

**Nesting:**  
**The ecofeminist imaginary in Inga Simpson's *Nest***  
**and its English proto-ecofeminist beginnings**

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## ABSTRACT

In this thesis I will argue that an ecofeminist imaginary has been producing narratives in English women's writing since the late seventeenth century and continues in the work of contemporary Australian writer, Inga Simpson. For centuries this imaginary has developed insight into how the entrenched patriarchal system has devalued women, nature and other Others. A brief historical overview discusses four connected areas: first, that an ecofeminist imaginary exists; secondly, that it is represented in the writing and literature of/by English women before and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; thirdly, that it complicated the culturally acceptable notions of women and/in nature; fourthly, that it made possible new forms of narration for women. These modes of writing about the natural world were transported by early White settler women to Australia, where certain entrenched approaches to nature were perpetuated in aid of the colonial project and resulted in colonial anxieties such as the lost child. A unique historical perspective is provided by linking the English proto-ecofeminist writing to Inga Simpson's novel *Nest*. Simpson's writing invites us to re-examine our own relationship with the nonhuman both in our contemporary actions and our relationship to the histories that have produced it. In her narrating of protagonist Jen's connection to the surrounding bush and its more-than-human life forms she creates a transontological space in order to narrate the results of human incursion and to suggest ways of mitigation through a non-dominative action and language. Simpson's work rests in the continuum of the ecofeminist imaginary, demonstrating how it has been produced over time, from what it is constituted, and how it has been sustained.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

The work of fiction that is the subject of this thesis, *Nest* by Inga Simpson (2014), is set on the land traditionally owned by the Gubbi Gubbi people of south-east Queensland.

I would like to acknowledge the Gubbi Gubbi people as First Nations people of the land and pay deep respects to the Lore and Elders of that mob, past and present and future. I acknowledge that Gubbi Gubbi land always will be the country of the Traditional Custodians, the elders and their Lore.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This acknowledgement of country is advised by “proud young Wurundjeri and Ngurai Illum Wurrung woman” Georgia Mae Capocchi-Hunter on the Foundation for Young Australians website. Capocchi-Hunter suggests I further acknowledge that invasion and colonisation has occurred, and that “in spite of that, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to survive and thrive” (Capocchi-Hunter).

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To my wife, Yvette Walker, thank you for everything, always.

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To the nameless west coast demon, thanks for nothing.

To Dr. Inga Simpson, thank you for writing the books that encouraged me to write this thesis. I hope my writing honours yours.

I wish to acknowledge Liz Stone from Shepston Editing Services for her help proofreading the final draft of the thesis.

## ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material, which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

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11<sup>th</sup> November 2020

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Date

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*The birds hopped and sang and flitted in the leaf light, oblivious to her 'epic fail' as Henry would call it. Light in the canopy had been one of her favourite subjects for a time, seeking to see what the birds saw, a world of dappled shades and whispering breezes.*

*For all her years of striving to see like a bird, be like a bird, in the end she was only a lumpy human. And not an especially gifted one at that. She was barely coping on the ground, let alone going to fly, and there was nothing as sad as a bird without wings.*

INGA SIMPSON, *NEST*

## Chapter One — The Proto Ecofeminist Imaginary in English Women's Writing of the 17th to 19th Centuries

From 1780–1870, a period marked by major political, technological, and cultural changes, the domesticated landscape was central to women's complex negotiation of private and public life. Women writers and artists used the subject matter of gardens and plants to educate their audience, to enter into political and cultural debates, particularly around issues of gender and class, and to signal moments of intellectual and spiritual insight (Page and Smith 1).

This thesis is undertaken in the spirit of what ecofeminist scholars Greta Gaard, Simon Estok and Serpil Opperman call an “intervention, however slight, into the ongoing cultural narrative authorizing the plunder of the planet—the people, animals, living beings and ecosystems” (15). In *International Perspectives on Feminist Ecocriticism*, Gaard et al. remind us that such a counter-narrative would be non-phallogocentric and non-anthropocentric. It would need to foster “an ontological understanding of ethics...and promote[s] an ecological-feminist discourse of hope and change” (2). Any addition to this counter-narrative or intervention would acknowledge:

...a continuation and expansion of feminist environmental conversations that began long ago and have survived, despite being variously muffled, muted, marginalized, appropriated without acknowledgement or, conversely, wholly ignored (Gaard et al.)

In this chapter, I provide insights into early moments of the above-mentioned feminist environmental conversation, suggesting that it has been active for centuries. I read back further than the above-described context of mid- to late twentieth century, in order to explore how the ecofeminist imaginary has over the centuries worked in women's writing and to suggest ideas regarding its origins and development. I locate literary spaces in which women writers narrated their relationship with the natural environment to the degree that the development of an imaginary is signified.

These historical insights are considered from an ecofeminist perspective in order to propose the existence of an ecofeminist imaginary that grows in scale and complexity. The period under scrutiny, although threads can be traced back to biblical narrative, takes particular

shape throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and continues to the present day. I shall detail this development by positing four connected areas: first, that an ecofeminist imaginary exists; secondly, that it is represented in the writing and literature of/by English women before and during the eighteenth century; thirdly, that it complicated the culturally acceptable notions of women and/in nature; and fourthly, that it made possible new forms of narration for women. These modes of writing about the natural world were transported by early White settler women to Australia, where certain entrenched approaches to nature were perpetuated in aid of the colonial project. I do acknowledge the problematics of using the terms White and settler. In *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-bush Myth*, Elspeth Tilley provides an overview of the terms' uses and applications, citing various scholars and concluding that the term White settler signifies the invasion and occupation "by which theft of the continent from its Indigenous owners was established and legitimated" (17). Tilley also explains her use of white to refer to "nationalized cultural images and identities circulated and perpetuated in the name of all Australian [while it does not] refer to any actual person or group of persons" (17). Tilley uses lower case, but in this thesis the word is capitalised to denote Whiteness as race. The term postcolonial will be approached in a later chapter.

The question under scrutiny in this chapter is: Does a reading of these texts illuminate a continuum that contributes to the ecofeminist literary imaginary? The answer will be extrapolated by questioning how the ecofeminist imaginary functions in relevant writing by women, how it has been produced over time, from what it is constituted, and how it is sustained. I argue that the early essentialist tendencies to gender nature as woman and woman as nature led women to develop not only a unique appreciation of the nonhuman world, but also unique forms of narrating it. I touch lightly on writers who may be separated by time but whose intent seems to be based in common ground. The authors under discussion are Margaret Cavendish, Hannah More, Priscilla Wakefield, Jane Loudon and Elizabeth Gaskell.

### **Ecofeminism and the imaginary: The ecofeminist imaginary**

It is helpful perhaps to set out the context in which I use the terms ecofeminist and imaginary. *Ecofeminism* was named as such by Françoise d'Eaubonne, writing in a 1974 feminist context, while anti-nuclear activities and various ecocritical perspectives were developing (including, but not limited to Adams; d'Eaubonne; Glotfelty and Harold; Mellor; Merchant; Plumwood;

Warren).<sup>2</sup> In one of the first explicitly ecofeminist texts, *New Woman, New Earth* (1975), feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether wrote:

Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socioeconomic relations as the underlying values of this [contemporary industrialised] society (204).

Similar thought is expressed by other foundational ecofeminist scholars of the late twentieth century who elaborated ideas of dominative and non-dominative modes of being and expression. Typical theorising includes an analysis of the enduring hierarchical dualisms that enable human domination of nature – body/spirit, nature (woman)/culture (man), science/nature, human/nonhuman – and although they will be referred to in a contemporary context in the following chapters, I demonstrate in what follows here that these dualisms have been debated by women in writing since the seventeenth century.

First I will introduce the term *imaginary* and how I shall use it in this thesis. As many scholars have pointed out, the imaginary is a much-used and over-simplified term (Braga; Cegarra; Dews; Strauss) that can have unruly leakages of meaning when used in an interdisciplinary sense, which is the case here. My use of the term tends towards the anthropological sense of accepted cultural beliefs or a shared mental life (Strauss) but is more so informed by Gilbert Durand, who worked almost entirely on the social and anthropological imaginary (Durand). I do not mean it entirely as a social imaginary (Castoriadis; Taylor), but I do mean it as a repository for the circulation of ideas, histories and beliefs pertaining to broad categories; for example, when a heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham) or a more specific category such as the Douglal imaginary (Mehta) or ecological imaginary (Morton 2010) are theorised. While the notion of an imaginary, any imaginary – Western (Whitford), social (Gaonkar; Taylor)

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<sup>2</sup> Greta Gaard has a list of texts in *New Directions for Ecofeminism*. They are “what could be described as canonical works of feminist ecocriticism—Kolodny's *The Lay of the Land* (1975) and *The Land Before Her* (1984); Norwood's *Made from This Earth: American Women and Nature* (1993); Murphy's *Literature, Nature, Other: Ecofeminist Critiques* (1995); Westling's *The Green Breast of the New World* (1996); Gates's *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World* (1997); Stein's *Shifting the Ground: American Women Writers' Revisions of Nature, Gender, and Race* (1997); Gaard and Murphy's *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism* (1998); Alaimo's *Undomesticated Ground* (2000)”.

Chicana (Perez), authorial (Bachelard), Ophelia (Rodriga), orthodox social (Dey and Mason), female (Campbell; Harris; Whitford; Ziarek), White national imaginary (Moreton-Robinson) and so on – may appear to condense an area of discussion by reducing it to a simplistic label, in effect the opposite pertains. The process of collecting an area of thought and imagination, whether vast or not so vast, while capturing it under the single term or function, does offer a useful foundation and frame of reference. Because an imaginary both captures and produces an ongoing cycle of representation, signification, meaning and language, it is a foundational social and cultural mechanism.

### **The proto-ecofeminist imaginary in and before the eighteenth century**

Although there is considerable scholarship on women and science in the eighteenth century – astronomy, chemistry, telescoping, microscopy – there is little scholarship on women writing about nature prior to the nineteenth century and even less that places such writing in relation to recent ecofeminist thought (Snook 244). In fact, according to Sam George in *Botany, Sexuality and Women's Writing, 1760–1830*, it has been all but ignored (180). There are important proto-feminist writings as early as the seventeenth century.<sup>3</sup> In 1611, John Donne expressed a view of women that, according to Helen Wilcox, “sums up succinctly” what was put forward by “countless other texts” as the “inheritance of Eve”:

One woman at one blow, then kill'd us all,  
And singly, one by one, they kill us now (331).

Given the social, political, cultural and of course religious framework that supported this world view, Wilcox asks and answers: “Is it really feasible to speak of any kind of protofeminism in this period, let alone feminist literary criticism? I would firmly suggest that it is possible to discover both” (Wilcox). Whilst qualifying her assertion by saying it was not a time of protofeminist gains, Wilcox suggests that for women to be writing *at all* was a presumption and I would add that it constitutes a form of resistance. At a time when “author” was a term ascribed to God or claimed by a man, the notion of a woman writer required apologies, demurrals and provisos. Anne Finch wrote in 1690:

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<sup>3</sup> Aughterson defines and discusses proto-feminisms in her *Renaissance Women: A Handbook* (255).

Alas! a woman that attempts the Pen,  
Such an intruder on the rights of men,  
Such a presumptuous Creature, is esteem'd,  
The fault, can by no vertue be redeem'd. (459).

Says Wilcox, “This boldness – or, from another perspective, lack of ‘vertue’ – in an early modern woman writer is precisely what we might term feminist initiative” (ibid). Sarah Ross provides further perspective in *The Birth of Feminism*:

We now know that hundreds of [Renaissance period] women across the European landscape were active contributors to culture, and we suspect that a significant change occurred in the definition of “womanhood” as well, which leaves us wondering how far back we might trace feminism’s pedigree as an idea, if not a coherent political philosophy (2).

To trace feminism back “as an idea”, there is a route called the Western female imaginary. This imaginary originates in the narration of the genesis of the first garden, its humans and all living things. Whether these events are regarded as fact, allegory, didactic story or myth, all are constituents of the Western Christian imaginary — although many scholars offer fact-based explanations for *What Really Happened in the Garden of Eden* (Ziony). The significance to this thesis is that the two imaginaries of the Western female and the Western Christian have been complicit in constructing one of the dominant narratives of the West; that is, the Eden narrative, the “mainstream narrative of Western culture” and “perhaps the most important mythology humans have developed to make sense of their relationship to the earth” (Merchant 2003 2).

In order to posit a starting point for an ecofeminist imaginary that produces English women’s writing about nature, a similar chronology functions,<sup>4</sup> for it is the Eden narrative that largely determined how Christian power structures determine how people should relate to each other and to the nonhuman. The Eden narrative, if not a starting point per se, is inherent to an ecofeminist imaginary. Various scholars have pointed to this at work since the medieval period.

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<sup>4</sup> Greta Gaard ascribes the unused but quoted term “early palimpsests of ecofeminist thought” to Laurence Buell. This is cited in Margarita Carretero Gonzales’s “Cassandra’s Cry: Mary Wollstonecraft’s Universal Ecofeminist Praxis.” *Feminismo/s*, vol. 22, diciembre 2013, 225–249.

Mary Wroth's *Urania* (1621) is set in an Edenic forest and mourns the loss of a green world (Larson). Rebecca Merrens points to Margaret Cavendish's poetic-scientific writing, in 1665, of *The Philosophical and Physical Opinions* as a theory of nature being comprised of eternal matter (Merrens). Catriona Sandilands also links Cavendish with a developing ecofeminist consciousness in *Blazing World* (Sandilands 2017). Silvia Bowerbank credits Cavendish with "originating a sensibility that we might call ecological" (62). Bowerbank also offers a detailed study of how English women writers (Mary Wroth, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Wollstonecraft, Anna Seward and others) negotiated the legacy of Jacobean debates of "the woman question" by "negotiating their place within the broader discourse on nature and humanity's changing relationship to it" (4). Mary Crone-Romanovski offers a reading of the literary garden in the work of Aphra Behn and Elizabeth Singer-Rowe to theorise that the use of the garden in women's amatory fiction of the early eighteenth century constructed "new narrative possibilities for dramatizing women's experiences" (133). Works such as Singer-Rowe's *Friendship in Death* (1728) and Eliza Haywood's *Love In Excess* (1719) re-appropriate the garden not just as a social and creative space that figures women's desire but one that allows "dynamic female protagonists" (Crone-Romanovski 134) the expression of reason and discourse.

In the eighteenth century, botanical texts, botanical illustrations, plant collecting, gardening, garden design and children's books were all produced by women and on a large, commercial scale. This developing ecofeminist consciousness is exemplified by Priscilla Wakefield, who was writing in the early eighteenth century when it was common for girls of the higher classes to be educated at home. Wakefield effectively wrote the matrix that intended to prime young female minds for a viewpoint receptive to seeing the nonhuman world a certain way. Her *An Introduction to Botany in a Series of Familiar Letters* went through eleven editions and various translations. The prologue alludes to many concerns of the ecofeminist imaginary: the gendering of nature, the gendering of science, the relationship of women to nature, the education of young women, and the proper conduct of young women.

Wakefield's *oeuvre* illustrates why an ecofeminist perspective can productively be applied to this botanical branch of late Georgian and early Victorian writing. It is largely because the writers are doing what ecofeminists do — questioning the linguistic devices that describe man, woman, science, nature and the relationship of each to each other. We tend, as Rochelle Johnson says, "to divide and separate the aspects of our world by means of language" (vi) in order to impose a sense of control and order. It was by contributing to this particularly "untidy dichotomy" (ibid), in this case the Linnaean system of plant classification, that Priscilla Wakefield

gave women access to a body of natural history that had been previously denied them — unless they knew Latin — and made a significant addition to the “feminised discourse of botany” (George 2007 1). Sam George says in *Linnaeus in Letters and the Cultivation of the Female Mind: Botany in an English Dress*:

In the eighteenth century many botanical texts were specifically addressed to the female sex. The language and arguments of botany, centring around reproduction and sexuality, experience and science, classification and order, introspective solitude and public debate, become inextricably implicated in arguments about women's intellectual and moral faculties and their general social status (2005 1).

