arguing that this dismissal is itself an "anthropocentric reaction," suggesting instead that animals in literature—like Palaeo—should not be seen as mere metaphors: "[h]e's a penguin fossil. He doesn't represent anything

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<sup>6</sup> In Daisley's novel, the narrative perspective shifts into the point of view of a pregnant dingo, adopting a third-person limited narration that closely follows her experience. This narrative style provides an intimate and sensory portrayal of the dingo's world, focusing on her immediate physical sensations ("the giddiness, the ground whirling before her"), instinctual drives ("the need to hunt," "to mate," and "to suckle"), and deliberate movements ("she waited," "took three steps," "put her nose to the ground"). See Donna Mazza, "Kangaroos and predators in recent Australian fiction: A post-pastoral reading," *Antipodes* 32, no. 1–2 (2018): 100, <https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.32.1-2.0094>.

<sup>7</sup> Kylie Northover, "Meet the man who's giving voice to the 'Mona Lisa of dinosaurs,'" *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.smh.com.au/culture/books/triceratops-gun-author-chris-flynn-s-mammoth-task-of-fleshing-out-a-dinosaur-20220307-p5a2cm.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Spencer Robins, "The Strange Primate: Sociobiological Storytelling in the Pop Anthropocene," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 31, no. 4 (2024): 895, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isad032>.

<sup>9</sup> Robins, "The Strange Primate," 895.

<sup>10</sup> UQP, "Chris Flynn talks Mammoth and the UN Sustainable Development Goals," published June 8, 2021, <https://www.uqp.com.au/blog/chris-flynn-talks-mammoth-and-the-un-sustainable-development-goals>.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Jean McKay, Erin Hortle, and Chris Flynn, "Animal perspectives: Breaking the language barrier," *Griffith REVIEW*, no. 71 (2021), <https://www.griffithreview.com/articles/animal-perspective/>.

except himself.”<sup>12</sup> Flynn highlights that animal perspectives in literature, including in his own work as well as in those of McKay and Hortle, are constructed through human narrative devices: “[o]ur animals have voices (granted, assigned by us, through processes that are both complex, reasoned, and narratively convenient).”<sup>13</sup> Here, Flynn emphasises the complexity in, and difficulty of, representing animal voices.

Each narrator in the novel has been affected by commodification in ways that reveal the entanglements of capitalism, extinction, and historical violence. Mammut’s death symbolically marks the inauguration of anthropogenic environmental change. Despite coexisting with humans for thousands of years, mammoths were driven to extinction by habitat loss and overhunting as the climate warmed during the Holocene.<sup>14</sup> Peter Sands’ discussion of J.G. Ballard’s “fossil imaginaries” offers a compelling framework for understanding how Flynn’s narrators work.<sup>15</sup> Sands argues that fossils disrupt human temporal frameworks, revealing humanity’s own impermanence. Analysing Ballard, Sands writes, “[b]y staging the fossil encounter as a confrontation with the human’s own geological being . . . , the human [occupies] the threshold between life and death, itself embodying the animal remains of a paleontological history for which the human marks but a single moment.”<sup>16</sup> In this sense, fossils do not merely testify to what has been lost but also expose the deep time of extinction and fleeting nature of human civilisation. Sands’ reading is especially relevant to Mammut’s presence in the novel, as both a remnant of the past and a witness to humanity’s encroachment. Mammut compels readers to recognise the continuity between past extinctions and present environmental crises. The inclusion of Hattie complicates the dynamic of fossilised animal narrators—once complicit in exploitative systems like slavery, she now exists as a colonial objectified relic. By applying the framework of “fossil imaginaries” to *Mammoth*, I argue that Flynn suggests that human-driven forces of extinction and exploitation may eventually reduce humanity itself to a trace in the geological record.<sup>17</sup> Hattie’s presence directly points to the possibility of humanity’s own eventual fossilisation—a remnant of its self-destructive systems.

### Oral Testimony and Humour

Historically, testimony has documented mistreatment and trauma experienced by victims of persecution and discrimination, including enslaved people, women, and the economically vulnerable. Tess Cosslett discusses the “formal parallel” between animal autobiographies and slave narratives which both utilise testimony to convey subjectivity and mistreatment and to evoke reader empathy.<sup>18</sup> Just as slave narratives

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<sup>12</sup> McKay et al., “Animal perspectives.”

<sup>13</sup> McKay et al., “Animal perspectives.”

<sup>14</sup> S. A. Zimov, N. S. Zimov, A. N. Tikhonov, and F. S. Chapin, “Mammoth Steppe: A High-Productivity Phenomenon,” *Quaternary Science Reviews* 57 (2012): 44, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.quascirev.2012.10.005>.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Sands, “J. G. Ballard’s Fossil Imaginaries: Apocalypse, Deep Time, and Deathly Life,” in *Animal Remains*, ed. Sarah Bezan and Robert McKay (Taylor & Francis, 2021), 17, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003129806>.

<sup>16</sup> Sands, “Fossil Imaginaries,” 16.

<sup>17</sup> Sands, “Fossil Imaginaries,” 17.

<sup>18</sup> Tess Cosslett, *Talking Animals in British Children’s Fiction, 1786–1914* (Routledge, 2006), 88, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315241852>.

were intended to demonstrate the full humanity of enslaved individuals, animal testimonies assert the subjectivity of animals and protest their objectification.<sup>19</sup> Flynn’s oral testimony draws on the historical role of the form but does not attempt to depict mistreatment and trauma. Instead, by making commodified objects the storytellers, Flynn offers alternative perspectives on human and animal exploitation, rooted in real historical events. Oral testimony in the novel is not only a means of imagining animals’ capacities to communicate but also a vehicle for critiquing the exploitative systems of colonisation, slavery, and commodification. Including oral testimony in my theorisation of animal communication in Flynn’s novel aligns with Robles’ discussion of animal voice in literature as a way of reconfiguring animals as “speaking beings” within a political and literary discourse.<sup>20</sup> *Mammoth* embodies Robles’ concept of political visibility by foregrounding the voices of extinct animals who reflect on their own commodification and displacement while witnessing human violence.<sup>21</sup> Flynn prioritises Mammut’s testimony while nesting the perspectives of other narrators to construct a multi-voiced oral history spanning deep time. Their testimonies trace their life, death, burial, exhumation, and posthumous trade, exposing patterns of harm linked to colonisation, slavery, and scientific slavery.

Drawing on Shoshana Felman and Dominick LaCapra, Katarína Labudová emphasises testimony’s role in countering “dominant” narratives and its “hybrid form” due to trauma’s tendency to “disrupt genres.”<sup>22</sup> Testimonial literature, she notes, is often “centered around a traumatic event” and serves as a “counter-narrative” that memorialises experiences through the lens of a “marginalized witness.”<sup>23</sup> Labudová highlights that “multi-voiced” and “multi-perspectival” narratives further reinforce this hybridity.<sup>24</sup> Each novel in this thesis, to differing degrees, attempts to represent the experiences of “marginalized” animals imbricated in exploitative human systems.<sup>25</sup> On the extreme end of generic experimentation, McKay and Flynn represent animals explicitly communicating their mistreatment directly to the reader. Flynn’s five narrators mirror testimonial literature’s counter-narrative function, challenging the anthropocentric historical record “produced by their oppressors.”<sup>26</sup> Their deeply personal, emotionally resonant testimonies transport readers into bygone worlds, highlighting their shared status as commodified artifacts—once living creatures, bought or stolen and prepared for resale. Giving their testimonies allows them to restore their subjecthood and serves as “the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness.”<sup>27</sup> The irony of their being deceased, historical artifacts and thus ‘portions’ of their former selves

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<sup>19</sup> Cosslett, *Talking Animals*, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Katarína Labudová, “Testimonies in *The Testaments* by Margaret Atwood: Images of Food in Gilead,” *ELOPE (Tiskana Izd.)* 17, no. 1 (2020): 100, my emphasis, <https://doi.org/10.4312/elope.17.1.97-110>; Dominic LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 96; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (Routledge, 1992), 2.

<sup>23</sup> Labudová, “Testimonies,” 100, 101.

<sup>24</sup> Labudová, “Testimonies,” 101.

<sup>25</sup> Labudová, “Testimonies,” 101.

<sup>26</sup> Labudová, “Testimonies,” 101.

<sup>27</sup> Dori Laub, “An Event Without a Witness: Truth, Testimony and Survival,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (Routledge, 2013), 85, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700327>.

are the means by which Flynn distorts the traditional requirements of oral testimonies for, while Labudová argues that “narrating ... becomes an act of survival,” the reality of survival is more of a question of whether they will be remembered.<sup>28</sup>

The novel opens with Mammut recounting his life and addressing ‘Clovis:’ “[t]he first time I killed a man—that was a good feeling. Clovis, you were back then.”<sup>29</sup> Mammut details the slaughter and extinction of his species with visceral detail:

I hated you. We all did. *Glyptodon*, *Megalonyx*, *Arctodus*, *Camelops*, *Bison priscus*, *Equus*—all were hunted without mercy. You ate our flesh and wore our hides. You used our bones to fashion ever more complex butchery devices. You burnt the grasslands and forests. You starved us. You drove us to our deaths over cliffs. You hurled rocks and dug pits. We fought back, but victories were rare. There were too many of you. You were as countless as the stars.<sup>30</sup>

Mammut’s testimony is not merely a recounting of individual trauma but also a collective elegy for the many species eradicated by humans. Though Mammut’s voice adopts an elegiac register, Joseph Meeker reminds us that “literary comedy depicts the loss of equilibrium and its recovery. Wherever the normal processes of life are obstructed ..., the comic mode seeks to return to normal.”<sup>31</sup> Meeker’s “comic” here does not refer to humour or irony but to a structural mode oriented towards continuity and ecological resilience—the opposite of tragedy’s fixation on irreversible loss. Flynn’s use of humour, while not “comic” in Meeker’s formal sense, nonetheless performs a related function: it converts lament into imaginative recovery, restoring voice and vitality to extinct species. Where elegy laments irretrievable loss, Flynn’s tonal playfulness gestures toward renewal—aligning, albeit obliquely, with the ecological ethos of Meeker’s comic mode. In recalling an act of self-defence—killing a human who ambushed his family—Mammut draws a stark moral divide: “[y]ou opened your eyes again and squealed in pain. I knew if I pushed hard enough your arm would tear away at the shoulder. I considered doing that, but I am not like man. I do not torture for pleasure.”<sup>32</sup> His declaration rejects cruelty, positioning him as ethically opposed to humanity. Mammut makes the kill swift: “I placed a foot on your chest and pressed down until your sternum cracked and your heart was crushed ... One less *Homo sapiens*. The world was a better place.”<sup>33</sup> Charged with defiance and bitterness, this moment presents Mammut as both a victim of human exploitation and an agent of resistance. By highlighting the moral deliberation behind his actions, Flynn challenges anthropocentric assumptions about violence and morality. Flynn’s mimicry of the oral testimonial mode becomes evident in the interruption that follows Mammut’s monologue: “[w]ho are you talking to, *Mammut*?”<sup>34</sup> Mammut responds, “[t]hat biped. The one with the glasses. I thought perhaps he could hear me.”<sup>35</sup> This metafictional

<sup>28</sup> Labudová, “Testimonies,” 100.

<sup>29</sup> Chris Flynn, *Mammoth* (University of Queensland Press, 2020), 5.

<sup>30</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 6, emphasis in original.

<sup>31</sup> Joseph Meeker, “The Comedy of Survival,” *North American Review* 257, no. 2 (1972): 13.

<sup>32</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 8.

<sup>33</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 8, emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 8, emphasis in original.

moment collapses the boundary between narrators and audience, implicating readers as witnesses to the testimony.

Mammut's testimony not only recounts past violence but also exposes the ongoing indignities suffered by fossilised beings, trapped in a world that commodifies their remains. Sherryl Vint writes that "[s]peculative fiction has long been interested in narrating from imagined perspectives that exceed or reconfigure the human, taking seriously at the level of a text's ontological world that nonhuman characters are fully people."<sup>36</sup> Flynn's mimicry of the testimonial form echoes this, granting Mammut a voice that asserts his subjectivity and articulates his alienation. This speculative mode of narration underscores Mammut's dual experience: a relic of a lost world and a sentient being witnessing human exploitation. After opening the novel with his reflections, Mammut realises that another artifact, T.bataar, is within ear-shot. Explaining the purpose of his narrative—an "oral account, not a written one"—Mammut draws parallels between his storytelling as a Mammoth's tradition and that of human "seanchaithe," Irish storytellers who preserved history through oral traditions: "[t]he *seanchaithe* were oft-itinerant storytellers who preserved history and lore through an oral tradition. Just as *Mammut* have always done, the *seanchaithe* passed their stories from one generation to the next ... *Mammut*, like the Irish, do not forget."<sup>37</sup> Lacking a "generation" of his own to inherit his story, Mammut shares it with fellow fossils.<sup>38</sup> Each narrator experiences their mistreatment differently; Mammut protests the "indignity" of their existence:

[we are] the disembodied spirits of prehistoric beasts, *T. bataar*, condemned to live in the infernal world of bipeds for as long as our body parts remain above ground, instead of crumbling to dust in the earth as they were meant to. We are currently on display in a seedy warehouse, being poked and prodded by all and sundry. Then, once we are sold to the highest bidder, we'll spend our days as museum exhibits, with grotty human children wiping their hands on our bones. How could our humiliation be any deeper?<sup>39</sup>

By conveying Mammut's distress at not "crumbling to dust in the earth as [he and the others] were meant to," Flynn reworks oral testimony's affective function.<sup>40</sup> Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as "a rebellion against the modern idea of time," writing that "[t]he nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition."<sup>41</sup> Mammut's longing for dissolution reflects this "rebellion:" he resists the modern, museum-driven impulse to preserve and display, yearning instead for the cyclical temporality of burial and decay.<sup>42</sup> While Flynn's fossil voices embody reflective nostalgia, which "dwells on longing itself, and delays the homecoming," the museum enacts restorative nostalgia, an effort to stabilise the past

<sup>36</sup> Sherryl Vint, "'Without the Right Words It's Hard to Retain Clarity': Speculative Fiction and Animal Narrative," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*, ed. Susan McHugh, John Miller, and Robert McKay (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 500–501, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39773-9\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39773-9_35).

<sup>37</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 31, emphasis in original.

<sup>38</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 31.

<sup>39</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 17, emphasis in original.

<sup>40</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 17; LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 189.

<sup>41</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), XV.

<sup>42</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XV.

and “reconstruct the lost home”.<sup>43</sup> In this sense, the fossils’ “humiliation” stems not only from commodification but from being caught between competing temporalities.<sup>44</sup> As LaCapra argues, testimony can enable “mourning and ... a proper burial,” restoring “to victims the dignity denied them by their victimizers.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, as historical artifacts, Flynn’s narrators remain objects of perpetual fascination, the question of their “dignity” unresolved.<sup>46</sup>

Mammut recalls how in Philadelphia in 1801, he was exhumed and displayed by historical figure Charles Wilson Peale, a naturalist, painter, and scientist. In Peale’s museum, Mammut “had become part of the menagerie,” “confined” alongside “grizzly bears and a bald eagle.”<sup>47</sup> Flynn conveys the animal’s frustration at the mutual “imprison[ment]” of living and deceased creatures being treated as objects of fascination and curiosity.<sup>48</sup> This resonates with John Berger’s account of nineteenth-century public zoos as imperial “menageries” of “conquest,” symbols of “modern colonial power” and “monument[s]” to “the disappearance of animals from daily life.”<sup>49</sup> Berger writes: “[t]he zoo to which people go to meet animals, to observe them, to see them, is, in fact, a monument to the impossibility of such encounters.”<sup>50</sup> Flynn literalises this insight: in Peale’s museum, the dead Mammut stands beside staged creatures, turning the exhibit into a tableau of extinction-in-progress where life and death are equally objectified. As Boym observes, restorative nostalgia “attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home,” rebuilding a fantasy of national origins and continuity.<sup>51</sup> Peale’s museum enacts this by transforming fossils into symbols of American strength. Yet Flynn’s narrators fracture the project, exemplifying reflective nostalgia, which “dwells on longing itself, and delays the homecoming.”<sup>52</sup> Through Mammut’s testimony, Flynn offers a more nuanced exploration of the ethical implications of these historical practices, providing “a point of conflation between life and text, a textual testimony which can penetrate us like an actual life.”<sup>53</sup> Mammut reflects wryly to T. batar that “Peale’s museum of natural history and portraiture was an eccentric place for a *Mammut* to find himself thirteen thousand years after he sank into the mire.”<sup>54</sup> The “eccentric[ity]” of his preservation serves as a counter-narrative: the museum does not simply conserve knowledge but stages a perpetual scene of conquest—a spectacle of domination that enshrines animal death as cultural achievement.<sup>55</sup> Sherryl Vint notes that “the power of speculative fiction [is in its ability] to shift our perception of the material world beyond the text, using the estranged world within the text.”<sup>56</sup> Flynn

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<sup>43</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVIII.

<sup>44</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 17.

<sup>45</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 17; LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 189.

<sup>46</sup> LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, 189.

<sup>47</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 32, emphasis in original.

<sup>48</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 32.

<sup>49</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 15.

<sup>50</sup> Berger, “Why Look at Animals?,” 15.

<sup>51</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVIII.

<sup>52</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XVIII.

<sup>53</sup> Shoshana Felman, “Education and Crisis, Or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (Routledge, 2013), 2, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700327>.

<sup>54</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 33–34, emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 33.

<sup>56</sup> Vint, “Without the Right,” 502–503.

exemplifies this “power” by animating fossils and granting them voice, disrupting the objectifying gaze that traditionally renders animals and natural specimens as passive objects of study or entertainment.<sup>57</sup> Rather than treating fossils as static artifacts, *Mammoth* interrogates the ethical cost of preservation and the human entitlement to other forms of life.