Wakefield is George's pre-eminent example, not only of a woman who became educated enough to translate “erudite” (masculine) English texts — possibly by virtue of her fine Quaker education (Hill) — but also one who seized the opportunity offered when Linnaeus's hugely influential series of botanical classification was translated from Latin to English. This enabled her to popularise that translation for a non-scientific commercial readership; that is; women and children. Her introduction to her *Introduction to Botany* is illuminating in its awareness of (and reflexive deference to) the status quo that “defended” itself against an “approach” from women:

Botany is a branch of Natural History that possesses many advantages; it contributes to health of body and cheerfulness of disposition, by presenting an inducement to take air and exercise; it is adapted to the simplest capacity [etc] but with all these allurements, till of late years, it has been confined to the circle of the learned, which may be attributed to those books that treat of it, being principally written in Latin; a difficulty that deterred many, particularly the female sex, from attempting to obtain the knowledge of a science, thus defended, as it were, from their approach. [But since its translation to English] it is now considered as a necessary addition to an accomplished education — May it become a substitute for some of the trifling, not to say pernicious, objects that too frequently occupy the leisure of young ladies of fashionable manners (1796).

So while it is true to say that botany was singled out to act as an antidote to “feminine faults such as idleness and frivolity” (George 2007 52), ironically, because the structure of society of the time rested on its ideas about the structure of nature, women's *nature* was naturally aligned with “Nature”. Thus, while Wakefield is promoting the entry of women into other branches of science, albeit “without destroying the peculiar characteristics of their sex” (Wakefield 2015 6), in

fact she is complicit in upholding the gendered binaries that she is at the same time questioning, so, as George puts it, “Whilst she is committed to the cultivation of female minds and the development of female reason, she delimits this with many gender- and class-specific boundaries”(2007 57).

The boundaries relating to women in Wakefield's time have of course been theorised across many disciplines. In terms of an ecofeminist imaginary, they can be seen to rest on the dual subjugation of women and nature. The subjugation has roots in the intersection of women-science-religion-Nature-nature as determined by the Church and its leaders. For the centuries preceding and following the French Revolution (which I here use as a convenient marker between pre-enlightenment and post-enlightenment thought), scientific thought was grounded in theology. This is detailed in a specific manner in Carolyn Merchant's extensive work on Sir Francis Bacon which, in turn, has informed several studies of the relationship between Nature, early modern science and women (Edwards; Hiltner; McColley). Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* describes the scientific revolution, through a revisionist reading of the grand narrative as “one in which women, far from participating in a general movement of liberation and progress, found themselves increasingly subordinated and excluded from economic and political power” (Park 488). The period of the scientific revolution is characterised by Merchant as a rejection of values that privileged an idealised attitude to patriarchy and were often framed in religious terms. *The Death of Nature* puts forward the “rich, energetic, and provocative argument” (490) that the band of heroes, from Copernicus to Newton, turned the Western world view of nature as God's work into a nature governed by mathematical law:

Instead of liberating the human mind and laying the foundations for general human happiness, it both reflected and encouraged the continued and increasing subjection of women and the exploitation of the natural world. Rejecting the respectful metaphor of nature as a benevolent and nurturing mother, it replaced this personification with a new one, of nature as an indifferent, destructive, and uncontrollable woman; this idea drew on and magnified deep currents of misogyny that underpinned the European witch trials, which reached their height in the century following the publication of Copernicus's *De revolutionibus orbium celestium* in 1543 (Merchant 490).

Merchant would have us recognise that the modern world has been produced at the expense of a fatal exploitation of the natural world — gendered female — that is endorsed by

science, religion and capitalism. Representations of women and nature, each conflated into the other, have endured not in spite of the scientific revolution but because of it.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a set of ideas emerged that became central to the possibility of reinventing Eden on earth. The construction of a secular narrative of Recovery through Enlightenment was based on a particular set of assumptions about nature and society. The state of nature was a fallen world typically and wholly represented by the singular female pronoun. Sir Francis Bacon, essential character in the grand narrative of the scientific revolution, is an effective exemplar of this durability. Citing Merchant, Katherine Park criticises Bacon's system of knowledge for being based on a "coercive relationship between male enquirer and female nature, expressed in metaphors of marital discipline, inquisition and rape" (488). In a defence of Merchant, Park details how a pre-Enlightenment respectful metaphor of nature as "benevolent and caring mother" was replaced, after Bacon, with a personification of nature "as an indifferent, destructive and uncontrollable woman", a misogynistic view that "ultimately produced the view of nature associated with the mechanical philosophy of Descartes, Hobbes, and others, who described it as a machine composed of lifeless, passive matter" (489). Both views legitimise and even welcome man's dominion and ownership. This is a misogynistic logic that has been subscribed to as an ideology of science as the masculine (Keller), legitimised to hold power over nature as woman and power over women as nature. Stacy Alaimo puts it well in *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*:

The dual meanings of nature converge at the site of woman, fixing her in a vortex of circular arguments: woman is closer to nature and is thus inferior; woman is inferior because nature has made her so. Perhaps it is the misogynistic logic of this formulation that obscures the contradictory meanings of the term "nature", which is subordinate to Man, and yet contains Man's truths (2000 3).

However, the texts and ideologies that uphold the misogynistic logic were at least, if not appropriated, then complicated by the women writers of the late eighteenth century who produced didactic texts to instruct women in happiness, conduct, gender performance and natural history. The work of Priscilla Wakefield again serves as exemplar.

### **An ecofeminist imaginary complicates culturally acceptable notions of women and/in nature**

In addition to her botanical texts, in 1804 Wakefield published a significant work of travel writing, *Family Tour Through the British Empire*. According to Jacqueline Labbe, Wakefield's book has an important point of difference in comparison to travel writing by other female authors of the time, such as Maria Riddell, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Wollstonecraft and Dorothy Wordsworth. Unlike these writers, Wakefield manages, while vacillating between masculine generalisation and feminine detail, appearing not to be a tourist at all, absenting herself from certain masculine activities such as climbing, hiking, digging and being subject to various feminine impediments — skirts, feminine weakness, an expected array of gendered physical barriers — to deliver her narration with such authority that she willingly sacrifices the prospect view. The prospect view is not necessarily the highest accessible by man but it is hard-won, magnificent and by virtue of that higher perspective, general. The wider view does not, says Labbe, see detail. This high, general versus detailed view, often denoting ownership, is what genders the prospect view as male and in Wakefield's family tour, the man and boys often "take" the prospect (they climb/go to it, deny the women access) and then tell the women all about it. In contrast, the female position is grounded in the dales, valleys and gardens (2000 40). This denotes lower status, but it positively affords women a perspective that comes from being on lower ground amongst the greenery, where an interested, engaged, educative and *specific* view is afforded. Wakefield thus leaves the prospect view to the men while she engages in the important business of writing about detail.

Traditionally, the detail that women found existing in nature was to do with historical knowledge of the cultivation, propagation and properties of medicinal and culinary plants whereas by the late eighteenth century "aesthetic or scientific considerations were more prominent" (Page and Smith 173). Thus, it might more properly be said that the higher ground and the prospect view was not so much out of the reach of women, but rather they claimed the lower ground and prospected in a different manner:

A woman sees the world, as it were, from a little elevation in her own garden, whence she takes an exact survey of home scenes, but takes not in that wider range of distant prospects, which he who stands on a loftier eminence commands (More 2007 437).

This is a typically proscriptive passage from Hannah More. It clearly outlines the limiting circumscription of woman's place within the domestic sphere; that is, the house and garden. For

well-to-do eighteenth-century women, being in the garden it would seem, meant reading, sewing, teaching and learning. Many of them, as did More herself, actually *gardened*. Other didactic writers (male and female) may have taught that in the domestic space women should be purely ornamental and without function but More argued against the decorative in women, whether to do with physical appearance or accomplishment. More's *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education* (1809) was influential in advocating a broad and practical education for girls rather than "finger accomplishments" (429), by which she meant pursuits such as needlework, drawing and piano. In notions of cultivation of learning, Hannah More was subtle, suggesting notions of assisted growth, and in this "More intends her conduct books to be the twine binding the fragile young plants to its trellis; in fact, her advice not only binds but provides the support: it is twine *and* trellis." (Labbe 1998 72) But, says Kathryn Gleadle, "Such an attitude while encouraging a progression in social perspectives on women, nevertheless cocooned them within conventional expectations of their characters and roles" (26).

Mary Wollstonecraft recommended gardening as a mental stimulus that would exercise the mind. "Gardening, experimental philosophy, and literature, would afford them subjects to think of and matter for conversation, that in some degree would exercise their understandings" (59). She also advocates the strengthening of body as well as mind (21) lest women, "made amiable by this weakness, made entirely dependent ... fragile in every sense of the word [are thus] obliged to look up to man for every comfort" (48). The fact that the writers of the didactic texts on the one hand promoted the cultivation of young women mainly in order for them to be good Christian wives and mothers while on the other nudging at certain gendered boundaries ("girls deserve a wider education") has been problematised at length by feminist scholars.

Much of women's published writing in the late eighteenth century was in the discourses of natural history, natural theology and proto-science, discourses that structured "woman" according to the series of misogynistic and gendered binaries upheld by religion and politics as generally described above. Some writers introduced complications that subverted dominant religious beliefs of, for example, man's superiority over nature. Mary Wollstonecraft proposed a "universal benevolence towards all creatures" (Carretero Gonzales), while Charlotte Smith's poetry is exemplary of the naturalist-poet who "in the absence of names and orders ... gazes in sympathetic identification with the unidentified" (Bailes 143). Women who, like Priscilla Wakefield, travelled throughout Empire and wrote about it, are beyond the scope of this thesis, although Australia will be referenced in the latter part of this chapter. To name just two non-Australian examples: Lady Henrietta, wife of Clive of India, botanised while he Clived, and Mrs

Rachel Jameson collected over 500 species from South Africa's Cape where her husband was a deputy medical inspector with the Royal Navy (Horwood). But the female body and its "rightful" place within the home — an idea as old as Aristotle (Vickery) — putting aside the travelling and botanising women written about by Wakefield and others, is possibly best discussed in the context of narrating the garden: designing, cultivating, planting, propagating and distributing the products thereof.

Susan Groag Bell, in "Women Create Gardens in Male Landscapes", says although women were largely excluded from designing the grander landscape and park gardens, they were very active as makers of gardens (471). Perhaps, she suggests, it is because of the obsession with "that magnificent eighteenth-century English male creation" — the landscape garden. Or perhaps it is because their efforts were better spent elsewhere, engaging in different forms of aesthetics and production because, deep down — and here Bell cites Margaret Cavendish — they knew they were the "movable goods" destined to be married and sent off to "some other *man's* ground" (473). By the mid-nineteenth century, "some other *man's* ground" had assumed vast new meaning as the British Empire continued to expand. In a geographical sense alone, this required the props of scientific discourse — mapping, labelling, claiming and appropriating.

**The ecofeminist imaginary made possible new forms of narration for women; transported to aid the colonial project**

In the early nineteenth century, the Linnaean system of botanical classification, as translated from the Latin by Priscilla Wakefield and popularised for English and other language speakers, was the standard introduction for two generations. By 1850, Wakefield's work, as well as its associated home and family-based study, had been appropriated by the new science of botany that had been advocated by John Lindley, who was the first professor of botany at London University (1829–60). Lindley's campaign to reclaim botany from women was, according to Anne Shteir in *Cultivating Women*, typical of "exclusionary practices of self-defining elites [which] are a powerful and poignant part of the history of women and botanical culture":

In Lindley's formulation the Linnaean system was not only polite knowledge, but knowledge for women — amusement for ladies. By contrast, Lindley's botany will be worthy of the attention of men of enlightened minds. His chosen mandate ... was to rescue botany for science, separating it from the realm of politeness and accomplishments that had for decades linked botany to women ... in favour of ... a new

man, a new kind of botanist, a scientific expert. ... Professionalization of botany meant its masculinization as well (155).

Women writers of natural history, having established a gender-acceptable role as sub-par scientists, needed to create new narrative models for young female readers who were (still) needing to be educated about the discourses on/of nature and women. Jane Loudon (1807–1858) had published an Egyptian Mummy novel and several books on botany, education and improvement when she wrote a fictionalised account of natural history and travel, actually writing herself *and* her daughter into a series of popular instructional books such as *Young Naturalist's Journey* (1840) and its re-issue as *The Young Naturalist; or, The Travels of Agnes Merton and her Mama* (1863). In the book, Mrs Merton and daughter Agnes travel around England *by train* (in itself, a rarity) visiting various menageries, zoos and parks. As Laurence Talairach-Vielmas says in *Fairy Tales, Natural History and Victorian Culture*, Agnes and Mama see more wild animals in their brief journey than most Victorians would see in a lifetime. And yet the point of the book, claims Talairach-Vielmas, is to educate readers about the perils of wildness and the need to tame our own animal instincts and appetites. Young Agnes, travelling with her mother and learning about the wonder and diversity of the natural world, is nevertheless being educated to embody values that have been prevalent for about a century, values to do with a nature separated from culture; nature as a ground for the moral instruction of young women and a boundary between “useful” domestication and a bestial, untameable wildness.

Jane Loudon was a peer of Elizabeth Gaskell. They were writing at the same time and were of similar age and social background. Gaskell wrote primarily fiction, while Loudon wrote fictionalised accounts of natural history and travel. Gaskell had daughters (whom she may have fictionalised) whereas Loudon, as I have just discussed, actually wrote herself and her daughter as Mrs Merton and Agnes. It is likely that these women had a good basic knowledge of Latin, the language of classification and naming (George; Martin) and were educated in natural science and history. Thus, Gaskell's own imaginary has as its production base the dichotomies of male/science, woman/nature that are essentialised at the heart of Victorian culture. In *Kindred Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World*, Barbara T. Gates describes the relationship between women and nature in the Victorian context. This context, their own class position and the role of science in culture are governors of the creative and professional environment of women writers:

Evolutionists, eugenicists, psychologists, anthropologists, educators, poets, and painters alike tended to confer on women attributes of the 'natural,' and the biological differences between men and women that prompted such cultural leaders to place women closer to nature often became the basis for their social definitions of womanhood. This kind of biological determinism was so widespread that it can serve as an index to an entire set of discourses that typify Victorian and later, Edwardian culture in terms of gender definition (12).

By contributing to the fictional narration of this biological determinism and the Darwinian revolution, Gaskell is assuming a creative role in the cultural production of nature which, although strongly influenced by (and personally linked by friendship to) Charles Darwin, is informed by and productive of, an ecofeminist imaginary.<sup>5</sup> Much has been written of Gaskell's analyses of class, the role of women, business, science, nature and her personal connection to Darwin. In her fiction women were, on the one hand, excluded from what men regarded as the "higher" sciences, whilst on the other being permitted to participate at "lesser" (and yet highly demanding and specialised) levels such as plant-collecting and painting, writing for children, illustration and on a further and yet more complicated hand they were embodied *as/within* discourse as the signifier of nature. Gaskell narrates these anomalies in two major works, *Mary Barton* and *Wives and Daughters*.

The subject of learned Latin-literate ladies raises an interesting narration of the conflation of science, class and gender in Gaskell's final novel *Wives and Daughters*, a return to one of the themes of *Mary Barton* (Coriale). In *Wives and Daughters*, Molly Gibson, the young protagonist, is driven into a faint when, on her first visit to Cunmor Towers, she is stunned unconscious by Lady Agnes's endless (and meaningless) repetition of Latin nomenclature for her precious plants and flowers. This representation of non-aristocratic women who are powerfully alienated by formal scientific discourses reveals the power of gender and class to determine together the

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of this thesis to cover various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century important works of fiction. For one such discussion, see Morteza Hajizadeh in *Ann Radcliffe and Mary Shelley: From Local to Global Ecology*, "Shelley's radical vision signifies a transformative politics of ecofeminism that addresses existing binaries which have been ideologically and socially fabricated and perpetuated in order to rationalize the marginalization of women and nature" (276).

boundaries of the “republic of science” (Coriale 362) and is narrated throughout both novels. As Gaskell is writing during the still-acquisitive and exploitative period of British colonial dominance, Lady Cunmor’s own pride of imported plants affords insight as to how the ecofeminist imaginary was both travelling with and responding to Empire. In *Mary Barton*, Mary and Jem go off to colonise Canada. In *Wives and Daughters*, it is possible that, had she lived to complete the novel, Gaskell *may* have chosen a similar direction for Molly who is now grown up, educated, opinionated and possibly keen, if not permitted, to accompany her husband, Roger Hamly. In our imaginations, if not hers, we may see her combing the plains of a distant land looking for plants, albeit at her husband’s side — and we are afforded this opportunity by the novel’s incomplete state, thereby accessing our own eco or nature or post-colonial or historical imaginary (Endersby).