Despite dealing with weighty topics like extinction, Flynn avoids being overly sombre or didactic, instead employing humour as a tool to frame themes of nostalgia and exploitation. By pairing testimonies of loss with the narrators’ humorous responses, Flynn applies affective “tactics like defamiliarization and estrangement in addition to absurdity, self-reflexivity, and antisentimentalism” to expose the absurdities that underpin human systems and ideologies.<sup>58</sup> Nicole Seymour proposes that “despair and hope, gloom/doom and optimism are often merely different sides of the same coin, a coin that represents humans’ desire for certainty and neat narrative about the future.”<sup>59</sup> Flynn adopts the tactics that Seymour identifies—rejecting environmentalism’s traditional tones of “reverence,” “guilt,” and “prescriptiveness”—to challenge the notion “that reverence is required for ethical relations to the nonhuman.”<sup>60</sup> His novel “profile[s]” multiple extinctions and patterns of exploitation in human history “while poking fun” at the orators.<sup>61</sup> By pairing moments of absurdity with reflections on nostalgia and loss in his speculative novel, Flynn critiques environmental and historical injustices while expanding literature’s capacity to grapple with the intersecting crises of extinction and exploitation.

Mammut’s empathetic “outside” witness,” a hallmark of testimonial narratives, is T.bataar who subverts the solemnity of his testimony with sarcasm.<sup>62</sup> Mammut describes the “peace” he experienced when his “life came to a dignified end,” contrasting this with the “humiliation” he now feels at being “condemned to live” as an artifact.<sup>63</sup> He recounts: “I lay there, letting the soft snow embrace me, staining it with the blood that seeped from the holes in my side. I felt comfortable. Relaxed. At peace.”<sup>64</sup> Here, Flynn captures the profound loss Mammut feels at being “the last” of his kind, a moment that implicitly recognises the reality of mammoth extinction.<sup>65</sup> T.bataar responds with irreverence:

[e]xcept not quite. For here you are, *Mammut*. On display in a Manhattan warehouse, telling the saddest story this dinosaur has ever heard. / I am sorry to have upset you, *T. bataar*. / I’m tearing up over here, buddy. You’ve really tugged the old heartstrings. I’m a tough guy too. / Well, you wanted to hear the rest of the story and there it is. I apologise for the lack of a happy ending, but life is cruel. / It turned out to be a bit of a downer, huh? I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’ll be glad to hear you resume the boring old tale of Americans digging up your bones and naming huge cheeses in your honour.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Vint, “Without the Right,” 502–503.

<sup>58</sup> Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 225.

<sup>59</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 3–4.

<sup>60</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 34–5.

<sup>61</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 34.

<sup>62</sup> Dori Laub, “Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle,” *American Imago* 48, no. 1 (1991): 81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26304032>.

<sup>63</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 72, 11, 17.

<sup>64</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 72–73.

<sup>65</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 73.

<sup>66</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 73, emphasis in original.

T.bataar's humour, through seemingly "inappropriate," complements the tragedy, aligning with Seymour's concept of "alternative environmentalism."<sup>67</sup> Here, Flynn disrupts generic expectations of climate fiction, which often deals solemnly with environmental loss. Later, Palaeo critiques Mammut's "memoir genre" style, noting, "I know you're technically an elephant and all, but your recall of events is a little too precise. Not to mention the verbatim dialogue. Surely, you're making some of this up?"<sup>68</sup> Mammut admits to "occasional romanticism" but insists, "what I am recounting is true. But as you say, I am a storyteller who enjoys indulging in a yarn."<sup>69</sup> While Mammut questions if his species is truly extinct, T.bataar mocks his introspection, preferring to joke about "Americans digging up your bones and naming huge cheeses in your honour."<sup>70</sup> Through Mammut's testimony and the narrators' comic engagement with his stories, Flynn establishes a paradox that juxtaposes genuine sorrow with bizarre expressions of American nationalism. This "playfulness" challenges the gravity of oral testimony, revealing absurdities in human actions, both amusing and dark.<sup>71</sup> Flynn explicitly links humour and tragedy in a conversation between Mammut, T.bataar, and Palaeo:

[h]old on, *Mammut*. Is this going to be another one of your sad endings? / The lives of hominids are replete with tragedy. / Are they, though? Back in Boston, all anyone wanted to do was have a good time. And it's not like their lives were brimming with joy. / You are correct, *Palaeo*. For a story to be successful, tragedy must be tempered with comedy. No-one is miserable all the time. / Right, and if you include a few laughs, it renders the sad moments all the more poignant.<sup>72</sup>

In this conversation about what makes a "successful" story, Flynn critiques the tendency to focus solely on loss and extinction and articulates the importance of balancing comedy and tragedy to enhance emotional effect.<sup>73</sup> The narrators' debate reinforces Flynn's dual approach which blends comedy and tragedy to deepen, not diminish, the poignancy of extinction and human-ecological contradictions. Their exchange exemplifies what Meeker calls comedy's ecological wisdom: "comedy and ecology are systems designed to accommodate necessity and to encourage acceptance of it, while tragedy seeks to avoid or to transcend the necessary in order to accomplish the impossible."<sup>74</sup> Flynn's narrators articulate precisely this comic acceptance, using humour as the mode through which endurance and adaptability are expressed. In other words, their wit and irreverence perform what Meeker identifies as comedy's ecological wisdom: the capacity to acknowledge loss while continuing to live within its terms, rather than seeking transcendence or restoration.

In his mimicry of testimonial modes, Flynn grapples with issues of fictionality, truthfulness, and reliability, accentuating the "fictionality" of his narrators' testimonies through the pairing of historical evidence with

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<sup>67</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 8, 38.

<sup>68</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 143.

<sup>69</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 143.

<sup>70</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 73.

<sup>71</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 14; Flynn, *Mammoth*, 73.

<sup>72</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 168–169, emphasis in original.

<sup>73</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 168.

<sup>74</sup> Joseph Meeker, "The Comedy of Survival," *North American Review* 257, no. 2 (1972): 14.

imagined accounts.<sup>75</sup> His representation of vicarious storytelling echoes Jarmila Mildorf's discussion of storytelling rights and epistemic authority in narratives recounted by individuals who have not directly experienced the events they narrate.<sup>76</sup> Flynn engages with questions of authority and authenticity through his narrators' interrogation of one another to both explore the process of writing history and emphasize that, despite the novel's fictionality and each narrator's object status, their testimonies offer valuable insights into the systems of exploitation and commodification to which they are tethered. The questioning of authority and authenticity highlights how history is shaped by power dynamics, while also revealing the complex relationships between the narrators and the forces that commodify them. Flynn muddies expectations of orality and a "dialogic context [that includes] an authentic listener" by having the narrators question Mammut's storytelling.<sup>77</sup> In a conversation where Palaeo questions how Mammut is able to translate such intimate conversations between the Irish nationalists, Flynn provides a logical framework through which each narrator can share their story, humorously illustrated when Mammut justifies that his "molar" being present facilitated his ability to overhear Caoimhe O'Neill's story.<sup>78</sup> This is also seen in the character of Hattie, the mummified hand. Mammut explains how Hattie voices the consciousness of Queen Hatshepsut: "she is only with us as a severed hand, and yet she is able to converse. At the same time, she is aware of the rest of her body undergoing study in an Egyptian laboratory."<sup>79</sup> Flynn's artifice, which allows each narrator to speak from the perspective of any part of their being, might initially appear comically farfetched. However, it serves the purpose of exemplifying their objectification and the fragmentation of their physical forms. Through each narrator's testimony—the novel's mode of animal communication—a deeper restoration occurs: a reclamation of identity and subjectivity within the exploitation they have witnessed and endured as commodified objects.

### Enduring Ideologies of Exploitation

Each chapter in this thesis examines how writers address colonialism's role in the exploitation of people, animals, and land, highlighting its contribution to the climate crisis. Set outside Australia, McConaghy and Flynn's novels engage with British colonialism as a global force. Flynn's narrators, shaped by their global journeys, trace histories of colonial power, slavery, and scientific discovery, revealing how these exploitative ideologies shaped history and continue to influence the present. Anecdotal stories told by narrators reveal both the compassion and cruelty of humans. Despite his hatred of humans, Mammut's emotional investment in the lives of those he accompanies reflects his complex relationship with humanity. While reflecting on Rembrandt Peale's relationship with Moses Williams—an African American indentured to Rembrandt's father, Charles Wilson Peale—Mammut expresses admiration for the men's "easy familiarity

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<sup>75</sup> Jarmila Mildorf, *Life Storying in Oral History: Fictional Contamination and Literary Complexity* (De Gruyter, 2023), 2, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111073101>.

<sup>76</sup> Mildorf, *Life Storying in Oral History*, 33.

<sup>77</sup> Laub, "Truth and Testimony," 80.

<sup>78</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 194.

<sup>79</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 194.

born from decades of intimacy.”<sup>80</sup> Rooted in shared education, their bond initially makes their racial differences seem insignificant to him.<sup>81</sup> Mammut reflects, “I took a shine to the pair straight away.”<sup>82</sup> However, the deeper reality of their relationship—one structured by the dehumanising system of slavery—emerges as Mammut reflects on Peale’s ownership of Moses. By characterising slave ownership as a “strange, uniquely human notion,” Mammut critiques humanity’s obsession with possession and dominance.<sup>83</sup>

Mammut, exhumed and displayed in Peale’s museum, becomes an object of national fascination and draws interest from Thomas Jefferson. Flynn represents the eighteenth-century rivalry between French and American naturalists and politicians over environmental determinism. Timothy Sweet explains that Thomas Jefferson used the newly-discovered mammoth to counter “George-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon’s claim that American nature was degenerate.”<sup>84</sup> Comte de Buffon’s environmental determinism argued that “the American climate “diminished all the quadrupeds,” while Jefferson cited the mammoth’s size and number as evidence of American vitality.<sup>85</sup> Through Mammut, Flynn critiques Jefferson’s attempt to justify American superiority by mythologising the mammoth. In conversation with T.bataar, Mammut asserts:

nothing compares to this nation’s willingness to promote patently false notions about itself in order to create a myth of American potency. Politics in this country has at its core an overcompensation for feelings of inadequacy. That is why men self-aggrandise so, and why successive paternalistic leaders have attempted to overcome their inferiority complexes by appropriating symbols of strength from the natural world. Why else are we for sale in this draughty warehouse? Who do you imagine will buy us? You said it yourself, *T. bataar*. We represent power, for that is what we were: Behemoths. Colossi. Titans.<sup>86</sup>

Here, Mammut critiques the American tendency to appropriate “symbols of strength” from nature, like the mammoth, exposing the violence and exploitation behind this mythologising.<sup>87</sup> Flynn also critiques the practice of “collecting trophies,” which contributes to anthropogenic extinction, with Mammut sarcastically observing that humans “helpfully clear away original inhabitants to make room for their grubby dwellings and mewling spawn,” an allusion to the colonial project.<sup>88</sup> Flynn’s portrayal of the Anthropocene through Mammut—in which humans have “taken a pristine wilderness that spanned the globe and brought it to heel with their concrete and firearms and technology”—unveils the destructive speed of human progress, contrasting it with the slow, expansive process of natural evolution.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 36.

<sup>81</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 36.

<sup>82</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 37.

<sup>84</sup> Timothy Sweet, “Narrating Animal Extinction from the Pleistocene to the Anthropocene,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Environment*, ed. Sarah Ensor and Susan Scott Parrish, (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 57, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108895118.005>.

<sup>85</sup> Sweet, “Narrating Animal Extinction,” 57.

<sup>86</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 15–16, emphasis in original.

<sup>87</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 15–16, emphasis in original.

<sup>88</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 17.

<sup>89</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 17.

Arguments for American ecological degeneracy seem absurd in the twenty-first century, which Flynn underscores through the representation of Mammut's "nineteenth-century reconstruction" and the dual humiliations experienced by Mammut and Moses Williams.<sup>90</sup> When describing the advertisement of Peale's mammoth museum exhibition, Mammut relays to T.bataar:

CW Peale still had legal ownership of the young fellow ... [and] [w]ishing to drum up business for my grand unveiling, CW had Moses pose as a Native American Indian, complete with elaborate headdress, and parade through the streets of Philadelphia riding a white horse. Rembrandt, dressed more modestly in a soldier's uniform, rode alongside playing the bugle to attract attention.<sup>91</sup>

The exhibition's script dramatises the mammoth as a fearsome beast, and transforms both Mammut and Williams into spectacles for profit: "[t]en thousand moons ago, a mighty creature roamed the gloomy forests of our nation. The beast was huge as a frowning precipice, cruel as the bloody panther. With wanton fury it stalked the plains and thunder rolled in its wake."<sup>92</sup> This performance appropriates Indigenous identity, dehumanises Moses, and sensationalises Mammut's existence, reflecting America's exploitative relationships with nature and marginalised peoples. Flynn's critique of the spectacle aligns with McKay's *The Animals* in which animal sanctuaries, despite their conservation claims, perpetuate exploitation. Both narratives expose the persistent commodification of the natural world and its inhabitants. Flynn extends this critique to consider the public's response to this commodification:

[a]s it turned out, ordinary Americans shared Peale's and Jefferson's passion for bigness. I represented American might, and this struck a chord in the new democracy. Within months, everything was mammoth themed. A twenty-pound vegetable grown in New York was proclaimed as a Mammoth Radish. In Washington, a fellow labelled himself a Mammoth Eater after digesting forty-two *Gallus gallus domesticus* eggs in ten minutes.<sup>93</sup>

Flynn underscores how the exhibit spawned a cultural obsession with "bigness" and excess.<sup>94</sup> Through Mammut's acerbic tone, Flynn exposes the paradox of a nation that simultaneously venerates and exploits the natural world.

To authenticate America's image of grandeur and might, Rembrandt and Moses transport Mammut to France in 1802. On the voyage, they meet a Frenchman who boasts of his role in the "Battle of the Pyramids," declaring "[t]he Nile ran red with their blood! Those Egyptian dogs were no match for French ball and steel."<sup>95</sup> When the Frenchman claims, "[l]es *sombres* are no kind of soldier ... they look strong, like your boy here, but faced with European intelligence and bravery, they turn tail and flee, every time," Moses attacks him.<sup>96</sup> The slur—"the dark ones"—exemplifies French colonial racism. At this point, Hattie interrupts Mammut's tale, questioning, "[a]re you saying a battle raged above my tomb, *Mammut*? I didn't

<sup>90</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 61.

<sup>91</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 61.

<sup>92</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 61.

<sup>93</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 62, emphasis in original.

<sup>94</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 62.

<sup>95</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 89.

<sup>96</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 89, emphasis in original.

hear anything.”<sup>97</sup> While humorous, Hattie’s presence in the conversation highlights the complexities of colonial history. Flynn acknowledges both the effect of British colonialism on Egypt and Egypt’s own relationship with slavery, complicating any straightforward moral stance. Mammot recounts how Napoleon’s victory left Egypt in turmoil, paving the way for “the struggle for dominance between the Ottoman and British empires,” during which “the French discovered the Rosetta Stone, which the British appropriated in 1802.”<sup>98</sup> Flynn satirises colonial looting and cultural violence through the following exchange:

[y]ou will doubtless be pleased to know, madam, that four years ago your friend Zahi Hawass requested the stone be repatriated to your homeland. / Excellent tidings. I assume the foreign devils complied with this demand. / I’m afraid the British Museum has been rather recalcitrant on the subject. A full-scale invasion of their territory might be the only solution. / Then that’s what I’ll do. As soon as my identity is revealed to the world, I’ll be reappointed pharaoh and lead our armies to victory across Europe. / It sounds like there are some insults to be redressed. When are you going to get it through your desiccated skull, lady? You’re dead. / I feel very much alive, bird.<sup>99</sup>

Hattie’s expectation “the foreign devils complied” to the request for the Rosetta Stone’s repatriation reflects her sense of entitlement as Pharaoh, while her delusional call for an invasion exposes the absurdity of colonial arrogance.<sup>100</sup> Flynn contrasts Hattie’s grandiose aspirations with Palaeo’s blunt reminder of her death, deploying humour to highlight the persistence of imperialist attitudes. Flynn further critiques historical power structures through Hattie’s ruthless disregard for human life:

[w]hen one is the absolute ruler of a vast nation—as I was—one can do what one likes. Tens of thousands of slaves worked on the tombs day and night. Egypt was a constant construction site, which was irritating on occasion. You know how subcontractors can be. Agitators, every one. They would have held up proceedings interminably, had I not ordered their throats slit. / Entrails fed to the jackals, I’m guessing? / Naturally, penguin. What else does one do with entrails? / Best-fed jackals in the world, seems like.<sup>101</sup>

Hattie’s casual admission of mass murder, framed in flippant banter with Palaeo, underscores the egregiousness of her rule. By presenting her as both an absurd and ruthless figure, Flynn critiques the arrogance and brutality of historical power structures.

Mammot recounts Moses and Rembrandt’s arrival in France, where they meet French naturalists Jean Léopold Nicolas Frédéric Cuvier and Jean-Marie Dubois. Flynn critiques early nineteenth century scientific racism, exposing how intellectual enlightenment coexisted with the justification of racial slavery. Upon meeting Moses, Mammot conveys Cuvier’s remark, “‘I was not aware you were of Ethiopian origin, monsieur’ ... after salivating over my skull for a few moments.”<sup>102</sup> Here, Flynn links Cuvier’s fascination with Mammot’s bones to his racial classification of Moses. Later, Cuvier expounds upon racial hierarchy,

<sup>97</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 90, emphasis in original.

<sup>98</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 90.

<sup>99</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 91.

<sup>100</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 91.

<sup>101</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 108.