Colonisation, as viewed through the lens of the ecofeminist imaginary, is itself founded on the view that nature and the landscape were, in the words of foundational US ecofeminist Annette Kolodny in *The Land Before Her*, “a feminine terrain apparently designed to gratify [male] desires”(5). On the colonised American continent, “the Euro-American woman seems to have been the unwilling inhabitant of a metaphorical landscape she had no part in creating — captive, as it were, in the garden of someone else’s imagination” (Kolodny 6). Kolodny succinctly captures the Eurocentric, androcentric, masculinist ideological justification for the colonising invasion of much of the planet and her insights are as applicable to Australia, which is the focus of the remainder of this thesis.

The Australian ecofeminist scholar Val Plumwood, in the opening words of her *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, lists the “four tectonic plates of liberation theory — [as] those concerned with the oppressions of gender, race, class and nature”(i). These are the oppressions disseminated by the colonial project and operative in Australia from the first invasion in 1788 until now, circulating within the ecofeminist imaginary as an ongoing problem. Plumwood is concerned with the urgent need to transform the responsible dominant economic and political institutions, particularly as enforced by the colonial project. Much of her later work has detailed how to “uncolonise” both human and more-than-human through identifying and dismantling what Plumwood and other ecofeminist scholars variously call the “logic” (Warren 1987) and “ontology” (Donovan 1996) of domination. Just as women in science were backgrounded by virtue of their supposed deficit of reason and rationality, says Plumwood, nature has also been backgrounded by science because it is less important than progress, and:

... the colonized are denied as the unconsidered background to “civilization”. They become the “other” whose prior ownership of the land and whose dispossession and murder is never spoken or admitted. Their trace in the land is denied, and they are represented as *inessential* because their land and their labour embodied in it are taken over as “nature” or as “wilderness”. Australian Aboriginal people, for example, were not seen as ecological agents, and their land was taken over as unoccupied, *terra nullius* (no-one’s land), while the heroic agency of white pioneers in “discovering”, clearing and transforming the land is celebrated (2003, 56).

To discuss this colonial tradition of overcoming, control and denial, this introduction now moves to contemporary Australia. Transported there by the colonising invasion, the Western mythico-religious tradition (Rigby 2015) that was carried by women as much as their masculine overlords, offers productive space for the ongoing expression of the ecofeminist imaginary. The next section will be situated in the ecofeminist theory of the twenty-first century, as produced in the work of contemporary Australian writer Inga Simpson. The section begins with a return to botanising women and colonial anxieties.

### **Introduction to Inga Simpson within a contemporary ecofeminist imaginary**

Inga Simpson’s own insights into the writing of colonial women in Australia are expressed in *Australian Nature Writing: A Literature of Landscape*, Simpson’s second PhD. After an early career in professional writing in the public service, Simpson did her first PhD, in creative writing, in 2010. The second dissertation is in English Literature/nature writing, completed in 2016. In it, Simpson puts forward an original perspective on colonial women writing about nature. She provides new insight into the work of nineteenth-century writers Louisa Meredith and locally born Louisa Atkinson. Both women figure in chapters devoted solely to them. Louisa Atkinson, argues Simpson, was one of the first Australian-born authors to develop both a local vernacular and local nature writing. In terms of this thesis, Louisa Atkinson serves as exemplar of how an ecofeminist imaginary, itself transported from England, was productive in the new colony:

I argue that her deliberate attempt to write about Australian landscapes, flora and fauna in plain and simple language for a local audience, without reference to England, saw her columns begin to catch the lyric of the country. Atkinson’s columns also demonstrate what would now be considered an ecological perspective, predicting widespread environmental change as a result of clearing and farming practices. Although now better

remembered as an illustrator, naturalist and novelist, I argue that Atkinson deserves greater recognition as a nature writer (Simpson 2016, 18).

Simpson also acknowledges Atkinson's largely overlooked role as an explorer. During an upbringing that resembles the plot of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, Atkinson, her three siblings and mother, Charlotte, were left fatherless and impoverished, forced to live in somewhat remote locales reliant on their (well-educated, published-author) mother to home-school them, which she did admirably. Atkinson, like her botanising female forebears, had an excellent grounding in natural history and enjoyed being close to nature. As a young adult, she would range over her surrounding area on horseback, often being the first colonist to do so, there "turning her attention to collecting specimens, and studying, drawing and writing about what she saw. Atkinson ventured off the beaten paths, travelling into rugged country alone on horseback, often for days at a time" (Simpson 2016, 112). At nineteen, Atkinson became the first Australian-born woman to write a column in a newspaper when her illustrated "Notes on the Months" appeared in the second issue of *The Illustrated Sydney News*. With a second column, "A Voice From The Country", it ran for two decades. Simpson's broader interest is in revealing the unique tone of Atkinson's voice while crediting her as one of the first writers to be "less confined by the perceptions and language of Europe – who would begin to develop a local vernacular, and write from what would now be considered an ecological perspective" (2016, 105). Simpson regards Atkinson as an important nature writer, not just because her columns are "rich with natural history information, personal accounts of nature based on lived experience [and] vivid imagery" which comes from close personal observation as well as lived experience but also because of a "capacity to convey [from] the fine detail to the large scale, along with an ecological perspective" (135). It would not be inappropriate for Simpson's own writing — both fiction and non-fiction — to be described in similar terms.

In my introduction, here, to Simpson and her work, I first discuss her major publications which are, to date, four novels and two PhDs. All non-academic works are published by Hachette Australia, suggesting she is a productive and marketable author of popular fiction. Hachette Livre is the world's second largest publisher of fiction after Penguin Random House. I mention this because the publisher's decision to market *Nest* as a generic crime-mystery fiction novel inflects the reception of the work and informs any reading of it. After briefly discussing the major publications, I then contextualise Simpson within contemporary Australian writing and an Australian Gothic of the hinterland (Doolan). I further situate her within the colonial influences I have just put forward in order to introduce the lost child trope and discuss its

presence/utilisation in *Nest* as popular crime fiction. I then introduce further ecofeminist questions to do with the ontologies of domination and the uses of non-dominative action and language in *Nest*. This discussion will continue in ensuing chapters.

Simpson's first novel, *Mr Wigg*, was published in 2013 following her participation in the 2011 Queensland Writers Centre/Hachette Manuscript Development Program. The protagonist is Mr Wigg, a third-generation farmer near the stone-fruit capital of NSW. His wife has recently died, his body is ageing and there is the matter of succession — will the farm go to his son who is the co-farmer, or to his estranged daughter? Mr Wigg tends his precious orchard (personalised through magic-realist tales), bottles fruit, listens to test cricket, hosts his grandkids and works in his metal workshop on a mysterious project. The reveal of this creative piece, a giant metal tree for the town square, forms the climax of the novel and becomes his legacy.

In 2014, Simpson's second novel, *Nest*, the subject of this thesis, was published. The publisher's web page suggests it is a work of contemporary, modern, crime fiction and mystery/suspense. The protagonist of the novel is Jen, who has been compared to Simpson (Doolan; Frank) and the novel does in fact have resonances with Simpson's later memoir, *Understory: A Life with Trees*. Jen is an artist who returns to the rural area of her childhood after the death of her mother and the breakup of her long-term relationship with Craig (Simpson was brought up in rural New South Wales and returns to the bush later in life). Jen is a wildlife artist and painter of birds, so she spends much time in the garden and neighbouring bush (Simpson is a nature writer and photographer). When a young girl goes missing, Jen's past becomes uncomfortably present (Simpson was deeply affected by the Daniel Morecombe abduction in 2003). *Nest*, although presented as a mystery or thriller, also has environmental themes that are elaborated in Simpson's following novel *Where The Trees Were* (2016), with another bird-named protagonist, Jay (for Jayne), a curator at the Australian National Museum in Canberra. As a child, Jay lived among farmland and trees on the Lachlan River in central northern NSW and her father was one of many farmers who destroyed trees carved with indigenous arborglyphs in order to avoid being subject to land claims. These two time frames are intercut as Jay, angry about the appropriation of the sacred work, plots to "rescue" an arborglyph from the museum and return it to its indigenous owners. The plot is supported by rich observation of Jay's childhood relationship to trees and wildlife and this is again developed by Simpson in her memoir of the time she spent setting up a writers retreat in the SE Queensland forest, *Understory: A Life With Trees* (hereafter referred to as *Understory ALWT*). "I see the world through trees. Every window and doorway frames trunks, limbs, and leaves. My light is their light, filtered green. My air is their

exhalation ... I have always been a tree-woman" (Simpson 2017, 1). *Understory ALWT* employs a taxonomical structure. A little like *Nest* which is pre-occupied with naming every bird species in the area, *Understory ALWT* uses a tree species to introduce each chapter, layering that description with its history and its present life, alongside that of the author, thus producing what Simpson prefers to call an "eco-memoir" that is also a "literature of nature" (Simpson pers.comm 2020).

Simpson began writing *Understory ALWT* while engaged in her second PhD thesis, *Australian Nature Writing: A Literature of Landscape* (hereafter, abbreviated to *ANW*). In her thesis, Simpson sets out to correct the long-held view that Australia lacks a tradition of nature writing, a tradition apart from those of North America and Britain:

Despite landscape having long been a central theme in Australian literature, outside the academic fields of environmental humanities and ecocriticism, nature writing is not widely known or understood in Australia [... but] Australian nature writing is not new. While a younger and smaller tradition than that of Britain and North America, there is a significant history of Australian nature writers (2017, 9–10).

In her 2016 dissertation, *ANW*, Simpson studies seven key writers, one of whom is Louisa Atkinson, discussed earlier. Simpson's focus is on the interconnectivity of all ecosystems where humans are but one part, but the focus is grounded in personal responses to a particular place or fauna or flora as this is conducive to an ecological way of seeing. In an interview on her course page at Writing New South Wales, Simpson says:

All my writing seems to come from my connection to nature. Nature seems to write itself in – it's the human story that I have to work at! Non-fiction, particularly nature writing, is easier in some ways. It's just an extension of how I live my life – close to nature and paying attention.

I keep a nature diary, which includes my reflections – like a daily practice. I'm always doing that in my head. But I do feel the shadow of the great nature writers I admire; knowing that I don't measure up. And I can get bogged down trying to capture all the details right in front of me *accurately*. There's a freedom to writing fiction. Things emerge more subconsciously, deeper truths. I need both I think.

I turn now to the situating of Simpson's work within that of contemporary Australian female authors of fiction. A singular point of difference for Simpson is her self-categorisation as

a practitioner of “the literature of nature” and “a nature writer who writes fiction”.<sup>6</sup> The above quote, from an interview with Writing NSW where she teaches an online course on nature writing, serves to illustrate her perception of herself as a writer who is both concerned with “deeper truths” and primarily driven by nature. “*All* (my italics) my writing comes from my connection to nature.” I note that Simpson does not say “comes from nature” but “comes from my *connection* (my italics) to nature”, and also that she pays attention to nature and strives for accuracy, which points to her engagement with nature writing as non-fiction genre. At the same time, in writing fiction there is a freedom that allows the unconscious to offer up deeper truths. These two concerns do not exhaust the list of Simpson’s genre/formats, preoccupations or themes, but it would seem that Simpson’s fictional works are a means of working through some of the ethical, political and cultural issues that are argued in her PhD and other scholarly work.<sup>7</sup>

In this way she can be compared with three other contemporary author-academics — Deborah Robertson, Charlotte Wood and Gail Jones. These authors are connected by “interwoven trajectories of colonialism and modernism; inventories and initiations of history, story, and memory ... mortality; abduction or the abandonment of children; voice and the limits of signification; the struggle of women to endure and create ... .” (Nikro 2). Although I make a comparison between the four, in 2014 they were not all Antipodean women writing novels in which the almost-entire concern is how a female protagonist engages with the more-than-human world. It is possibly more appropriate, as suggests Emma Doolan in *Hinterland Gothic: Reading and Writing Australia’s East Coast as Gothic Spaces*, to make links between Simpson and three other writers and their texts — Sarah Armstrong’s *Salt Rain* (2004), Melissa Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby* (2013), and Jessie Cole’s *Deeper Water* (2014). Doolan connects the four authors firstly through setting (the southeast coast of Queensland) “in which the natural environment is a key focus and marginalised—especially female, but also Indigenous and ecological—voices are privileged”. Says Doolan, the grouping is further based on female protagonists dealing with sundry disempowerments:

... in lush, excessive hinterland environments dominated by masculine power and threat, in which mothers are missing, emotionally absent, or otherwise aberrant. ... key elements of the Female Gothic tradition that can be traced back to the eighteenth-century [and]

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<sup>6</sup> This is a self-categorisation by Simpson, written in a personal email to me on 23 October 2020, cited under Simpson as “A comment from your illustrious self.” I asked the author to give a brief comment on how she would classify her writing.

<sup>7</sup> All Simpson’s published works are detailed in the works cited list at the end of this thesis.

which centre on mother-daughter relationships, the terror of uncertainty, female entrapment and disenfranchisement, and gendered violence. Likewise, [in] Hinterland Gothic novels, the hinterland landscape is strongly identified with not only female but also Indigenous bodies (2017, 2).

Although Doolan places *Nest* in the Gothic tradition, Simpson actually works against the use of Gothic devices. In an interview with Jane Frank, cited in her article “Ironbark and Stone: Place and belonging in the nature novels of Inga Simpson” (hereafter called “Ironbark”), Simpson says that landscape is “a positive force” that she describes in a realist manner and she would not:

...depict bush landscapes as alive and hostile. Simpson finds these treatments “foreign” and “works against them” because “this is not the rural Australia I know . . . this imported artificial landscape of human drama. The characters are not at home there”. Such Gothic representations of rural Australia do not reflect Simpson’s own intimate experience of the landscape (Frank 233).

But *Nest* does (as Nikro says of Gail Jones, above) speak of memory, mortality and abduction and it does it in relation to lost children. The lost child is one of the foundational White settler myths that, as Simpson says, depicts “bush landscapes as alive and hostile”. In the last two decades, three major works have been published in which the lost child (and occasional adult) is theorised as trope (Tilley), complex (Waddell) and myth (Pierce). Terrie Waddell says the lost child has engaged the White Australian imaginary since the colonising invasion. It is more “than a cultural memory of vulnerability in a country colonised through violence, empire building and the misery of Britain’s convict ‘orphans’, it is a psychological obsession — a cultural complex that can’t be shaken” (Waddell 2). The vulnerability of the colonists can perhaps be attributed to a certain lack of adaptability, characterised by their need to maintain control in the face of unfurling socio-cultural complications to do with First Australians, the climate and geography, bush-rangers, mutineers, failed enterprises, the defence of British virtue, honour and “Sterling” as opposed to “currency” way of life,<sup>8</sup> women, children (Spender 76; Woollacott) and other Others. The impossibility of controlling all these factors led to the British colonist-invaders

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<sup>8</sup> British-born as opposed to (non-Indigenous) born in Australia.

developing a particular set of anxieties that are still narrated across media and popular fiction. The “Lost Child” as genre is of particular relevance to *Nest* and this thesis. It will be discussed and elaborated in subsequent chapters, as will its connections to the ecofeminist imaginary.