<sup>102</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 95.

claiming “that there are three distinct races of man. Caucasian, Mongolian and Ethiopian” and that the Caucasian race are “the master race” while “the Ethiopian” supposedly resembles “the monkey tribe” and lives in “the most complete state of barbarism.”<sup>103</sup> Astonished at the farce of Cuvier’s pseudo-scientific racial classifications, Moses challenges Cuvier: “[h]ow is it that you can be so progressive in regard to the evolution of animals, yet so backward when it comes to humans?”<sup>104</sup> His defiance is met with mockery—Dubois likens him to “a monkey ... trained to play the cymbals,” with Dubois remarking, “[t]hey are naturally aggressive, don’t you find, Georges?”<sup>105</sup> Flynn exposes how scientific racism reduces Moses to a spectacle, much like Mammut himself. Recognising this, Moses remarks, “[t]hey view us as a travelling freak show, it seems. The Ethiopian and the Mammoth. We are two clowns for their amusement.”<sup>106</sup> Yet he also observes, “no-one will be able to tell the difference between my bones and those of the so-called Caucasians. Death reduces all men to their composite parts. Skull, spinal column, ribs, pelvis and limbs.”<sup>107</sup> In this moment, Moses and Mammut share an understanding of objectification, stripped of individuality in death. Moses further aligns his struggles with those of the Irish, stating:

[t]hey have told much about their struggle for independence from their oppressors, and I feel a kinship with their cause. They are slaves too, after a fashion. Perhaps I would fare better on their island, were I free to travel there without consequence. Although they inform me that I would be even more of a curiosity in Ireland than I am here or back home. Perhaps one day a man of colour may parade freely in the street without fear of aggression or condescension.<sup>108</sup>

While Moses empathises with the Irish fight against oppression, he acknowledges that racial bias persists across nations. Flynn complicates the narrative of oppression, showing how discrimination operates in intersecting systems. Like McKay, Flynn employs the weird—animating a mammoth tusk—to expose the absurdity of racial and colonial injustices.<sup>109</sup> By giving Mammut a voice to challenge pseudo-science, Flynn mobilises animal communication and the speculative mode to critique the historical objectification of both humans and animals.

In a comedic turn of events, Irish siblings steal Mammut from the Americans and transport him to Ireland, where Caoimhe O’Neill and Robert Emmet plan to sell his bones to fund the 1803 Irish rebellion. Flynn links the Irish struggle for independence to the broader effects of British colonialism. The fact that many rebels were later exiled to New South Wales is another connection between Flynn’s novel and his home country.<sup>110</sup> Mammut sympathises with the Irish nationalists, contrasting his swift, merciful kills with the British forces’ brutal torture. He recounts how the British “yeomen ... showed no pity” to “all republican sympathisers,” and tortured the Irish:

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<sup>103</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 95.

<sup>104</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 95.

<sup>105</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 95.

<sup>106</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 126.

<sup>107</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 127.

<sup>108</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 127.

<sup>109</sup> Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 10–11.

<sup>110</sup> One of the novel’s connections to Australia is that some rebellion participants were transported to New South Wales as convicts. See “Castle Hill Rebellion,” National Museum Australia, accessed July 20, 2024, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/castle-hill-rebellion>.

[n]either you, *Pterodactylus*, nor you, *Palaeo*, were present at the very beginning of my narrative, when I explained to *T. bataar* how, when a member of the Clovis tribe of hominids was at my mercy, I ended his suffering swiftly, rather than resort to torture. In my experience, bipeds have no such compunction. The yeomen of Major Sirr in Dublin Castle tortured Anne Devlin, who was only twenty-three years old at the time.<sup>111</sup>

Mammut's moral perspective opposes human cruelty, a theme reinforced by *Pterodactylus* who recalls that he was used as a "teaching tool" for the Nazis.<sup>112</sup> *Pterodactylus* remembers how he was "presented [him] to the eager teens as proof that Germany had once been the centre of might in Europe" and that Mammut, in particular, was "elevated as a symbol of strength."<sup>113</sup> *Pterodactylus* highlights the "alarming" nature of human violence, recalling a "[a] group of bipeds in uniform abusing a perfectly reasonable and gentle fellow member of their species."<sup>114</sup> He recounts how Heinrich Himmler's 'Ahnenerbe' fabricated Nordic ancestry to justify racial purity, echoing the racial classifications of French naturalists.<sup>115</sup> This fabrication "was designed to provide justification for a range of Nazi policies—domination, subjugation and cleansing."<sup>116</sup> *Pterodactylus* observes, "[y]et again the hominid males appropriate motifs of power from the natural world in order to make themselves seem strong."<sup>117</sup> Flynn parallels British colonial violence and Nazi ideology, exposing how myths of power have historically legitimised oppression. These ideologies, affecting both humans and animals, are framed as absurd by the narrators. The critique extends to the commodification of fossils. As *Palaeo* warns:

[t]hat's why some of us are up for sale tomorrow, *M*. You, *T*, the lion, the dire wolf, even you, *P-dac*. If you're not purchased by well-meaning museums, you'll be shipped off to the mansions of rich men as pseudo-sexual trophies. As for me, well, no-one ever thought a penguin made them look like a badass.

Mammut responds, "[i]f our use was only emblematic, *Palaeo*, I could almost understand. But the sort of hominids who boast of their connection to mammoth and tyrannosaur are too often cruel in character."<sup>118</sup> This exchange reinforces the narrators' critique of human brutality in the pursuit of power, not only exposing how historical obsessions with strength and dominance have fuelled exploitation but also prompting reflection on how these patterns persists in contemporary values and practices. Mammut, disturbed by the senseless violence of war, remarks, "[t]he hominids exhibit a barbarism towards each other that is difficult to understand. Case in point: the failed Irish rebellion."<sup>119</sup> Flynn distances his narrators from human actions, deploying their perspectives to critique nationalist, colonial, and scientific ideologies that have historically justified subjugation. Through the mode of animal communication, *Mammoth* satirises humanity's relentless pursuit of power across time and geography, exposing its moral cost.

<sup>111</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 169–170, emphasis in original.

<sup>112</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 160.

<sup>113</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 160.

<sup>114</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 157.

<sup>115</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 157.

<sup>116</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 157.

<sup>117</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 157.

<sup>118</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 160, emphasis in original.

<sup>119</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 160.

### Farewells and Resurrection: Nostalgia, Hope, and Remembrance

Mammut recounts his final days spent leading his species north to escape a warming climate. He describes their last battle against Clovis hunters, the devastation of a melting glacier and tidal wave, and his own death after being speared by a human. Elements from oral testimony and epic storytelling lend a dramatic effect to Mammut's story as he essentially performs his own elegy, blending nostalgia with critique of human exploitation. Svetlana Boym's concept of nostalgia, which balances loss—the “longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed”—with historical possibility—for a “past [that] opens up a multitude of potentialities, nonteleological possibilities of historical development”—offers a useful framework for understanding Flynn's portrayal of Mammut's memories.<sup>120</sup> Boym distinguishes between “restorative nostalgia,” which “puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gap,” and “reflective nostalgia,”—which “dwells in the *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance.”<sup>121</sup> Restorative nostalgia often involves a longing for a return to a particular time or place while reflective nostalgia is more nebulous and embraces longing and loss in the process of remembrance, focusing on memory and the passage of time rather than a desire for restoration.<sup>122</sup> Mammut's reflections on his past life, particularly his incomplete death and continued existence as a conscious historical artifact, embody both types of nostalgia: caught between resignation and desire for home, family, and for a finalised death, he acknowledges that his home is gone but still yearns for it. Flynn explores nostalgia's power to distort collective memory, exhibiting how Mammut's survival as a conscious fossil complicates the idea of returning to the past. Mammut observes, “[n]ature has a way of exerting a calm dominance over us all. It was beautiful, in a way, how the landscape was changing, becoming something else. The world was moving on. There was no place for the likes of me, or any of our kind.”<sup>123</sup> Here, Flynn illustrates how mammoths were gradually displaced amid the decline of the Ice Age and the onset of climate change. Mammut's awareness of irreversible change resists the romanticisation of history. Flynn both reflects and subverts Boym's depiction of nostalgia as a blend of “loss and displacement” and as “a romance with one's own fantasy” of homecoming in Mammut's dual acknowledgement that his home was no longer suitable for his kind while still longing to be there again.<sup>124</sup> By making Mammut both a fossil and a sentient narrator, Flynn subverts nostalgia as mere longing for restoration. Instead, he presents it as a reflection on displacement, loss, and the inevitable passage of time.

Mammut concludes his testimony by recounting his journey from Ireland back to America, where he lies dormant in a mastodon graveyard for two centuries before land developers unearth him. He laments:

my spirit lived on. I was condemned to simply lie there, alive but not alive, permanently stuck between realms. This awful condition of stasis continued throughout the twentieth century and beyond, until, one wondrous day not so very long ago, a metal claw opened up the side of

<sup>120</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), XIII, 54.

<sup>121</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41, emphasis in original.

<sup>122</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

<sup>123</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 70.