### **Simpson as writer of place**

Simpson's response to place has been discussed in the emerging body of critical work on her writing, as has the crossover element of works of fiction based in a literature of nature. Frank, in “Ironbark”, uses the term “nature novels”. She also notes the importance of a direct connection to the nonhuman. In a general sense, Frank notes, the characters in each of the novels:

...like Simpson herself, are fused with the landscape, particularly the trees that inhabit it. The story of each character is linked to trees in fundamental but distinct ways: in *Mr Wigg*, a fairy-tale thread centred on the personified fruit trees of Wigg's imagination mirrors the central storyline; in *Nest*, a fragile narrative of loss and betrayal is woven together through the idea of nesting and the healing power of trees; and in *Where the Trees Were*, unresolved tensions in black and white Australia are examined through an encounter with Wiradjuri burial trees discovered by children on a Central Western New South Wales property. In each case, trees represent both sacredness and spiritual wholeness (229).

This “fusion” of Simpson, landscape and trees is a remarkable quality of her work. In intensity and depth, her engagement with trees and their ecology prefigures Richard Powers' Pulitzer prize-winning work *The Overstory*, which Ron Charles reported in *The Washington Post* as “a sprawling epic about the wonderful life and alarming death of trees”. Charles interviewed Powers at the time of the award:

“If this prize has any meaning for me,” Powers said, “it's not for this book alone but for a push among those literary writers who want to broaden our scope of concern from the personal and the domestic to the environmental and everything that lies beyond the world that we've created.”

Powers's work, like Simpson's, is characterised by making historical connections between colonisation, capitalism and environmental degradation. His imaginary, like Simpson's, draws on the problematics that were argued by foundational ecofeminists of the mid- to late twentieth century. Powers and Simpson both narrate the breadth and depth of the complications of the ecological disaster that they are putting under scrutiny. *The Overstory* is in a sense the mirror

character to Simpson's memoir *Understory*. Powers's massive novel is divided into four large sections, titled Roots, Trunk, Crown and Seeds, whereas Simpson's *Understory* uses Canopy, Middle Storey and Understorey and *Nest* does something similar with Wing, Feather and Bone. What Powers does with dendrochronology, Simpson does in *Understory* and in *Nest* she does it with ornithology. These broad structural approaches call to mind the colonial systems of classification and taxonomy that each text problematises throughout. Each text, like the ecofeminist imaginary that has contributed to its production, contains and/or reflects a multiplicity of environment-related concerns – historical, sociological, political, theoretical, anthropocentric — as they have developed over time.

This intimate yet socio-political awareness of environment is reflected in my recent communication with Simpson. In relation to this thesis, she commented, “In a way, I just write how I live and see the world. But my aim, with all my writing, is to break down the human/nature division, to move away from anthropocentric thinking” (pers. comm.). Simpson here refers to one of the enduring binaries that concern ecofeminists. I mentioned earlier that, in *Mastery of Nature*, Val Plumwood theorises the enduring hierarchical dualisms that enable human domination of nature — body/spirit, nature (woman)/culture (man), science/nature, human/nonhuman. Many ecoliterary texts and theorists of the late twentieth century build on and have resonances with Plumwood. They have in common the core tenet that the degradation of the planet and the subordination of women are linked and that there is an urgent need to transform dominant economic and political institutions. Simpson's work likewise illustrates both the continuity and enduring nature of the ontologies of power that have produced the ecofeminist imaginary and there are historic associations to be drawn between Simpson's own concerns and the writing of Wakefield, More and my other historical exemplars. These associations demonstrate the dynamics that characterise the development of social movements but, embedded as they are within hegemonic power relations, these continuities can be obscured. Noel Sturgeon, in *Ecofeminist Natures: Race, Gender, Feminist Theory and Political Action*, discusses this possible erasure by analysing two aspects of ecofeminism as a movement. Her argument can be transposed to my chronology: first, there is a synchronic aspect of concept (women writers of natural history redefine the social sphere) within a specific moment of cultural reformation (proto-feminism and the improvement of the education for girls); and secondly, there is a diachronic aspect which is the movement-specific theorising that works alongside the synchronic. This can both *precede and work alongside the movement* (my italics). Or, to put it more

simply, ecofeminism needs at all times to hold “both the relations of power existing at particular conjunctures as well as previous traditions of opposition” (Sturgeon 4).

The combined concerns of the women's movement and the ecological movement have come to constitute a twentieth and twenty-first century ecofeminist political framework that challenges anthropocentrism, “development”, poverty, wealth, gendered science and so on, or what Josephine Donovan, in “Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Reading *The Orange*”, calls “the ontology of domination” (1996).<sup>9</sup> Ten years later, Charis Thompson says that early ecofeminism “yoked together world patterns of environmental degradation with women's oppression” and that “poststructuralist feminisms somehow lost sight of the structuralist insight of ecofeminism” and were “hopelessly beguiled by the [perceived static] singularity of truth and reason” (511). Erika Cudworth elaborates similar thinking in 2005 in *Developing Ecofeminism: the Complexity of Difference* as multiplicities of domination. She proposes that ecofeminism has tended to group these multiplicities into a single overarching system of domination, whereas what is called for is an account that overlaps the “extensive differences in form and degree of domination exerted by different systems of domination in different times, places and spaces, [which] means, in my view, that a multiple systems approach enables us to theorize the complexities of structural dynamics ... without marginalizing difference” (Cudworth 176). More recent publications develop ecofeminist concern with the ethical and political positioning of humans and nonhumans or nature as inextricably interrelated, or as Stacey Alaimo puts it in her work on trans-corporeality, the “interconnections, interchanges, and transits between human bodies and nonhuman natures” (2010, 2). And finally, in my microscopic ecofeminist historical round-up, and as an indicator of current ecofeminist thinking, Greta Gaard has an appropriate closing thought, or rather ecofeminist questions to ask of a text:

- How does this text handle the problem of speaking for other species?
- Does the text depict other or animal species as passive agents who need human saviors, or does the text depict the agency of other animal species?
- If species differences are used as metaphor, what are the implications for the actual lives of non-human animal species?

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of an ontology of domination is recurrent in ecofeminist criticism. The few scholars I do cite (Alaimo; Cudworth; Donovan; Gaard; Merchant; Mathews; Mellor; Rigby; Salleh) are in consideration of the many.

- If speciesism is implicit in the text, how does that perspective shape definitions of humanity, nature, and human-nature relations?
- What kinds of social and ecological relations (i.e. communalism, reciprocity, dominance) are identified as central to human survival? (2010 651).

Using these questions as an overarching framework, I argue that the ecofeminist imaginary produces ecoethical ideas that are addressed by Simpson in *Nest*. I argue, in the coming chapters, that considering the questions raised by Gaard leads to a more productive understanding of *Nest* than regarding generic plot devices such as the lost child plot “problem” as the textual problem needing to be solved. Rather, what the text actually does, is grapple with much larger questions and presents us with multiple possibilities as to their solution. The next three chapters, building on ideas of dominative ontologies and languaging, approach core concerns of the ecofeminist imaginary that are narrated in *Nest*. In particular, I look at how the work shows us possible ways of living non-dominatively in and with nature. I demonstrate how the text performs this through the actions of protagonist Jen, the use of non-dominative language and the use of a generic missing child mystery plot in order to conceal a hidden metonymic strand that yields further depth to the book’s ecocritical concerns.

## Chapter Two —

### ***Nest: An Egg, an Artist, a Trans Bird***

It is this model of the human that has underpinned the flawed, ultimately self-defeating project of the domination of nature which has assumed a particularly virulent form in western industrial modernity and which now threatens the ecological basis of all human life (not to mention that of millions of other species) on this planet. For women, and other Others, to now uncritically assimilate themselves to this “master model” might mean to forego the opportunity to develop new forms of knowledge and selfunderstanding, incorporating less exploitative patterns of human to human and human to nature relationships (Rigby 2018, 59).

The above quotation from Australian eco philosopher Kate Rigby's “Women and Nature Revisited”, both points to the ideas so far developed in this thesis and provides a possible stepping-off point — it is necessary to both avoid uncritical complicity with the “master model” and to activate a new self-knowledge. Which is to say, by taking into account and putting into practice ideas of non-dominative action and language, “the human” may get to a position to develop “new forms of knowledge and self-understanding, incorporating less exploitative patterns of human to human and human to nature relationships” (Rigby 2018, 59). Rigby suggests that we need to subvert the dominative ontology through self-knowledge and that there is a need to move beyond thought to *practise* non-dominative action and language. Freya Mathews (whose work frequently includes reference to Plumwood and Rigby and whose onto-poetics are discussed later in this chapter) builds on this in her study of the First Australians' tradition of “walking the land”, which she describes as ongoing devotion in relation to ecological Law, as in Aboriginal Lore. Says Mathews:

The efficacy of such activity also perhaps brings out a deeper truth of historical materialism itself, which is that people undergo changes of normative consciousness not as a result merely of discourse but of personal—and particularly communicative—immersion in the realities which discourses merely represent (2020 112).

The materialism of which Mathews speaks is based on a “classic” Marxist analysis of an economic influence on ideological structures, whereby the structures are resistant to change,

especially if pressure is exerted on discourse alone. A more effective means of change is to exert pressure on the “realities” that sustain the discourse by personal and material engagement through praxis and active participation. In other words, to take action.

In Inga Simpson's *Nest*, the actions of protagonist Jen are given a material context that affords reflection on many of the above questions, questions that are central to ecofeminist ethics as both an ecological and ontological concern. A plot synopsis outlines a narrative of a mature woman who, after decades away, has returned to her childhood town to begin life again. Not quite a “treechanger” but the daughter of a logger, “a timber child, grown from fallen trees and sawdust” (134). Jen Vogel, artist-teacher, rents a house above the town, near the treeline, surrounded by bush and birds. Avoiding reconnection with old friends she takes on a sole art student, Henry, 12. This commitment, along with her work for the local land-care volunteers and an upcoming art exhibition, accounts for but a small part of Jen's time. The rest is spent caring for her property and the birds that she shares it with. When Caitlin, a classmate of Henry, goes missing, Jen is made to reconnect with memories and emotions relating to her own losses. There is best friend, Michael, who went missing when they were children. There is also, on the same day, her father, who “left” or disappeared. Both have never been accounted for and Jen fears that her father is connected to Michael's disappearance. There is the possibility that Caitlin's disappearance is connected to Michael and therefore Jen's father. Jen is also processing her recent separation from a twenty-year relationship with partner Craig and the death of her mother. According to the conventions of the missing child mystery genre, all these plot points are explained and resolved, but not necessarily in ways that accord *with* the conventions as *Nest* is not entirely *of* the genre.

The plot circulates and filters all these plot elements directly through Jen's memories and associations, falling into several main storylines, all to do with themes of loss, transition and the connections between past and future. There is her relationship with Craig and the reasons it came to an end. There is her ongoing relationship with her environment, based on a desire to nurture and caretake and also to represent. There is her processing of the disappearances of Michael and her father and how it affected her life as a teenager. There is her relationship with art and nature. These storylines are, generally, narrated by one of three methods — plot resolution, character work, or formal thematic and metonymic work symbolised by two large artworks created by Jen, a painting named *Flightless Bird* and an installation in the form of a “giant” hanging bird nest (277). In terms of genre, it is possible to categorise *Nest's* plots and

subplots across various types. The novel blends components of missing child mystery, Australian Gothic, treechange, nature literature and popular fiction.

Part of the work of this thesis will be to organise these components into the following three plotlines and scrutinise them according to certain connections. First, there is the missing child mystery plotline, secondly there is the Jen trans bird plotline, and thirdly there is the transontological metonymic plotline. I identify each as a plotline rather than an arc or plot or line or any other formal device because it is Jen's actions that cause each plotline to develop through the accumulation of cause and effect. I also use the term because it suggests there is a nesting of plots throughout the text and that the linkages between the plots are significant to the structure of the whole text. Equally, the links between Jen's actions and her creative work — and then the links between those and the structure of the text — are all connected, in the way of an ecosystem. Each of these plotlines, and relevant connections between them, will be discussed and detailed over the next three chapters.

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In order to consider the Jen trans bird plotline, I intend to demonstrate how an ecofeminist ethics of action is inscribed in Jen's actions and also in her connection to the actions of birds and other nonhumans in the narrative. Jen's way of life, from her beliefs to the way she represents and relates to the nonhuman world, can be seen to disrupt the ontology of domination that has been discussed in the previous chapter. Jen's character, her relationships, her personal ecology, ontology and ethics are all revealed through her current and past actions, culminating in a creative act that lives out her wild connection with earth others as both "fellow agents and narrative subject" (Plumwood 2002, 175).

In this theoretical context, an analysis of Jen's character within the plot is usefully contextualised by the question "What ethical actions might be produced by an ecofeminist imaginary?" An ecofeminist imaginary requires that, for such an ontology to be narrated, nature should be represented in ways that are neither reflective of a dominative language nor expressed in terms that materially exploit nature or place it as a code, resource or setting that "naturalises" any human activity (Sandilands 1997, 31). Simpson and Jen are both women, but whereas this is no guarantee that they share an ecofeminist or even feminist approach, it is nevertheless likely that, as Josephine Donovan puts it:

...when oppressed and dominated groups' views are heard, their views are found inevitably to be subversive of the ideological system that would render them silent [...] The system ignores ethical significances, which are consistently absented or "overridden by a human controller who is governed by anthropocentric ideologies of *speciesism*, *human carnivorism* and *capitalism* (2017 210–11).

The text *Nest* does prove to be feminist and subversive if its own "human controller" Jen is considered. Not only does Jen's perspective and way of being offer deeper understanding of nonhuman species but she also performs actions that destabilise anthropocentrism and advocate for a more recuperative mode of being. This is evidenced by an ecofeminist ethical approach in the text. Protagonist Jen models several "environmentally aware" positions — she volunteers for a land-care group, she acknowledges First Peoples as traditional owners of the land on which she stands, and she narrates or bears witness to White settler acts of dispossession and environmental degradation:

The whole area had once been rainforest, thick and dark with ancient life, the great buttressed roots of cedars, bunya and hoop pines poking above the tree line. Canopy, middle storey and understorey, rich with stories that white folks had never bothered to learn (19).

In this degraded area, Jen attempts to create and live in an ecology of balance between human and nonhuman. She is an all-round caretaker, and she has a hierarchy of values that supports this.

Jen's ethical position is made clear in the early pages of the novel. On page 7, Henry is visiting for his weekly art tuition with Jen. Caitlin's disappearance from Tallowood Drive has been in the news. In a dissociative move (because Jen is immediately connected to a painful childhood memory of the unsolved disappearance of her own best friend, Michael), Jen remembers a recent fatal accident on the same piece of road where a driver had taken the corner too fast and run into a tree. The tree is cut down; in fact, "The whole lot had been removed, thirty lives in exchange for one. It wasn't far from Slaughter Yard Road, which she had thought appropriate at the time" (7). Jen calculates the taking of thirty trees in recompense for the loss of one human life as a "slaughter" and we are immediately connected to a perspective that is linked to ethical and environmental issues. Soon after, we are given another link between Jen's past and the land she has chosen to inhabit:

When she had realised, walking around the property the second time — while the agent took a call — that it was the right area, the trees the right age, and that she had probably even been here with her father, she figured it was all meant to be. Something had drawn her back to look after the land he had cleared. To make amends (20).

Although apophatic (“something had drawn her back”) the “something” will be narrated as a recurrent ineffable quality or dynamic that connects Jen to this place. This ineffable quality (often narrated as unresolved past events) is countered in Jen’s now by the presence of birds. Caring for birds is one way of “making amends” that is tangible. This particular action of Jen’s embodies and narrates an activist remedy to what Donovan, Plumwood, Rigby and others caution us against — the fact that the current ecological crisis has been brought about because the dominative system absents people from their essential role as caretakers and custodians. It does this by placing the needs of (for example) capitalism above the needs of those and that for whom and which we should be caring. This is more than saying that ethically one human should preserve the life of another and therefore preserve the means of preserving that life. It is more than the act of caring for clean air, clean water, clean soil. Rather than merely conceptualising these concerns, Jen acts them out on a material level. She acts like a steward and talks from that perspective. Unlike her father, Jen is not the kind of steward who is accumulating resources for exploitation (Kheel).

### **The narration of non-dominative action through birds in *Nest***

In “The Language of Nature, the Nature of Language; Richard Hugo’s Eco-poetics” Gregory Fraser (2002) discusses an eco-poetics in which the answering of questions always remains deferred. In the case of poet Richard Hugo, argues Fraser, this is a form of brilliantly crafted “sloppiness” that works against coherence but gives the work strength. In Hugo’s work, the taxonomy of naming things carries a weight of limitations:

Time and again, the struggle to break free from the constitutive power of language is dramatized by speakers unable to stop naming birds whose flight they witness—a struggle that mirrors the poet’s own bedevilling worry that the very making of poetry may dangerously foreclose the richness and ambiguities of human and natural life (Fraser 2002, 159).

Fraser is referring to birds here because of the human propensity to think of them *merely* as their names. In Simpson’s work, the opposite is true and becomes evident through Jen’s

relationship with birds, as demonstrated by her actions. Before I move on to specific examples of how Jen's actions move from dominant to non-dominant behaviour in regard to birds, I want to talk about the opening words of the book, which set out numerous problematic subject positions for the human and nonhuman characters. "She was trying to capture the essence of wild. She had been trying her whole life" are the first words, followed by the first bird reference, "Today it was the eastern yellow robins bathing" (3). "Capturing" wildlife, even symbolically, might be a problematic inclusion in an eco-text. But the first three paragraphs move us from a questionably dominant position (she was trying to capture) to a perhaps not so dominant position:

She was trying to capture the wild. The secret to what made it unique and other. She had been trying her whole life.

Today it was the eastern yellow robins bathing. Of all the birds, they were the most ridiculous, pitching chest-first into the water and shaking themselves into fluffy rounds until their eyes and legs disappeared. Even with the softest pencil, she couldn't achieve the same effect on the page.

The more brazen yellow of Singapore daisy — on the run at the edge of the lawn — occupied her peripheral vision, reminding her of all the things she should be doing now the weather had cooled (3).

The kind of capture to which the text refers does not necessarily signify a species-ist attitude or action. "Capture the moment" is also a term used by photographers and artists. In both cases, the capture is about having a moving subject that has to be rendered static in its representative state. Even a person sitting still for a portrait is a "moving" subject in the sense that it has agency and is animated. A painter may say they want to capture particular qualities of a subject and avoid imposing an oppressive colonising project — they're just trying to draw. But in this opening, of this book, the narrating of postcolonial themes comes with complications. There is a reciprocal textual balance between an anthropocentric first paragraph and the ensuing non-anthropocentric, non-anthropomorphised, ecologically balanced second paragraph. That is, the text begins with the human narrator and takes her point of view to observe a setting and its relationship to her. But the more-than-human is written with an agency that is connected to the protagonist yet independent of it. "Even with the softest pencil, she couldn't achieve the same effect on the page" (3) suggests that the birds remain "free", they are autonomous. However, between the human apparatus of writer and protagonist performing the observation, description and representation — "capturing", "trying", "ridiculous", "softest pencil" (3) — and the

nonhuman observed, there is a sense of wanting a metaphysical pencil that is soft enough to blur the boundaries between them; that is, Jen signals a desire for a better capability to represent her subject and for her to be closer in materiality to her subject. Throughout *Nest*, Jen will expend much action and thought trying to reconcile this.

In the opening paragraphs, Jen's actions can be seen as a non-dominative yet complicit participation resulting from living with the consequences of a colonisation that has gone "on the run" while at the same time she is playing some part in questioning the colonial project — its urge to taxonomise, categorise and thereby "own" everything — and treading a balance between her own colonising lawn and the colonising weed and the indigenous fauna and flora. This can also be considered as a manifestation of what Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson suggests should be termed postcolonising rather than postcolonial, because, "It may be more useful ... to conceptualize the current condition not as postcolonial but as postcolonizing with the associations of ongoing process, which that implies [...] these power relations are at the very heart of the white national imaginary and belonging; they are postcolonizing" (2015, 5 and 18). In this sense, the opening paragraphs position *Nest* as a "postcolonising" text.<sup>10</sup>

The property Jen has just bought is, like any bush property, difficult to "manage". These initial stages of Jen's characterisation bear traces (not disavowed by her) of her White settler colonist history. And, as problematic for her as many a lady White settler before her, she draws and paints the wildlife with an intent to capture its qualities on the page, trying to tame her "wild" environment as a mode of engaging with its other unique qualities. "Wild life." Wild life. As unique and other at the same time? Questions are immediately raised around the ethical considerations of each of these positions (White – settler— artist – wild – other) and these questions are continually addressed throughout the text, forming the plotlines that culminate with the painting of *Flightless Bird* and with Jen's wild moment of building and inhabiting a nest. Jen is, as yet, not fully articulate in these tensions; in fact, whether she can ever be articulate is discussed in the final chapter but, as with most White feminist products of the education system that qualified her to be an art teacher, Jen has a point of view that, however intersectional, prioritises herself, her immediate concerns and her preferred concerns (Deckha) — in this case, birds, their idiosyncrasies, their needs, their environment, their safety.

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<sup>10</sup> The differentiation between US and Australian spelling of colonise is intentional. Moreton-Robinson is an indigenous Australian. In an Australian publication, colonising would be spelt with an "s". In a discussion about colonisation it seems important to specify these differences.

This desire continues at deepening levels throughout the book so that her increasingly close relationship becomes a process that moves her from a dominative position to a non-dominative one. This evolves through the actions of “consciously noticing” birds, actively caring for birds, actively caring for the environment that supports the birds, drawing birds, painting birds and organising an exhibition that shows her representations of birds to the world, with the intention of privileging birds in an ecological and ontological sense by representing the birds-being and her own body-being as equal in terms of representation. At this early stage of the narrative, the expression of a material affinity with the birds is a nascent expression of transcorporeality, which “denies the human subject the sovereign, central position” (Alaimo 2010, 16). The affinity becomes more intense as Jen grows aesthetically closer to the birds, gradually intensifying her performance of a new ontological position. This affinity is an important part of the trans bird plotline. It will be discussed in the following chapters when my analysis arrives at the related plot points, which occur towards the end of the book. An ecofeminist with a similar framework to Alaimo is Catriona Sandilands, who says, in *Good Natured Feminist*:

In ecological politics it is only through some sort of a coalitional move — a desire to speak with and of but not for the Other — that nature can be spoken of in a democratic forum, given that its presence cannot be grasped through the taking up of a natural identity... (1999, 97–98)

Sandilands also calls for an “affinity production within ecofeminism ... that disrupts the human/nature boundary” (ibid, 117). Jen models this behaviour when she begins as an artist and ends as a participant in the subjectivity she was “trying to capture” — a being who lives in a nest. Jen moves on from a desire to *capture* the wild and evolves this position to one that produces a shared performance of wildness based on understanding and reciprocity.

There are over one hundred mentions of birds (alive, as opposed to representations of birds) in the book and fewer than a dozen are generic mentions such as “a bird” or “some birds”. The one hundred mentions have birds being referred to specifically by species and of these one hundred, about eighty are one-off references; that is, each reference is discrete. So that means there is almost one bird narration for every three pages. Apart from human names, personal pronouns, punctuations and spaces, not much else appears so frequently on the page. Each of the mentions have a direct link to Jen because birds are only referred to when Jen sees or hears them directly. To illustrate the beginning of this book-long character arc, I provide the bird references, with brief surrounding text, for the first twenty pages of the book. I argue that it

is necessary to include these mentions here (rather than append them) because they bear scrutiny as an accumulation of signification. This is the most bird-intensive part of the text, with almost one mention per page. I shall then move on to readings of some more detailed and lengthy passages. The first bird reference in the plot (as opposed to the epigraph, which I discuss in the final chapter) is on page 4. Ensuing references will appear in the order of the reference — 2, 3, 4 and so on — as well as the page of the text on which it/they appear/s:

- 1           p. 4    Today it was the eastern yellow robins bathing.
- 2/3        p. 6    The birds moved in sympathy with cello and violin, and the trees dipped their leaves in time to piano [but the radio and opera] frightened off the birds. Now into her fourth year, she preferred silence. Or, rather, the forest orchestra of bird, frog and cicada.
- 4           p. 7    ... a treecreeper's claws scritch on a bloodwood, securing its hopping, vertical ascent.
- 5           p. 9    Henry leaned over... "All those drawings in there. There aren't any people. Just trees and birds". (The speech is Henry, talking to Jen.)
- 6           p. 9    She counted eight chirruping white-eyes on the branch shading the birdbath, before they were sent packing by a family of Lewin's honeyeaters with their rattling machine-gun notes. The pecking order — or drinking order — played out right in front of her every day. From now until sunset it would be non-stop action. It just went to show, all you had to do was put out water and the birds would come. Sometimes, it reminded her of the classroom.
- 7           p. 10   Jen closed her eyes to listen to the bird's chatter. The splashing of water behind her. The afternoon breeze lifting. Things you just couldn't draw.
- 8           p. 19   Jen sat on the back step, in the sun, staring out at her trees. A king parrot called from somewhere high in the canopy, repeating one identical note over and over. Johnny one-note he might be, but what a note it was. And he always had his looks to fall back on.

9 p. 20 Cuckoo doves called from all sides; they had her surrounded. Her father had called them whoop whoop birds. For that was mostly all they said: whooop, whooop. They were big, too, and slow, with tiny heads, so she thought of them as “big whoop” birds. Her ear had attuned to the heavy flap of their wings, her eye to slim boughs dipping under their weight. They had been plentiful in the early days, when whites first arrived, but they were easy targets, hunted for food and fun, until rare.

Here they had grown back, with the trees. Like her, they favoured forest edges. Regrowth. If she were a bird, no doubt she would be brown and common, too. Not that cuckoo doves were really brown, more of a rufous to cinammon, and the females quite auburn on the crown. “Bloodnuts. Like your mother,” as her father used to say.

This summary of pages 1–20 illustrates how a continuing reference to birds and their environment contributes to the work of situating the reader within Jen’s perceptual range and behaviours, which largely frame the world of the novel. The reader is introduced to Jen and her world and the characters, both human and nonhuman, who are relevant to the plot. The text creates a world of Jen’s actions, in relationship to birds and her representation of them, by using a traditional realist approach of world-building through setting, action and character, with an important exception — humans will not be the only species whose goings on, whose places of work, rest and sustenance, whose *lives* are important enough to be narrated, let alone noticed, let alone detailed. Birds are more than a supporting cast. The frequent actual sightings and hearings of birds in the wild becomes an almost contrapuntal motif that is used repetitively to balance the human plotlines. Species are handled like members of the text’s human and more-than human character ensemble, with brief descriptions that grow in detail as the narrative progresses and the idea of “supporting character” gets subverted somewhat.

What emerges in these early pages (and is maintained throughout the text) is an infusion of bird as co-habitant species, rather than companion species or other.<sup>11</sup> Jen and the birds lead

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed analysis, including new perspectives on Donna Haraway’s work on companion species, see *Queering the Non/Human*, edited by Noreen Giffney and Myra J. Hird, Ashgate, 2008.

interrelated but autonomous lives and Jen tries to tread lightly in their shared space. These are important ethical distinctions. Birds are narrated as beings who live in and share the same place and, in the same way that she perceives that trees give life to each other and us, Jen must be mindful of how her actions affect the birds, given the birds (and also, by extension the trees they inhabit) are part of her home. The textual strategy here seems to suggest Jen's stewardship demonstrates co-relational practice. It can also be read as demonstrative of a move away from the logic of domination and "allopathic ethics" towards a more holistic relationship of an environment and its parts.

In *Nature and Ethics; an Ecofeminist Perspective*, Marti Kheel proposes an ecofeminist holistic philosophy that moves away from "allopathic ethics" that look at "moral dilemmas at an advanced stage of their development, treating the symptoms of patriarchy (its dilemmas and conflicts), rather than the disease inherent in its worldview", characterised by "waging war" on illness and disease rather than understanding causes and assisting the body's natural ability to recuperate. A more holistic philosophy would question "certain unconscious and masculinist allegiances" that neglect paying close attention to the individual and the domestic (and this means all sentient beings) in favour of taking into consideration an abstract "whole".

Ecofeminist philosophy, by contrast, follows a holistic model, exploring the worldview and mentality that underlie the existing conflicts, while simultaneously working to promote an environment in which appropriate care can flourish (Kheel, 217).

However, Kheel reminds us the abstract nature of much holistic environmental debate needs to be refocused in order for the holistic model to work. An intense scrutiny, both of the component parts of any ecosystem and also of our relationship with it, is necessary. This reflects an attentive and holistically orientated ontology of value in which "appropriate care springs from a sense of kinship, respectful boundaries, and recognitions of needs" (Kheel 14). This holistic approach is recognisable as one of *Nest's* core narrative techniques or strategies (Tjupa 564), where Jen's everyday life and the manner in which she and the text connect themselves to both the human and nonhuman world is detailed. I said above that perhaps the most effective way of uncovering how this works in the text is to detail Jen's relationship with birds. This is because that relationship develops into arguably the most significant moments of character development and fulfilment of textual ambition where Jen strongly identifies as avian. Then, after the climactic revelation of Caitlin's body, two of the three plotlines (missing child mystery and Jen trans bird) conflate in Jen's biggest bird action, becoming her most significant transformational moment

and one that elevates the Jen trans bird plotline to key structural importance. This privileging of the Jen trans bird plotline places it as the dominant plotline of the book and, as such, is a subversion of a traditional anthropocentric, human-as-sovereign plot. To demonstrate that the Jen trans bird plotline is as instrumental in Jen's growth as the "missing children mystery" plot, I shall now discuss the relationship between the two.

### **The missing child mystery in relation to the Jen trans bird plotline**

This next section, then, identifies the moment when these two plotlines emerge as separate entities, then follows them to their discrete structural moments of crisis and climax at the art exhibition and ensuing installation of the giant nest. At that moment, a third, the transontological metonymic plotline, is produced and I shall discuss this in the final chapter. The moment of emergence for the Jen trans bird plotline occurs when Jen decides that it is time to get to work and make her studio ready for getting the exhibition sorted (22). It is difficult for her. She's dealing with a lifetime of accumulated personal baggage that is beginning to weigh her down. And that is made clear in the following passage. It is much longer than any bird passage so far. It contains a sequence of actions occurring both in the present and the past. It affords four temporal shifts from the present to the near past to the distant past and an inferred future, but, more relevant to a discussion of plot structure and action, it affords a turning point for Jen, one where the need to resolve her past is signposted as an obstacle against personal and creative development. Regarding the latter, this moment shows Jen's realisation that in order to prepare for the exhibition of her life's work, she actually has to do some housework. She has to take the step of cleaning out her studio and making it ready to archive the old and create the new for the upcoming exhibition. Birds are instrumental in this change:

It was the birds who saved her. They always did.

A yellow-tailed black cockatoo called from below the cottage, one lonely rising and falling note. It called again, this time answered by its mate, a little farther off. It was the season for feasting on borer grubs in the acacias. One bird would rip the bark off the tree while the other screeched and squawked and chuffed from the ground or a nearby low branch.

When she had first heard the ruckus, she had thought the birds in distress, a young one fallen from the nest perhaps, and made her way down the slope to see if they needed her help. The birds were fine, enjoying their ritual, and barely acknowledging her.  
[...]

While the robins were her favourite, she had come to see the cockatoos as her totem bird. They tended to appear whenever she asked for answers — and sometimes when she hadn't — giving some sort of sign. Hearing them fly overhead, or in the trees, was always a good omen. During the winter of her first year back, when her courage had failed her, only they had come to call her out of the darkness.

The morning she had been unable to get out of bed, still lying amid the white sheets in full sunlight, a dozen had turned up screeching and carrying on in the tree tops. Their cries were somehow sympathetic.