<sup>124</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XIII.

the mountain ... The land was being developed, you see, the forest cleared to make room for a hillside casino resort. For a while, I believed myself rescued. I thought I would be mounted on a wall again, or even made whole, as a visitor attraction. But no, the construction of a casino is an expensive endeavour ... This is why I am here, with you. I am being sold to finance a gambling den.<sup>125</sup>

Mammut's fate reflects humanity's evolving patterns of destruction and commodification. Once a symbol of national prestige, he is now reduced to mere profit as if he is "money lying on the ground."<sup>126</sup> The discovery of the mastodon "graveyard" becomes a lucrative opportunity, a prioritisation of profit over conservation.<sup>127</sup> Mammut longs for a meaningful existence, to be free from the "awful condition of stasis," and concedes that being "mounted on a wall" or being a "visitor attraction" would be preferable to "financ[ing] a gambling den."<sup>128</sup> Mammut views his part in funding the "den" as the least redeemable outcome and T.bataar confirms their grim reality: "[e]verything has a price, *M*. Even us."<sup>129</sup>

As the narrators bid farewell, Flynn balances solemnity with "irreverence" and "playfulness" to offer an "alternative ... to crisis discourse in an era of crisis fatigue."<sup>130</sup> With Hattie "locked into a case at the rear of the room," only the fossils remain to reflect on their futures.<sup>131</sup> Mammut expresses gratitude for their time together: "[i]t has been an honour getting to know you. / Are you going somewhere, *M*? You sound like you're about to jump off a building. / After tomorrow's auction, we will all be going elsewhere, *Palaeo*. Probably not together."<sup>132</sup> Their parting thoughts highlight their uncertain destinies—T. bataar dreams of luxury, living in the "mansion of some rich playboy," Pterodactylus seeks a "quiet spot in a respected museum," Palaeo hopes to be "anywhere except another frigging bar," and Mammut hopes for "a window where [he] can look out and see mountains."<sup>133</sup> In their varying responses and ambitions that range from desires for extravagance to peace, Flynn blends humour with poignant reflection, ultimately foregrounding how these ancient beings remain trapped in humanity's ongoing cycles of exploitation. Throughout the novel, Flynn binds the lives of his narrators to humans and in this farewell that excludes Hattie, Flynn draws attention to how animals, dead and alive, are bound up in an enduring narrative of human 'progress.'

Flynn concludes the novel with an 'Epilogus hominum' and an 'Epilogus mammut.' The former, written from Flynn's perspective, details the results of the auction and the celebrities who bought each item. His metafictional commentary further exposes both the constructed nature of the novel and how stories and histories are manipulated and commodified. Flynn's authorial presence in the epilogue allows him to directly comment on the absurdities of the fossil auction, where relics of deep time are reduced to collectibles for

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<sup>125</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 233–234.

<sup>126</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 234.

<sup>127</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 233.

<sup>128</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 234.

<sup>129</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 234.

<sup>130</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 230; Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 8.

<sup>131</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 135.

<sup>132</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 234, emphasis in original.

<sup>133</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 234.

celebrities like Nicolas Cage, Leonardo DiCaprio, Russell Crowe, and John Oliver.<sup>134</sup> Flynn reinforces their entrapment by illustrating how their legacies endure, even as they remain objects of exchange. The mosasaur skull that DiCaprio “had to make do with” after losing the bid on T. bataar’s skull to Cage exemplifies this cycle.<sup>135</sup> Flynn writes:

Mr DiCaprio held on to his mosasaur skull for an even shorter space of time. In December 2008, he sold it to Russell Crowe. Ten years later, the skull featured as one of over two hundred lots in the auction Mr Crowe held to raise funds for his divorce from Danielle Spencer, alongside a chariot from *Gladiator* and the leather jockstrap he wore in *Cinderella Man*. In an interview with Channel 9’s Today show, Crowe said he could not recall the exact details of how he came into possession of the mosasaur skull but that vodka had almost certainly played a part. The skull sold for \$A65,000.<sup>136</sup>

By bundling the “skull” with souvenirs of Crowe’s celebrity, the novel exposes the reduction of fossilised remains to status symbols.<sup>137</sup> The fact that the skull, first sold in a 2007 natural history auction, resurfaced in a 2018 celebrity auction reinforces the ongoing trivialisation of its historical and scientific significance. Whether or not these items were bought to “appropriate ... symbols of strength from the natural world,” as *Mammut* suggests in the novel’s opening, Flynn prompts readers to question why objects as disparate as “the *bataar*, the severed hand of an Egyptian mummy ..., a meteorite ..., [and] a ten-million-year-old penguin fossil” all circulate in the same market.<sup>138</sup> The inclusion of a gold nugget in the catalogue highlights the novel’s critique of the exploitation of natural resources, linking the extraction of gold, fossils, and ivory to broader systems of colonialism, capitalism, and environmental degradation. The epilogue frames these acts within a broader history of resource depletion, culminating in the contemporary ivory trade and the extinction crisis.<sup>139</sup> Flynn further connects the loss of mammoths to climate change, noting that mammoths once compacted the snow in the “old Mammoth Steppe,” preventing permafrost from melting.<sup>140</sup> Their absence accelerates permafrost thaw, releasing carbon and exacerbating global warming.

While acknowledging the destructive consequences of progressive ideologies, Flynn also evokes nostalgia and futurity to signal the importance of hope. *Mammut*’s final plea rejects perpetual commodification, longing instead for a return to his own kind: “I am tired, friends. All I wish for is a return to the earth, to die, as I should have thirteen thousand years ago. I want to sleep, so I may dream of the steppe. Please, hominids, if you’re listening out there, it is not much to ask. Let us sleep.”<sup>141</sup> *Mammut*’s epilogue is set in 2104, and his consciousness has transferred to one of the newly made mammoths. He relays the environmental benefits of his species’ return and the possibility that more will follow. Aligning with Boym’s vision of nostalgia as involving critique of the past, Flynn’s narrators expose humanity’s “wanton savagery,”

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<sup>134</sup> Sara K. Mazurek, “The Dinosaur in the Living Room: A Proposal to Enable Academic Access to Fossils Discovered on Private Land,” *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media & Entertainment Law Journal* 31, no. 1 (2020): 272, <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/ipj/vol31/iss1/5>.

<sup>135</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 241.

<sup>136</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 241, emphasis in original.

<sup>137</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 241.

<sup>138</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 15, 239, emphasis in original.

<sup>139</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 239.

<sup>140</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 245.

<sup>141</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 235.

emphasising cycles of exploitation.<sup>142</sup> Yet by resurrecting Mammut through a scientific breakthrough, Flynn envisions renewal—human progress “wind[s] back the clock.”<sup>143</sup> In 2104, Mammut conveys:

[t]hirteen thousand, four hundred and fifty-one years have passed since the antediluvian days. The blink of an eye, for some. An eternity of torment, for others. I fall somewhere in between on that scale. The years of loneliness have evaporated, like mist burning off a lake in the morning sun. The fog has lifted. I can see all the way to the horizon. I am alone no more. The great herd has been restored.<sup>144</sup>

Mammut’s experience as a fossil—an “eternity of torment”—contrasts with the “restor[ation]” he feels at being “alone no more.”<sup>145</sup> In staging resurrection, the novel resists elegiac closure and imagines continuity, however improbable, as an ecological assertion of endurance rather than extinction’s finality—a gesture that quietly echoes Meeker’s vision of the comic mode as adaptive and ongoing rather than tragic or terminal.

Flynn does not conclude solely with critique but introduces hope in the second, speculative epilogue, where scientists suggest that genetic resurrection, such as restoring a herd of mammoths, “could hold the key to combating climate change.”<sup>146</sup> This shift not only critiques commodification but also envisions a potential future where scientific intervention offers an alternative to the cycles of extraction and consumption defining the narrators’ fates. This speculative approach aligns with Kim Stanley Robinson’s concept of ‘optopia,’ which envisions “the optimum society, the best one possible” given global constraints.<sup>147</sup> Robinson’s vision, grounded in what Anette Mikes and Steve New call a “politics of hope,” emphasises constructive action despite overwhelming challenges, arguing, “we have a moral obligation to find that optopia.”<sup>148</sup> Robinson’s *New York 2140* (2017) exemplifies what Spencer Adams calls a “speculative fiction of utopian world-building,” where narratives of “micro-utopias” experiment with “radically different forms of social and political organization.”<sup>149</sup> Flynn’s engagement with de-extinction in the epilogue reflects a similar dynamic, offering a path toward renewal amidst ecological loss. Rather than simply diagnosing catastrophe, Flynn imagines how scientific innovation might counteract ecological destruction rather than perpetuate further exploitation. This aligns with Robinson’s belief that speculative narratives should explore potential futures, not just document social collapse. Mammut’s testimony complicates this vision by framing de-extinction through nostalgia. As Boym argues, nostalgia can act as both a “defense mechanism” and a means of understanding humanity’s evolving relationship with nature amid “accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals.”<sup>150</sup> Mammut acknowledges human destruction but sees signs of recovery in his

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<sup>142</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 249.

<sup>143</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 249.

<sup>144</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 249.

<sup>145</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 249.

<sup>146</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 245.

<sup>147</sup> Anette Mikes and Steve New, “How to Create an Optopia?—Kim Stanley Robinson’s ‘Ministry for the Future’ and the Politics of Hope,” *Journal of Management Inquiry* 32, no. 3 (2023): 231, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10564926231169170>.

<sup>148</sup> Mikes and New, “How to Create an Optopia?,” 229, 231.

<sup>149</sup> Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, “Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism,” *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 2, no. 2 (2011): 187, <https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.105>; Spencer Adams, “Staging the Speculative: On Kim Stanley Robinson’s *New York 2140*,” *Qui Parle* 27, no. 2 (2018): 525, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-7200512>.