Whether they sensed her plans for departure, or had taken in the unmown lawn strewn with sticks, the leaf-filled gutters, the junk mail poking out of the box, and thought her already gone, she was unsure. The cottage, after all, was not unlike a giant bird-house.

One cockatoo had perched right outside the window, peering in. Despite herself, Jen hadn't been able to help smiling at its comical cocked head, the clown-like spots of yellow on its cheeks. Only when Jen got herself up and out of bed did the bird fly off, screeching, settling on a high branch with the others.

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She opened all of the windows of her studio, pulling the screens from the frames and depositing them outside. The kookaburras were at it up on the ridge, chortling and cavorting for all to hear. It was difficult to imagine what they were communicating with such volume and gusto, and to fight the feeling that she was the butt of their jokes. Probably it was just a weather forecast. It was Percy Grainger who said that the soul of the climate and land could be heard in the song of native birds. It was in all of the other animals and plants too but only the birds had been given a singing voice (22–3).

The above passage, the first half of chapter five, is structured entirely around birds and it both foreshadows and contains in summary two of the major turning points of the novel — the commitment to the preparation of a career-retrospective art exhibition and the “goodbye-to-partners past”. The latter is set up with Jen dusting around a collection of found objects (insects, rocks, shells, leaves) that Craig gave her and which a friend jokingly called her “shrine to Craig” (24). We can expect that the shrine to Craig is going to have to be dismantled. There is a sense that when Jen says, “Here, at least, there was no-one to pester her” means pestered by humans — present and departed, both in form and memory — and not the nonhuman. The birds may

save her but humans probably won't. Other than her student Henry, most other humans and their activity do little for Jen except provoke difficult and painful memories and unsolved issues. The cockatoos are said to have "saved" Jen. What that means is that they saved her from the consequences of human suffering. They saved her in her first winter at a time when she was barely coping. Also, the cockatoos are endowed with spiritual and totemic importance. Their appearance is taken as a sign. In acknowledgement of the land's traditional owners, Jen would be thinking of "totem" in terms of First Peoples. Australian ecofeminist philosopher Deborah Bird Rose writes that:

...there is a three-way relationship between the people, the species, and the country. The totemic relationship invariably requires that people take responsibilities for their relationship with another species, and learn that their own well-being is inextricably linked with the well-being of their totemic species. Where the totemic relationship also involves land, people are further implicated in a set of responsibilities toward that land, and their well-being is linked to the well-being of that land (1996, 28).

Perhaps most importantly, Jen is respectful enough of the birds to regard them as her saviours. Jen is not yet at a stage in her developing relationship with her surroundings that her languaging resides mainly in the totemic world view that Rose describes, but elements of a totemic relationship are acted out in the present. That her life is inextricably interwoven with the lives of the birds is not just implied, it is stated and actioned. When a branch falls, Jen immediately rushes down the slope to see if a nestling has fallen and if she can help (22). It is not uncommon in Australia for people to chase cockatoos away because they strip flowers off trees or make a mess or their calls just sound sad. Jen is not a chaser; she is a carer. Rescuing baby cockatoos is perhaps not a revolutionary disturbance of the dominant order but the narration of even a small act, not required by plot but supportive of ethos, is a disturbance, nevertheless.

I have established that Jen's caring for the birds and their environment is because she feels they are worthy of her care, not because it rewards her or satisfies her needs but because she respects the birds. She does not hold that they inhabit some inferior or irrelevant ontological domain. Rather, she doubts her ability to represent them in a way that reflects that equal status. They will not be sentimentally regarded as a part of nature to be appreciated because it looks nice (Jen's mother once asked her to paint lorikeets because "everyone loves a bit of colour" 240). But, having committed to being in the studio again, she is confronted with difficulties of representation. This time, Jen's action is to draw the tiny fairy-wren:

It was eluding her again: the essence of bird. The mystery of what held the tiny fairy-wren together, made it more than a spot of feathers on stick legs with a flitting tail. She could not seem to channel, even for a moment, wild bird, despite her well-trained arm. [...] Not for the first time, she wondered if it wasn't a mistake to try to pin the bird to the page, to confine it to paper with her meagre scratches and marks (38–9).

This is the second specific reference to capturing but now Jen has taken responsibility for her thinking in those terms. “*It*” (the wild, the essence of bird...perhaps the thing that cannot be represented just because it is beyond representation?) is eluding *her* because her own abilities and understanding are not up to the task of empathetic representation. And it is happening “again” which suggests a revision of her previous position where the elusive qualities were held to be caused by the bird, not by a lack in her own abilities. There is a negotiation underway and it acknowledges the eco-ethical implications of the difficulty of narrating a particular apophatic state — narrating and/or representing the nonhuman world so that it “really exists” within the same story world the narrator and reader inhabit, while at the same time it is unspeakable. Timothy Morton investigates these implications in *Realist Magic, Objects, Ontology, Causality* when he says “realism” implies that there is something real or permanent or definable about certain objects and life forms and nature itself. This “real”, Morton explains, is not an essential truth but there is an apophatic or illusory version of truth because philosophical realism hides the fact that “reality itself is not mechanical or linear when it comes to causality” (2013, 17):

If things are intrinsically withdrawn, irreducible to their perception or relations or uses, they can only affect each other in a strange region out in front of them, a region of traces and footprints: the aesthetic dimension (18).

Jen is encountering the responsibility and difficulty required when navigating that apophatic and “strange ... aesthetic dimension” where humans attempt to represent the nonhuman in a way that expresses our shared relationship *and* is a shared expression ... that can't be expressed. She questions what kind of relationship is possible. Is “channelling”, for example, an appropriate means of relating? But what Jen asks here is not so much how do I relate to these wild things but how do I *represent* them in a “really” representative manner when it is actually impossible? It eludes her capability as an artist, and it eludes her understanding in terms of “how to channel wild bird” (39). This appears to be more than a need to find a certain quality in her subject (she mentions a gleam in a scrubwren's eye later). Rather, Jen speaks the

need or desire to bridge the perceived gulf between human and nonhuman. It requires more than her intuition, her technical ability or even her heart (because earlier she has told Henry to go with his heart). The “more than” is what the text cannot speak within the prescribed limitations of known languages . . . . spoken and visual. It is more than politics — the “correct” view or standpoint or philosophical position — and it is more than finding the words or having the vocabulary or the poetic or artistic ability or the discipline. It is something that perhaps lies outside language.

The tension between Jen as human and her subject as nonhuman or more-than-human, is structured to be a major event in the novel — Jen's exhibition and the revelation of her major work, the painting titled *Flightless Bird*. When Jen's exhibition date finally arrives, a retrospective of her life's work has been curated by the gallery owner, Maureen. On display are many of Jen's works representing nature, the nonhuman, the other Other; mostly birds and flora. She is modelling the making of artworks as described in *The Expressive Forest* by Denys Trussell, artworks that:

...engage with nature as making re-presentation [...] Art acts obliquely. It will not, of itself, save the world. Nor of itself will it make us socially and ecologically moral. Its ancient and perennial role is rather to warn us we should neither be grossly anthropocentric nor narrowly ego-centric. It re-presents to us the “other” — the other of nature and our fellow human (87).

Interestingly, this is a kind of mirror-thought to one of Rigby's in her “Earth, World, Text: The (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis”. Putting it simply, it may be better to write about nature than to speak *as* it, to write *as* the enframing rather than about it:

Perhaps, then, it might be more helpful to seek in the work of ecopoiesis, not so much a voicing of the more-than-human natural world, but, more humbly, simply a response, and, recalling Dobson's cautionary words regarding the inescapability of weak anthropocentrism, a merely human response at that, to the call of nature's self-disclosure, its *autopoiesis* (Rigby 2004, 438).

Trussell and Rigby's mirrored thoughts speak to several of Greta Gaard's “ecofeminist questions to ask of a text” that I introduced in Chapter One, specifically how writers handle speaking for other species, depicting the agency of other species and using species differences as metaphor. Jen has been modelling several responses to these questions by articulating the

difficulties of representing birds, the limitations of language in talking about them, the ethical implications of living with them but, almost halfway through the plot and approaching her major exhibition, she has not yet manifested what Josephine Donovan calls a non-dominative mode of being and representation. In “Everyday Use and Moments of Being: Toward a Nondominative Aesthetic” (hereafter called “Everyday Use”), Donovan says that the hegemonic mode of producing art is based in a Kantian aesthetic, itself rooted in the Cartesian-Newtonian epistemology, a system governed by its own laws which make it coherent. In opposition to this is a non-dominative aesthetic borne of a personal and serendipitous physical encounter with the everyday which renders it incoherent to the dominant aesthetic but coherent to an understanding that lies outside its governing language. Trussel, Rigby and Donovan are each speaking, firstly to the complexities of interrogating actions and artistic endeavours that engage with the more-than-human and secondly, the complexities of narrating that.

The complexity of producing Donovan’s non-dominative mode is demonstrated when the plot finally arrives at Jen’s exhibition. Being one of the novel’s important character events and knowing that Jen has prepared just one or two significant new works, there may be an expectation that these works will be contextualised within Jen’s personal development narrative. The text resolves this expectation, but in unexpected ways. Rather than being presented with a description of either the works or Jen’s emotions, there are gaps in Jen’s narration that the ecofeminist imaginary can be employed to fill.

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The crisis-revelation of *Flightless Bird* occurs as follows. By the time the exhibition is hung and opened, in the chapters “Hanging” and “Opening”, Jen and Maureen, the gallery owner, have gathered together a life’s work of painting birds, which Jen signals in a typically self-effacing but humorous fashion — “The gallery’s rooms were now full of birds, which was a vast improvement on the guns and penises displayed on her previous visit” (228). It’s a quip, really, and could be regarded in dramatic performance as a “throwaway line” but, in performance arts, the throwaway line often offers a rich vein of cultural and political commentary. That is the case with the ideas that this speech-action expresses. Jen has already, some chapters ago, compared her own art with dominant forms. She was named “the bird lady” after her first exhibition, when her interest in the sentient nonhuman, as opposed to the “sharkskin heavy petting gloves” on display alongside her birds had “made her all but invisible” (156). Now, she elevates the entire corpus of her own life’s work and privileges it above “guns” and penises”, which can be taken to

be Jen's generic signifiers of the patriarchal discourse. The notion of the current absence of guns and penises is also an apophatic avowal that tells us that Jen thinks nature is more important than the patriarchy, an idea that underpins her everyday living, her creativity and also foreshadows the giant nest-building that is about to occur thirty pages later in the chapter titled "Nest".

Of equal narrative importance is the fact that her major work, heretofore undescribed and unnamed, is revealed when Henry and Jen carry the canvas into the gallery. We are told that it is big enough to require "four arms to transport" and that it reminds Henry of Jen:

"It kinda reminds me of you," he said.

"Oh?"

"What's it called?"

"*Flightless Bird.*"

He frowned.

Had he not noticed the stumps of wings, the feathers around her mouth? The old, claw-like feet. Of course, she was not only flightless but childless and mateless (227–8).

We do not get a clear or detailed description of how Jen has represented herself. Her art may have more significance than an art of guns and penises but all we are told is that the painting represents her as birdlike as well as old, childless and mateless — Jen has achieved the trifecta of the female abject (Kristeva), which, according to the origins of the word, means she may as well be thrown away (Cresswell). However, Jen does not normally tend to self-deprecation in regards to either her single or childless status. She has reconciled with both by recognising that she *may* have wanted children, just not with Craig (211). The painting, therefore, can be taken more as an absent signifier because we are denied access to anything absolutely meaningful about the painting, apart from the three signifiers which are both generic and absent — "childless and mateless" is a female without the means or result of fertility, and "flightless" is a bird without the means of being a bird. And yet, does this lack of direct reference mean the implied meanings are too arbitrary? Or does the simplicity of Jen's description allow an openness of being? This languaging, as I said earlier when talking about Fraser and the answering of questions always being deferred, will be approached in the next chapter of this thesis. As a painting, however, *Flightless Bird* works and is well received. "Everyone loves it," says Maureen, the gallery owner (233). In the intervening chapters between the cockatoo totems and this Jen-as-Birdwoman artwork, there has been an increasingly detailed description of birds in the wild but until this

“unveiling” at the exhibition, it has not been clear whether her increased level of companionship with birds is reflected in Jen’s detailing of herself or indeed, why it could or should be. The question is raised: Is this apophasis truly an apophasis or is it the affordance of a transontological space? I argue that both moves, the apophatic and the transontological, are in play and that *Flightless Bird* and the ensuing building of the giant nest are actually two signifiers of one of the book’s main themes — the absence of children through loss, abduction or reproductive choice.

### **Transontology, onto poetic transvaluation and the apophatic in *Nest***

As a remedy to a “commodity fetishism”, in “The World Hidden within the World: A Conversation on Ontopoetics”, Freya Mathews recommends what Rigby paraphrases as the “cultivation of practices that afford the deeper pleasures of interactive self-actualisation, or co-becoming, through experiences of intersubjective encounter, communicative interchange and, potentially, synergistic co-creation with more-than-human others and those places in which we might meet with them” (Rigby 2017). This is what Mathews calls a mutually inflected encounter, which I build on in what follows. It has already been established throughout the text that Jen is both attentive and caring towards her avian cohabitants. She has attempted to make amends for, and live a life that minimises, any negative impact on the environment. She actually recalibrates her own desires so that they enhance and replenish nature and its needs. However, how much more of an intersubjective encounter would ensue if Jen could go a step further, as Mathews suggests:

Attentive love ... still leaves us, so to speak, on the outside of the system, looking in sympathetically, even cherishingly, but as spectators [...]

To situate ourselves psychically as actors within the system, with a view truly to “fitting into nature”, we need, I think, to take a further step, one that could be described in terms of *synergy*. By synergy I mean, very precisely, the coming together of two or more parties in such a way that the self-meanings they bring to the encounter become mutually inflected and enlarged by the communication that takes place between them (2010 4).

What Mathews suggests may seem impossible. How can the nonhuman be “enlarged” by the human if the social imaginary that defines nature does it from an always anthropocentric-privileging position that sees the nonhuman as less valuable than the sovereign human?

It cannot simply be a question of Jen developing some new values unless the values are based in *more* than the Jen-actions I have described so far. She needs to step right outside of her

understanding and go beyond her ontological position by taking the more synergistic step that Mathews wishes of us. And it is the ecofeminist imaginary that leads her to perform an action that produces an intersection of all those things and is, in fact, narrated by the revelation of *Flightless Bird*. But there is a further complication, or perhaps it is better expressed as result; namely, having represented herself as a bird, Jen Queers herself.

The expression of a transitional state in which Jen represents herself as humavian is a queer move. Jen's student Henry says that the character in *Flightless Bird* "kinda" reminds him of Jen. We might immediately put a human face to that, or a body shape, but it is Jen who narrates the painting as a bird-woman representation of herself. The "feathers around her mouth" means the Jen-bird's mouth, which may or not connote beak but it definitely means mouth. The "she" of the dialogue is her own pronoun and here it is also that of a female bird co-subject. A mouthed creature with feathers, claws and wings. Jen has represented herself as a woman becoming bird, a trans bird. The abject trífecta can now become a superfecta — old, childless, mateless and queer.<sup>12</sup>

To return to "Everyday Use", Josephine Donovan calls for an art that "remains embedded in the everyday world but by virtue of its aesthetic character provides a political critique of the reified world ..." (53). Such an art engages with the problems raised by dominative creative paradigms that reinforce hegemonic ideas of aesthetic theory. Jen embodies Donovan's artist who is a "relatively passive transmitter of 'things as they are', who ideally imposes as little artifice as possible upon the material, so as to allow existential moments of discovery to happen" (Donovan 1993 60). Both Simpson and Jen have achieved a version of "things as they are" in this trans bird representation. To produce this work, Jen could not be an artist who "takes a piece of reality and reworks it according to these rules, thus imprinting upon it his or her own design and setting it above the everyday. It is an imperialist dominative project" (Donovan 1993 53). Rather, Jen would need to be engaged with a question like "How can the drawing of a bird by a third generation (self-labelled) White settler *not* be in and of itself, a hegemonic gesture?" The question that has been expressed through Jen's actions has thus been

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<sup>12</sup> Extensive discussion on trans\* studies is beyond this thesis, but I would refer to the intersections of queer, animal and trans\* studies in Estok (2009), Gaard (1997), Haraway (2016), Hayward and Weinstein (2015), Mortimer-Sandilands (1999), Stryker and Whittle (2006) and also the journal *TSQ Transgender Studies Quarterly*.

answered: by making art that is transontological and beneficial. As Gaard says in *Mindful New Materialism*, it is beneficial if it is aimed at ending suffering of oneself or others (298).