<sup>150</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, XIV.

resurrection: “[t]he world has not been fixed. It is still ailing from so many years of abuse. But it is getting better. On the mend.”<sup>151</sup> Flynn’s depiction of the mammoths’ return recognises past damage while envisioning a slow process of adaptation and recuperation. Mammut longs for the steppe yet embraces a future shaped by human intervention:

[m]y tales of *Clovis*, *Canis dirus* and the glacier regale the calves. They know we were extinguished and still survived. Most of them don’t believe me when I tell the story, or perhaps they do when they are young. Once they reach maturity, they set aside childish fantasies of the old steppe. My stories are dismissed as fairytales, legends created to teach and entertain. I am one of the few who know the truth. The steppe is different now. Smaller, but growing.<sup>152</sup>

Flynn thus entwines speculative hope with reflective nostalgia, envisioning a future of adaptation shaped by memory as much as by science.

Julia Gibson’s exploration of environmental memory resonates with Flynn’s depiction of Mammut’s testimony. Gibson writes:

[r]esisting the temporal and spatial isolation of the memory and mourning work common within mainstream climate ethics, remembrance is an ongoing communal ethic for keeping the dead alive in memory so that they can be cared for ... Like the living, the dead are among those beings who shape and are shaped by us.<sup>153</sup>

Flynn’s narrators enact this “ongoing communal ethic” as their testimonies ensure the dead are remembered.<sup>154</sup> Mammut’s voice, both in death and in resurrection, embodies this work of “remembrance.”<sup>155</sup> Throughout *Mammoth*, Flynn highlights how “the dead ... shape and are shaped by us” as his narrators observe, critique, and recount their histories.<sup>156</sup> Yet, as Gibson notes, environmental discourse has a “tendency to represent abstractly or symbolically, for example, as mascots, martyrs, names to recite, species identities and norms, cautionary tales, and so on.”<sup>157</sup> Flynn resists this abstraction by giving his narrators agency. They not only challenge false mythologies but also express nostalgia for their lived experiences, revealing a tension between commemoration and loss. This underscores the broader implications of how extinct beings are perceived and remembered. Mammut is a figure of historical transcendence—his genetic material is used to recreate his species—yet his testimony does not idealise the past. Instead, it reflects on the complexities of human-animal interdependence, engaging with extinction not as a static loss but as an evolving relationship shaped by memory, science, and environmental ethics.

Flynn’s depiction of the past is largely critical of humans and yet he envisions a near future where scientific progress enables de-extinction and ecological restoration. Mammut reveals: “[s]omehow, those bipeds I always resented for their wanton savagery found a way to undo their mistakes. They have wound back the

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<sup>151</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 250.

<sup>152</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 250–251, emphasis in original.

<sup>153</sup> Julia D. Gibson, “Practicing Palliation for Extinction and Climate Change: Weaving Death Ethics from Story and Practice,” *Environmental Humanities* 15, no. 1 (2023): 210, <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-10216250>.

<sup>154</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 210.

<sup>155</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 210.

<sup>156</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 210.

<sup>157</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 224.

clock, discovered a means of cheating oblivion.”<sup>158</sup> Flynn’s novel engages with Gibson’s call for palliation and remembrance through Mammut as he bears witness to human exploitation over time. Gibson notes the complexities within the idea of “rewinding” and writes:

[w]ith the conservation paradigm geared primarily toward pausing (via the preservation of so-called wilderness) or rewinding (via restoration-as-reversal) the ecological clock, the question of what is owed directly to the unjustly dead and dying is undertheorized and underpracticed in mainstream environmental discourse.<sup>159</sup>

Flynn’s speculative future is not utopian but focuses on efforts to “mend.”<sup>160</sup> Continuing to be told in his new life, Mammut’s testimony enacts Gibson’s death ethics, which involves a palliation framework, for “remembrance is what the unjustly dead are owed.”<sup>161</sup> Mammut plays a unique role in being able to remember his ancient life, observe human exploitation over time, and to be given this second chance at life, a role that reflects Gibson’s argument that “[h]ow we remember those who die or depart as the result of environmental injustice matters deeply under such conditions, both to the dead as well as to the living and those yet-to-be.”<sup>162</sup> Flynn acknowledges the importance of looking to the past when working towards a hopeful future as Mammut comically asserts:

[e]very party needs a cool head, someone who sees the big picture, a guest who can tap into deep time and explain that the future lies in our past. Need an answer to your dilemma? Look over your shoulder, friend. Everything that is happening now has happened before. And, to be quite frank, a mammoth problem requires a mammoth solution.<sup>163</sup>

Mammut’s role in remembering and testifying to the injustices of the past aligns with Gibson’s intergenerational ethics which emphasises the importance of acknowledging the dead while addressing the living.<sup>164</sup> The narrative of human progress, which each narrator associates with the facilitation of violence and harm, is, in this instance, reframed as a source of renewal, leading to a conclusion that is ultimately hopeful.

Flynn’s approach amplifies awareness of the interconnection of human and animal lives, highlighting shared histories of suffering. Humour plays a crucial role in tempering the novel’s serious themes, with Mammut offering sarcastic critiques of human folly. His sardonic tone highlights the absurdity of human pretensions: “[f]or the first time, I overheard bipeds speculating that we might possess a means of interspecies communication. Not many subscribe to the theory, which sounds outlandish to most hominid ears. This amuses me. Really, humans? You’re only working this out now?”<sup>165</sup> Mammut’s final words in the novel poignantly remind us of the values of life and of home: “[i]t is time to leave. Trunks are raised, calling me to the march. Breathe it in. Breathe in that cold air. Isn’t it wonderful? It is so good to be alive. To be

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<sup>158</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 249.

<sup>159</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 208.

<sup>160</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 250.

<sup>161</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 222.

<sup>162</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 222.

<sup>163</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 250.

<sup>164</sup> Gibson, “Practicing Palliation,” 228.

<sup>165</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 251.

*Mammut*. To be home.”<sup>166</sup> While a comforting conclusion to the story, Mammut’s testimony remains steeped in a deep time memory of exploitation and commodification, both experienced and witnessed. Flynn reminds us that we share this home, coexisting with the living, the dying, and the dead. Though it attends to grief and death, the novel avoids fatalism and instead gestures towards hope. Flynn’s speculative mode and use of oral testimony and comedy navigates the tension identified by Seymour between “despair and hope,” critiquing traditional environmental affects such as “gloom and doom.”<sup>167</sup> By employing “absurdity, self-reflexivity, and antisentimentalism,” *Mammoth* exposes the commodification of natural history while acknowledging the possibility of redemption and renewal.<sup>168</sup> *Mammoth* suggests that parody and irreverence need not trivialise, instead, they can sharpen ethical critique by deflating human pretension and restoring dignity to nonhuman voices.<sup>169</sup> Flynn’s fossils embody the tension Donovan identifies—oscillating between risk of exploitation and the potential for an ethics of care—yet they ultimately extend the project of animal communication into speculative and comic registers. From Arnott’s realist novel *Limberlost* through to Flynn’s *Mammoth*, each author analysed in this thesis uses genre to advance a unique model of animal communication that demonstrates how animals and their realities are deeply intertwined with human histories.

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<sup>166</sup> Flynn, *Mammoth*, 252, emphasis in original.

<sup>167</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 3–4.

<sup>168</sup> Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism*, 3–4.

<sup>169</sup> Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care*, 44.

## Conclusion

This thesis has argued for the efficacy of the concept of animal communication as a framework for examining the affordances of genre in representing climate change and its effect on animals. By analysing a selection of Australian novels published after 2020, my thesis illuminates how contemporary Australian literature reframes human-animal relations, exposes systemic violence, and critiques modernity's complicity in ecological degradation and ethical compromise. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as Donna Haraway's concepts of "companion species" and "responsive relationships," and debates about the suitability of certain genres to represent climate change and animal experiences, this thesis synthesises insights from literary, animal, and genre studies to address questions of narrative form, ethical responsibility, and the Anthropocene's demands on storytelling.<sup>1</sup> My formulation of animal communication emphasises the importance of genre and form and contributes to broader conversations about the capacity of literary aesthetics to address climate change. These novels centre key human-animal relationships—Ned and the quoll in *Limberlost*, Lucy and the octopus in *The Octopus and I*, Inti and wolf Ten in *Once There Were Wolves*, Jean and Sue the dingo in *The Animals in That Country*, and Moses and Mammut in *Mammoth*—which function as "contact zone[s]" that make the ethical stakes of human-animal entanglements palpable.<sup>2</sup> These relationships also operate as "localizing figures" for the "hyperobject" of climate change, transforming "abstract space" into "local place."<sup>3</sup> By prioritising relationality, these narratives construct ethical engagement that embraces shared vulnerabilities across species. Animal communication operates across diverse genre modes, from realism to the speculative. It integrates animal behaviour, gaze, voice, and empathetic human-animal relationships and attempts to depict animals not as passive victims of injustice but as beings with consciousness and affective states. By portraying animals as agents of moral and semiotic significance, these novels foreground the ethical implications of harm and expose the systemic violence embedded in industrial and cultural practices. In each novel, animal death functions as a recurring motif: whether through extinction, hunting, or incidental harm, these deaths crystallise the limits of human care and force readers to confront the ethical weight of both human and animal mortality. By centring human-animal relationality through animal communication, each novel centres ethical responsibility and the moral complexities of coexistence.