Identifying as trans bird can be read as a desire to other and out herself. This is a queering by becoming wild and natural. But if the text queers Jen, then it also queers natural, at the same time repositioning natural as inclusive of trans bird and repositioning trans bird as inclusive of natural. All these transitional moves are coalitional and non-dominative. But Jen is delivering even more than the beneficial queer and abject (which I do not intend to conflate — rather, they mutually enhance and mutually inflect) in this *Flightless Bird*. The apophatic nature of its own representation through narration — that is, the lack of description relating to it in the text — is revealing, and in turn, the revealing nature of *that* apophasis is characteristic of the narrative strategies of this text. I discuss this languaging of apophasis and metonymy in detail in the final chapter when I look at Jen's most sustained piece of eco-artistic praxis, building the giant nest, hanging it in a tree and moving in. However, as the plot move is one of action performed by Jen, and it is linked to *Flightless Bird*, I introduce it here.

When Jen makes her giant nest she does it in her back garden by picking up pieces of tree and bark and forming them around a spherical metal hammock that she found in the town junk shop, something that had been built for a child and ended up there. In making a nest, she can be seen to be doing exactly what Donovan rebukes; that is, taking “a piece of reality and rework[ing] it according to [hegemonic] rules, thus imprinting upon it his or her own design and setting it above the everyday” (1993 53). It would hardly seem to be the “non-dominative praxis” for which Donovan makes an appeal. What is missing is Donovan's second point, that a dominative aesthetic theory sees:

...matter or nature as dead; it is not perceived to have interests or indeed to have an existence apart from the subject whose thematizing gaze is seen as redemptive. This allows the subject — whether artist or scientist — to manipulate matter or nature without retaining an empathy with or ethical respect for its independent existence (1993 56).

But Jen as artist and Jen as companion species to the birds does retain both empathy and ethical respect. Her ethical intent is not to harm but to co-create. Jen's intent is to re-position the demarcation lines of the ontology of domination by changing the position of the insider-outsider “line”, where inside is within the dominant and outside is the Other. This is what I call

transontology.<sup>13</sup> Transontology should be expressed as one word because it allows for the fluid movement between any of the formerly singular parts. It is two or more signifiers of being-ness transitioning into or across or around (the possible structural combinations should be many) each other. As Eva Hayward says in “More Lessons from a Starfish: Prefixial Flesh and Transspeciated Selves”:

And I wonder, thinking about the transsexual trans-formations and the starfish re-generations that are suggested in the song, what is the trans formative and re-lational power of prefixes like ‘trans-’ or ‘re-’? [...] In becoming transsexual, am I not also becoming ‘like a starfish’ as the song suggests? When do metaphor and metonymy ‘ripple’ into one another? Is the analogical device of ‘like-ness’ (‘like a starfish’ or like a woman) too clumsy a rhetorical device for the kind of poetic and material enactments (67–8).

Hayward is a trans\* theorist coming from that embodied standpoint and still in process of engaging with and producing what Mathews might call “self-meanings”. In her (Mathews’) “ontopoetic transvaluation” she calls for “the coming together of two or more parties in such a way that the self-meanings they bring to the encounter become mutually inflected and enlarged by the communication that takes place between them” (2010, 4). This is how Jen has been relating to the nonhuman world and also representing it. If the ontologies of domination need to be dismantled in order to engage with trans- anything, then this is what the ecofeminist imaginary has produced in *Nest* — a bird-human hybrid or a human-bird hybrid who is not a harpy and not a bird-human hybrid but is a trans bird, as in “Jen’s a trans bird”; that is, not a trans man or a trans woman, but a trans bird called Jen who is now represented as *Flightless Bird* who builds a giant nest ... in which there will be no eggs.

However, there is a broader sense of the apophatic through self-negation that the text is working towards and this is discussed in the final chapter. The text does not speak of the queer abject trans bird by detailing elements of *Flightless Bird as trans bird* because queer as cross-species is as yet unspeakable. In order to contravene a dominative paradigm that places the

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<sup>13</sup> No hyphen. This is to differentiate between Dussel’s “Trans-ontology, an important 21<sup>st</sup>-century philosophical theory. Nor do I intend inclusion on a list of trans man, trans woman. Or even trans\* ontology (Hayward and Weinstein). These terms have been designated as hyphenates or separate words and are tangential to my term.

human above and apart from nature, one way Jen can represent herself as part of nature is to make an apophatic move. Her urge is to remove, not only parts of her “civilised”, colonising, White settler self but also parts of her human self — *but* there is no future in which this representation will be possible, not just because same-sex reproduction or parthenogenesis is not (widely speaking) possible but because there may be no *future* in which this representation will be possible. Future apophatic. This apophasis is represented by the giant and empty nest and also by the disappearance, loss and even death, of children.

## Chapter Three —

### ***Nest*: Transontology, Trans Genre and Lost Children**

The revelation of a painting called *Flightless Bird* as the crisis of a genre-driven (or at least, genre-inflected) missing child mystery would seem to be an unproductive narrative proposition if the plot outcome is to be the solution to a crime that is apparently unrelated to the painting. The notion of painting-as-crisis is an unexpected turn or surprise that subverts expectations of the mystery genre, where a plot crisis tends to revolve around matters directly to do with the crime or mystery in question. As the reader approaches the last third of a crime novel, or in this case its close relative *Nest*, there are certain genre-expectations that are expected to be fulfilled. If the text is to have closure on all the questions it has raised in the missing child plot, there are but a few brief chapters left in which answers to the following questions can be provided. The first three questions have become linked in Jen's mind. Even though decades separate the events, she senses they are connected. What happened to Michael? What happened to Caitlin? What happened to her father? Subsequent questions relate to the secondary plot of Jen's professional and personal development. Will her exhibition be a success? Will she move on from Craig? Does her chosen home offer a future for her? In order to have closure on her personal development, there will need to be a sense of change or growth in Jen, and again, all this must be done within a frame of non-dominative actions and language. However, these plot questions will also be put in service to the more important textual concerns that drive the third plotline, which emerges in consequence of the preceding two. The function of this third plotline is both metonymic and apophatic yet is discernible as a plotline *because* it is driven by event, action and character. In the previous chapter I detailed how Jen's actions with the more-than-human can be considered as transontological and non-dominative, outlining a narrative progression that produces the *Flightless Bird* and models Mathews' "mutually inflected" encounter. But, part of the hidden strategy of *Nest* is that there are also mutually inflected textual encounters between genres and themes. These encounters, like when Jen describes a "nest within a nest" (67), work as a recurrent metonymic device which the text offers as its best kept secret. The work of this chapter will be to discuss this hidden strategy of nesting in terms of narrative structure. This will afford discussion of genre conventions, the lost child in Australian fiction, thematic connections and character development all produced by, and informed in relation to, the ecofeminist imaginary.

In Chapter Two the Jen trans bird plotline was considered in terms of a narration of non-dominative actions that reached a climactic plot point with Jen's retrospective art exhibition. The representation of herself as trans bird is plotted to be the event just preceding the climax of the novel and is arguably thus the crisis of that particular plot. I use these terms here as factors of genre-driven plot structure. By crisis, I mean the plot point where the forces of protagonism (Jen and her birds) come into the next-to-greatest conflict with the forces of antagonism (environmental, cultural and social degradation). This causes even greater conflict which manifests as an ensuing climax (that is, the climax follows the crisis that causes it) during which the antagonist is vanquished by the protagonist, who then undergoes positive change and growth. Throughout the novel, the Jen trans bird plot offers a counterpoint to the missing child mystery plot (including the storylines of Caitlin, Henry, Michael and Jen's father) and demonstrates a generic use of form and structure. The crisis of the missing child plot is the discovery of Caitlin's body where the forces of protagonism (Jen's need to understand) come into direct conflict with the forces of antagonism (information withheld from Jen).

### **The lost child and mystery genre convention in *Nest***

A comparison and discussion of genre conventions in *Nest* requires an explanation of the lost child narrative and a return to its White settler origins. Inga Simpson is self-reflexively aware that she is fifth-generation White Australian (2016, 2). Her family "settled" in central-West NSW in 1867 where they "displaced" the First Peoples or traditional owners, the Wiradjuri. Says Simpson, in "Triangulation: In Ironbark Country":

Up the Back is in Wiradjuri country. The people of the three rivers – the Lachlan, the Macquarie and the Murrumbidgee – are known for their possum skin cloaks, diet of fish, and fierceness. [...]

I'm not sure how many [White] people moved through the area, or how often, before 1788. But by the time the gold rush came, there were few Wiradjuri left. Displacement seems too polite a word for the co-ordinated attempt to wipe out a people with disease, bullets, strychnine and arsenic (301).

Simpson here introduces the idea of transgressions committed because of colonial anxieties, a term that in itself, given the context that Simpson has just offered, is too polite a term. Anxieties can provoke the most extreme and brutal of actions, such as the coordinated attempt of which Simpson speaks. The following quotation, from Barbara Gates in *Kindred*

*Nature: Victorian and Edwardian Women Embrace the Living World*, points to the colonising practices of naming, rhetoric and power which, conversely to their intent, created anxieties in the invaders:

Naming, of course, implies power, the human power of the word over the thing named, the power of the word to bring into being through naming, the power to change situations by changing what they are called, the power of rhetoric to spin believable cultural myths. Always a significant agent in determining Western culture, the idea of nature came to exert even more formidable influence after Darwin (12).

Gates offers insight into the manner of these anxieties by making the connection between the power of naming and the production of “believable cultural myths”, which are at once both expressive of and used in management of the cultural anxieties that have produced them. She is referring to how attitudes to nature changed in the pre- and post-Darwinian world, but her insight can also be usefully applied to the pre- and post-colonial world.

The “natures” and natural worlds that been appropriated by colonisation, and the naming of the species discovered in these new worlds, was but one part of what Val Plumwood calls the “nature-colonizing system in practice”(2003 52). In her essay about Australia, “Decolonizing Relationships With Nature”, Plumwood focuses on two colonising frameworks.<sup>14</sup> First, there is the “mistreatment by the Australian colonizing culture of the land to which it has supposedly brought progress and reason; and, secondly, the way the naming of the land can both reflect and reinforce colonial relationships...” (52). Plumwood argues that the history of White Australia demonstrates how anthropocentric dualisms that began with the scientific revolution (the male/female and human/nature dualisms in particular) working alongside polarisation, devaluing/othing and denial, form the basis of colonisation:

“Nature” then encompasses the underside of rationalist dualisms that oppose reason to nature, mind to body, emotional female to rational male, human to animal, and so on. Progress is the progressive overcoming, or control of, this “barbarian” non-human or semi-human sphere by the rational sphere of European culture and “modernity”. In this sense, a culture of rational colonization in relation to those aspects of the world, whether

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<sup>14</sup> Again, I differentiate between the US and Australian spelling of colonization and colonisation. Plumwood is Australian. In an Australian publication, colonising would be spelt with an “s”. In a discussion about colonisation, it seems important to specify these differences.

human or non-human, that are counted as “nature” is part of the general cultural inheritance of the West (2003, 53).

In colonial Australia, the nonhuman world constantly threatened to overwhelm the Euro- and androcentric colonists. The White male world endowed itself with reason and supremacy, whereas “nature”, inferior to the ideal and considered less than human, less ideal, primitive, animalistic and also female, held the threat of being uncontrollable while at the same time women were a necessary adjunct. The women of England, as convicts, wives and sisters, were part of the colonising invasion of the Antipodes but, in terms of the literary tradition in which Simpson writes, for the botanising women amongst them, their skill as collectors and artists was enlisted. Gates reminds us how “women contributed particularly strongly to the enterprise of natural history: through collection, illustration and close observation” (66).

When the renowned Baron Sir Ferdinand V Mueller, Government Botanist, needed collectors, he recruited 3000, of whom 300, or ten per cent, were women. In remote Western Australia, he was able to set up a network of twenty skilled women who knew enough about plants to collect and paint for the “great” scientist (Olsen 11). For women without such endowments, their relationship to nature was largely as moderated and controlled as “back home”. They could still be encouraged to:

... ramble in the Australian bush ... gathering a handful of pretty little wildflowers ... Many Ladies, I am sure, would devote much of their leisure to the healthy exercise of a daily walk, coupled with the instructive and elevating pursuit of studying our native plants ... (Dexter 32).

Caroline Dexter, feminist, writer-editor-publisher, is writing in her *Ladies Almanack* in 1858, the first such publication of the colony. Dexter was politicised, unorthodox and outspoken, and either because she was intrepid (Ugnow) or in denial, she does not mention the dangers of women getting lost on their “ramble” through un-White-trodden bush.

By the time Dexter is writing in the mid-nineteenth century, Australia is decades into White “settlement”. “The economic, political and cultural institutions of nineteenth-century Australia bore a strong stamp of colonialism, strong enough in many cases to allow British attitudes to survive nearly unchanged” (Schekter 61). And, to pick up on my earlier point about the usefulness of co-opting nature (or in effect the entire pre-colonial state) for rhetoric:

Part of the political function of early settler accounts was to inform and encourage potential emigrants from Europe. As a result, published works tended to be somewhat selective, defining landscapes, flora and fauna in European terms, ridding the scene of its original inhabitants, and reassuring readers that civilised life was in practise (Simpson 2018).

These selective “reassurances” were required in order to both encourage new colonists *and* to counteract growing cultural complexes and anxieties. The Empire’s entrenched attitudes towards race, class, gender and nature had little flexibility. In “The Lost Child In Australian Fiction”, one of the earlier critical papers on the subject, John Schekter describes how early settlers were “injected into the new territory” as, “finished and educated individuals, according to the codes of the societies they leave. The encounter ... between the values of an old society and those of a new environment [and] English visitors or colonists ... begin[s] with the naïve assumption that Australia will be just like home” (61). Indeed, most encounters with Australian nature showed it to be most *un*-like home. One thing new arrivals quickly learnt was to never wander off, because the risk of getting lost in the bush was high. Getting lost in the Australian bush was not like getting lost “at home” in the New Forest or the Salcey Forest or the newly established National Arboretum at Westonbirt House. In Australia, getting lost could be fatal. Cautionary tales about this very real danger were quickly produced in newspapers, journals, letters and early short stories and novels. As Peter Pierce suggests in the earliest of the scholarly books on the subject, the Lost-in-the Bush plot is found frequently in works of fiction and becomes one of several genres arising from the colony’s many cultural anxieties. In a press interview, Pierce says:

“Almost every major Australian writer of the 19th century had a ‘lost child’ story,” Pierce says, citing episodes from Henry Kingsley’s *The Recollections of Geoffrey Hamlyn, Such is Life* by Joseph Furphy, the story *Pretty Dick* by Marcus Clarke, and the Henry Lawson story *Babes in the Bush*, in which a squatter initially denies having lost his child while out on a spree. By the end of his tragic life, the squatter, who once owned thousands of acres, owns nothing but a single child-sized plot in Waverley cemetery (Fairfax Media).