Jeff Sebo's argument in *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves* for including "animals in health and environmental advocacy and policy" resonates strongly with this thesis.<sup>4</sup> As Sebo contends, reducing harm to animals is integral to addressing climate change. This aligns with Robles' call for a "politics of reading" that amplifies

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<sup>1</sup> Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Prickly Paradigm, 2003), 7; Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 36.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Duke University Press, 2019), 135, 142; Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) 1.

<sup>4</sup> Jeff Sebo, *Saving Animals, Saving Ourselves: Why Animals Matter for Pandemics, Climate Change, and Other Catastrophes* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 6–7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190861018.001.0001>.

the voices of animals that are already present in literature but often go unheard.<sup>5</sup> Robles' call to make animals "audible as speaking beings" supports my thesis's focus on animal communication as a literary strategy that grants moral significance to animals.<sup>6</sup> Through animal communication, these novels advocate for the inclusion of animals in ethical, moral, and political frameworks, reframing coexistence as a shared responsibility. These novels also bear witness to the violence inflicted on animals by human systems of exploitation. Importantly, they do so not only through representations of harm in life but also through depictions of animal death that insist on mortality as a site of ethical encounter with the individual creature, not merely a metaphorical symbol of human concern. Responding to Alice Crary and Lori Gruen's critique of institutionalised violence in *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory*, I have observed how novels reckon with cultural and industrial practices that obscure the suffering of animals and perpetuate moral indifference.<sup>7</sup> Crary and Gruen advocate for reconnecting reasoning with emotion to reveal values distorted by capitalist and political formations.<sup>8</sup> This thesis draws on the etymology of "communication" (from *communicare*, meaning "to share") to argue that animal communication not only represents animals and their experiences of harm but also fosters a shared ethical space.<sup>9</sup> Each novel employs animal communication and empathetic human-animal relationships to highlight exploitative, violent systems, including colonialism and capitalism. The relational dynamics depicted in these novels resonate with Isabelle Stengers' concept of cosmopolitics, as referenced by Haraway, which resists "the fantasy of transparent and innocent communication" and instead "remain[s] exposed to consequences" and "entangle[ed]" in complexity.<sup>10</sup> They reject simplistic portrayals of human-animal relationships, instead exposing broader webs of accountability and consequence within predator reintroduction, as seen in *Once There Were Wolves*, industrial agriculture, as seen in *The Animals in That Country*, and species commodification, as seen in *Mammoth*. By crafting narratives where animals "look ... back" and demand recognition in diverse communicative ways, these texts demonstrate the ethical possibilities of literature, exemplifying how representations of animal agency and multispecies accountability challenge anthropocentric paradigms.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars have critiqued novels that "conceal ... the real," either by downplaying the realities of climate change or by glossing over the violent legacies of colonialism.<sup>12</sup> Kirne and Potter observe that some contemporary Australian settler writers address climate change without confronting the realities of colonialism.<sup>13</sup> However, the authors examined in this thesis recruit animals as focal points to create

<sup>5</sup> Mario Ortiz Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (Routledge, 2016), 14, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315880389>.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. Julie Rose (Polity Press, 2011), 4; Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 144.

<sup>7</sup> Alice Crary and Lori Gruen, *Animal Crisis: A New Critical Theory* (Polity Press, 2022), 27–28.

<sup>8</sup> Crary and Gruen, *Animal Crisis*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> "Communication," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed November 23, 2024, [https://www.oed.com/dictionary/communication\\_n?tab=etymology](https://www.oed.com/dictionary/communication_n?tab=etymology).

<sup>10</sup> Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 106; Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, ed. Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (The MIT Press, 2005), 994–1003.

<sup>11</sup> Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway*, 140.

<sup>12</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 23, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Jack Kirne and Emily Potter, "Settler Belonging in Crisis: Non-Indigenous Australian Literary Climate Fiction and the Challenge of 'The New,'" *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 30, no. 4 (2023): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isab085>.

emotionally charged encounters that expose intertwined legacies of colonial violence and environmental harm. By linking capitalist modernity and settler colonialism to climate change, novels such as *Limberlost* and *Once There Were Wolves* challenge ideological frameworks that justify resource extraction and settler narratives of abundance. *The Octopus and I* critiques how humans treat nature as both a resource and a repository for their own ambitions. These texts reject the “cornucopian myth” which envisions nature as an inexhaustible reserve for human exploitation.<sup>14</sup> Arnott and Hortle acknowledge the ecological wisdom of First Nations peoples, which situates humans as custodians rather than conquerors of the land. However, while Arnott’s treatment of this wisdom and settler colonial legacies remains potentially problematic, Hortle more successfully navigates the complexities between idealised environmental stewardship and real-world practices. By intertwining narratives of species extinction and environmental harm with critiques of colonial and capitalist systems, these authors reveal how destructive ideologies perpetuate both ecological harm and ethical indifference.

These novels illustrate how a range of generic modes, from the realist Bildungsroman to speculative comedy, can meaningfully engage with climate change. The thesis’s movement from realism to speculative fiction highlights the diversity of strategies through which contemporary authors are narrativising animal communication. Arnott’s novel operates within the realist tradition, grounding human-animal relationships in historical and ecological specificity without employing anthropomorphism. Hortle integrates avant-garde poetics to include animal voices in an otherwise realist narrative of self-discovery. McConaghy’s novel strays further from realism by employing synaesthesia as a speculative and melodramatic mode of animal communication. McKay and Flynn push these boundaries even further, literalising animal communication through speculative scenarios that destabilise anthropocentric assumptions, aligning with what Sherryl Vint describes as the speculative “motif of consciousness projection” as they reconfigure human-nonhuman relations by centring the voices of the nonhuman.<sup>15</sup> Each example of animal communication in these novels effectively reimagines ethical responsibilities within a shared ecological web. I have argued that realism and speculative fiction prove *equally* effective in facilitating animal communication, shaping how animals are represented, and the ethical implications of these encounters. Whether grounded in realism’s material specificity or the speculative’s imaginative extrapolations, these novels demonstrate the versatility of animal communication as a narrative device. This underscores literature’s capacity to navigate the ethical challenges of the Anthropocene, offering new ways to understand accountability and care in a multispecies world. This thesis has addressed the central questions posed at the outset: how literature can represent animal agency, how genre mediates our capacity to perceive and respond to ecological crisis, and how narrative conventions themselves orient us ethically toward the nonhuman. By tracing these questions across a spectrum of Australian novels, I have shown how animal communication operates as both a narrative strategy and an

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<sup>14</sup> Greg Garrard, “Futures: The Earth” in *Ecocriticism* (Second edition), (Routledge, 2012), 161, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203806838>.

<sup>15</sup> Sherryl Vint, “Without the Right Words It’s Hard to Retain Clarity: Speculative Fiction and Animal Narrative,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*, ed. Susan McHugh, John Miller, and Robert McKay (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 500, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39773-9\\_35](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39773-9_35).

ethical practice, foregrounding the role of literature in reimagining multispecies coexistence in the Anthropocene.

Ultimately, this thesis contends that animal communication highlights literature's capacity to bear witness to ecological harm. As represented in these novels, care is rarely straightforward but is entangled with conflict and ethical ambiguity, particularly in multispecies contexts where ethical responsibilities to one being or community may come at the expense of another. By analysing human-animal interactions as catalysts for ethical reflections, I uphold a multispecies approach that acknowledges the interconnected "ecologies of selves" in our world.<sup>16</sup> This framework mirrors the ripple effects discussed in chapter two, capturing the expansive consequences of human-animal encounters. The ripple metaphor accommodates diverse ethical outcomes and aligns with anti-colonial perspectives, emphasising entangled histories of harm. These novels invite us to imagine what it is to live ethically in a world of shared being, embedded within the tapestry of relationships linking humans, animals, and ecosystems. As van Dooren asserts, "[w]hile we may all ultimately be connected to one another, the specificity and proximity of connections matter."<sup>17</sup> These novels invite us to confront the ethical stakes of specific, embodied connections, highlighting the value of animal communication as a generative stylistic tool and a tool of ethical enquiry.

#### Future Directions for Research

Further research may extend the analysis of animal communication beyond contemporary Australian fiction into global climate literatures, tracing how diverse cultural contexts frame cross-species ethics. Comparative work with First Nations' storytelling traditions could highlight alternative communicative frameworks grounded in custodianship and reciprocity within the epistemological framework of Country. Future studies might also investigate how hyper-contemporary literature develops animal communication as an aesthetic and an ethical strategy, particularly given the accelerating prominence of ecological storytelling in a context of climate crisis. Attention to genre experimentation is especially productive here: writers are increasingly deploying hybrid forms to reconceptualise voices that exceed the human and to recalibrate narrative epistemologies, enabling readers to perceive nonhuman agency, multispecies entanglement, and temporal scales of extinction and recovery.

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<sup>16</sup> van Dooren et al., "Multispecies Studies," 3.

<sup>17</sup> Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 60.

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