While *Nest* can be regarded as belonging to the “Australian lost-child” narrative trope, familiar in theatre, film and literature, it could also belong to the broader “Australian Gothic”. Simpson works against that genre in her work and, as she says, seeks, “To move beyond Gothic representations, the fearful othering of our landscapes as hostile places against which we must pit

ourselves and fail" (2010 170). And yet the Australian environment, the driest inhabited continent, is particularly sensitive to climate change and hence climate anxiety. Prior to 2014, when she was writing *Nest*, Simpson's wish may have been to avoid narrating a hostile place. To some readers now, all the enchantment with place and nature that protagonist Jen conveys to us is inevitably contextualised within Anthropocene fears of mass extinction and climate disaster, possibly manifesting as panic (Cohen and Colebrook).<sup>15</sup> But in the story world of *Nest*, any climate change or extinction themes are filtered through Jen's moderating influence. As she says to a "shiny faced young scientist [...] 'We're the only species destroying our own habitat. That doesn't seem so clever to me'"(59). As Frank says in "Ironbark", in her discussion of Simpson's lack of regard for 'bush Gothic', any Gothic tone in *Nest* derives from its "mystery of two missing children, as well as ... exploring the psychology of love and grief and the role of the natural world in healing. [...] while Jen's day to day encounters with birds in the landscape take centre stage ..." (233). Simpson may disavow the Gothic categorisation, but Frank has privileged it in her discussion of three of the concerns of *Nest*: missing children, the psychology of love and grief, and birds taking centre stage. Frank privileges the "mystery of two missing children" as a key signifier of the Gothic in Australia and the marketing of the book does suggest that *Nest* belongs squarely in the "missing children mystery" genre, but birds *are*, as Frank states (but does not expand on), "the centre stage" of the text, as I have demonstrated in Chapter Two. The lost or missing child element is presented both by Frank, as well as all the book's marketing, as the actual "centre stage" (to use Frank's phrase) of the book.

On the front cover of *Nest* is the marketing slugline: "A gripping and thought-provoking novel about finding the lost child in all of us." On the back cover is a brief synopsis:

When a girl in Henry's class goes missing, Jen is pulled back into the depths of her own past ... everyone is waiting — for the girl to be found and the summer rain to arrive. At

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<sup>15</sup> Scholars devise new theoretical frameworks in order to approach this growing awareness: the Anthropocene is widely covered and, alarmingly already "post-Anthropocene" (Jagodzinski). Also see capitalocene (Sterling), neganthropocene (Stiegler), the Trumpocene (Ross) and, in a neat conflated overview of these approaches, what John P. Clark (Clark) and Justin McBrien call the necrocene or, "the processes of extinction and necrosis under capitalism" (McBrien 134).

last, the answers come, like the wet, in a rush — torrential, drenching, but ultimately revitalising — and the countryside delivers up its lost children.

Some readers have reported a disappointment, upon engagement with the missing child plot, that the book itself is not a “full on” detective fiction. The first time I read the book, I, too, thought it would be a crime drama with a plot, structure and form typical of the crime-fiction genre. This assumption proved correct and also incorrect, and this is one of the interesting puzzles of the book. It would seem, then, that the lost child is the plot “problem” that, as a generic plot device, is what needs to be solved. What the text actually does is grapple with much larger questions and present us with multiple possibilities as to their solution. In order to constrain this potentially complex analysis, in the next chapter, I focus my discussion on what Frank chose as the book’s point of difference, being “birds at centre stage”. My scrutiny of the relationship between the missing child mystery plot and the Jen trans bird plot will reveal that both plots are engaged in a process by which they mutually inflect each other in accord with the third plotline — the transontological metonymic — and perform the metonymic act that opens the book out on to the multiple possible solutions offered by the ecofeminist imaginary. This theoretical insight could be mobilised without referencing the lost child perspective. However, by incorporating it, *Nest’s* more satisfying textual complexities are revealed.

### **The lost child in *Careless* and *Nest***

Carmel Bird, an Australian author and essayist whose career spans the last fifty years of Australian fiction, affords a twenty-first century contextualisation of the lost child plot. In “Dreaming the Place: An Exploration of Antipodean Narratives”, Bird says:

The lost, the stolen child – this must be a narrative that is lodged in the heart and imagination, nightmare and dream, of all human beings. In Australia the nightmare became reality. The child is the future, and if the child goes, there can be no future. The true stories and the folk tales on this theme are mirror images of each other. And the landscape of Australia played and plays its part in them, nourishing the anxiety, proving the validity of the fear. Australia, raw, rough and wild, where the people were already cut off from home by thousands of miles of ocean, was the perfect place for children to disappear, for the future to go missing (7).

The above quote is actually in relation to Bird’s most recent novel, *Field of Poppies*. Like *Nest*, the novel has an inciting incident where the remains of a young woman, missing for some

years, are discovered amongst the roots and soil beneath a tree by a river. The river, unlike Jen's neighbour, is near a goldfield near the site of a massacre of First Australians. Both authors thus re-visit tropes of colonial Australian fiction and re-contextualise them into the missing child plot of late twentieth-century fiction, also pointing to the uses of crime fiction genre conventions and their relevance to popular culture. I continue with the Australian contemporary literary context that I introduced in Chapter One and return to one of the three writers I said could be usefully compared with Simpson – Deborah Robertson. The comparison, based on the writers all being scholar-novelists, is possibly not enough to make a taxonomical grouping based on anything but the broadest of connections so I offered a “hinterland Gothic” connection between Simpson, Lucashenko, Cole and Armstrong, but the theme of Robertson's first novel is so strongly linked to *Nest* that it bears discussion here. The following is from a review written by Peter Pierce, author of *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*:

Early in Deborah Robertson's brilliant first novel, *Careless*, six children are killed by a father tormented by lack of access to the two of them who were his own. Thoughts of a memorial, not only to those children but to the legions of others whose loss has been such a crucial historical circumstance and cultural anxiety in Australia, are crystallised in this question: “How does our nation come to terms with a history of children lost, stolen, worked, hurt, abandoned, detained and dispossessed?” (2006).

Pierce and other reviewers focused on the book's pre-occupation with lost children; “Lost children people *Careless*: in lived experience; in the news; in fairy tales and myths; reminding the reader and the characters of the many lost children throughout history and the immeasurable emptiness they leave behind” (Slater 1). The text is structured around four protagonists. In discrete chapters for each of them — Pearl and mother, Lily; Sonia; Anna and Adam — the characters are linked only by their personal relationships to loss and grief. The inciting incident of the novel is a shooting in a quiet suburban park. Pearl is the only child who survives, while her younger brother, Riley, is one of the victims. Sonia has recently lost her own husband but often recalls details of the disappearance of the Beaumont children, siblings who went missing in 1960s Adelaide. Anna's daughter has been murdered. Adam is a sculptor who wants to win the commission for erecting the memorial to the shooting. There may be an expectation that the four are immediately related to one of the murdered children and sole adult, but this is true only of Pearl, the one person who survived the shooting. There are few plot points that link the characters back to the shooting and it is this that keeps the text firmly outside of any crime genres. It is, however, along with *Nest*, a type of popular/literary fiction that deals

with the effects of violent crime. Although *Careless* is *very* concerned with loss (Slater), mostly of children, it is not a mystery and so it doesn't need to offer the solving of a mystery to provide a sense of resolution or reclamation, which readers may expect in a crime novel. *Nest*, however, does not so easily step outside of the mystery genre and is an example of the turn that Pierce describes in *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*. After his analysis of nineteenth-century writing about lost children, Pierce identifies the historical moment when a cultural shift occurs — the narration of the child who is lost in the bush becomes the late twentieth-century narration of the child who was murdered and then buried in the bush (186).

*Nest* is marketed as a mystery/thriller (although the two are different) so a reader can expect levels of anxiety, tension and fear. Genre conventions would create expectations — that both Caitlin and Michael have been murdered, that the murderer is still at large and may threaten Jen, that Jen may have known him/her all along, that Jen might have been implicated in the disappearances, that Jen might have been a victim herself which means all this is imagined by her Susie Salmon-like ghost,<sup>16</sup> that the ghost and the house will be consumed by a bush fire — any and all of these narrative devices are possible and expected by readers familiar with the genre. Indeed, *Nest* does employ many of them. Detailing the many plot variants of crime fiction is beyond the scope of this thesis but there are some salient points.

*Nest* is a mystery, not a thriller. In a mystery, the crime has already happened or is happening and the understanding of it is often the problem that protagonist needs to solve. If there is any danger to the protagonist, it is likely to occur because they are close to solving the mystery and the genre requires an escalation of tension at that point. This tension manifests fully around the crisis and climax. In a thriller, however, the protagonist is likely to be in danger right from the beginning because the antagonist (be it human villain or faceless corporation or system) is manipulating the events that must be solved/overcome. Both genres may escalate and release tension and conflict, and both may employ various characters and subplots to facilitate that, but a thriller is likely to be much more “suspenseful” and even labelled as suspense; for example, the domestic suspense genre. In the case of a lost child narrative, there is a chronology of pending doom involved. When a child goes missing, the day or two after their disappearance may mean they are “lost” (as in lost their way and might come home) but after 2 to 3 days they are missing,

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<sup>16</sup> In Alice Sebold's novel *The Lovely Bones*, Susie Salmon is a 14-year-old girl who has been raped and murdered and narrates the text from heaven.

probably abducted, possibly dead. That short “ticking clock” time frame may be written as a thriller — with great reliance on suspense. Hallie Ephron, author of four, and reviewer of hundreds of crime novels for *The Boston Globe* says:

Most mystery novels have a final climactic action scene, fraught with mortal danger during which the sleuth and the villain duke it out ... that scene contains the payoff for the entire novel. ... After that comes a coda, a more contemplative scene in which all is explained. You can write three hundred pages of great book, but if the final twenty don't fulfil the promise, it's a washout. (58)

When a child has been missing for months or years, the sense of mortal danger, along with the momentum of the ticking clock, has dissipated into a different form of suffering and the genre is likely to be a mystery, as with *Nest* or a post-trauma narrative like *Careless*. In a mystery the character of the protagonist, in relation to the plot, is a critical element. The protagonist evolves in accordance with the plot and themes, while the plot and themes usually reflect the concerns of the protagonist (and vice versa). Or to put it another way, Ephron also says, “Drama works in direct proportion to how miserable you make your protagonist” (56). Being miserable, and I do not mean to be glib here, is almost expected of a mystery genre protagonist. They are, after all, dealing with death, the survivors of death, and both the causes and memory of death. Mary Evans, in *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World*, says:

... it is a genre which continues to assert the impact of death on the survivors ... famous detectives are touched by the death of those close to them, and they are marked by it. It is on this capacity of human beings to be changed and affected by the death of others that detective fiction is particularly articulate; what is recognized is that people do not “recover” from the death of others, and that memory is a central part of the human condition (165).

The notion of “recovering”, says Evans, is entangled with grief, evil and justice and it is the detective who affords discussion of what are often overwhelming, or what Ephron has called the miserable, themes. Resolution and emotional closure are often impossible, and yet, the dominant emotional rhetoric of the twenty-first century tells us only to “move on” or to “seek some kind of closure” (Evans 165).

In *Nest*, as Jen takes on the role of detective, she is made to articulate the impact of death on the survivors. Jen gently acknowledges crucial moments in those first few days of Caitlin's

disappearance, at the same time moving back to the disappearances of her father and Michael. But she is at a distance physically (she does not live in town) and emotionally (she has kept these memories at a distance). Because of Henry's bond with Caitlin and because Jen has experienced those ticking-clock days herself, she is immersed in the potential misery and she works it out through focusing on the details of her art, her surroundings and her memories. *Flightless Bird* can be regarded as Jen's major non-dominative artistic expression of working through those details within the context of her identity and self-meaning. Also, as *Flightless Bird* is produced before the three deaths have been resolved, then the giant nest, produced after the resolution of two of the deaths, has even more to do with death, closure and recovery. Evans continues with her discussion on being touched by death and the difficulty of recovery. She holds the death of millions in mind when she considers what she calls "the dominant political agenda":

Modernity has always been premised on the value of movement, progress, change and the ready abandonment of the past. Yet, with this has disappeared a certain degree of understanding about the way in which human beings are made and formed by the past and that sometimes it is appropriate not to forget and not to assume that latent conflicts can be solved by "moving on" (Evans 166).

The question that *Nest* raises, and which Jen is allowed to pose for us is, how will society "move on" from something larger than the disappearance of its children? How will society move on if there is, for example, the very real possibility of zero children? One of Evans's references in her discussion of "the past" is the Holocaust. It would seem that, for Jen, the idea of moving on is expressed in personal terms in both the trans bird and missing child mystery plotlines. But in terms of a subversion of the dominant political agenda and issues that hold as much significant dimension as the Holocaust (for example, something as significant as the imminent collapse of all planetary biosystems), that is the concern of the ecofeminist imaginary, and expression of that concern is found in the conflation of the three plotlines, as expressed in the final metonymy of the novel. The expected tropic plotlines of the mystery genre — secrets buried and revealed, children missing and found, wounds uncovered and healed — are only a disguise for a far more important narrative move. Just when the missing children's bodies are revealed, Jen's real purpose, as well as that of the novel, is likewise revealed. The novel has been incubating a subsequent and arguably greater (in terms of textual strategy) intent, which is actually to manifest possible solutions to the extreme consequences of the dominative systems that are destroying the planet and this is so unrepresentable that the text has to do it through metonymy and apophasis.

This apophasis and metonym constitute another nesting, this time of literary and narrative devices that “mutually inflect each other”, which I have said previously reflects the manner of Mathews’ onto-poetics, not least because of the chain of signification involving trans bird, egg, nest, missing child, missing future but because, as Mathews says, the mutual inflection must *add* to both/each/all of the inflected. To discuss this now, I look at how the crisis of the novel produces the conflation of all those elements, but to do that it is useful to leave the lost child for a moment and return to a plot point that precedes the art exhibition and foreshadows the conflation. This event occurs just before the moment of crisis.

### **The egg, the nest, the trans bird, the humavian**

There is an event that foreshadows both *Flightless Bird* and the giant nest. It is also one of the mutually inflecting moments that contribute to the chain of signifiers building towards the giant nest. It is the moment Jen reveals her “treeboat” for the first time. Several days before the exhibition, after an emotional visit with her Aunt Sophie, Jen is driven to toss her camping gear in the back of the ute and go bush for a few days. She chooses her favourite national park and does a one-day walk in, intending to camp overnight. It is another bird with a totemic role that guides Jen to her campsite:

A golden whistler flew in front of her, darting from branch to branch just above her eyeline. She let him lead her away from the path, taking his bright yellow chest as a sign. ... The bird alighted on a low branch of a tallowwood then flew up to its higher branches to sing an encouraging song, his white face banded by black.

“Really?” she said, looking up. “This one?” She could just reach the solid lower limb (199).

So, the campsite is in a tree? Yes, because Jen has a treeboat. The treeboat is a complicated hammock developed from technology used by the “skywalking” tree scientists whom Jen and Craig worked alongside in the tall redwoods in California. Treeboats are designed so that the scientists can sleep in the treetops instead of making the difficult climbs up and down. When Jen has made the rig secure, she climbs into:

...her nest while it rested on her portbranch...The first stars twinkled through the branches above, and birds settled into their roosts around her.

[Morning breaks.]

She lay snug in her nest, watching the sun come up. Light flowed into the valley, revealing layer upon layer of colour and texture. Finches and wrens chattered around her, and a breeze ran up, tickling her face and rattling the leaves. It was Thoreau who said that in wildness lay the preservation of the world: one of his more optimistic remarks. She knew that she could not save the world by drawing it. There was nothing, it seemed, that could shift or slow the human compulsion to consume the planet — but she could still save herself (202).

Jen has taken a further step towards an avian perspective, one that does not entail making an artwork. She questions whether that would do anything to “shift the human compulsion to consume the planet”. And yet, Jen’s avian compulsion may be an act of what Sandilands calls “a moment of disjuncture between subject position and subject, thus offering a route into the questioning of the possibility of identity itself” (1999 98); that is, the moment when a subject’s identity can be re-constituted in order to embody a paradigmatic shift. In the trans bird plotline, this shift is actually about to occur.

After the night in the treeboat, the chain of signification in the Jen trans bird plotline is narrated as Jen’s identification with and as a bird. Rather than predictable genre drivers, this now takes over as the main “growth” action of the text. Not only is this a radical non-dominative move in terms of action in narration, as well as reflecting Donovan’s idea of a non-dominative aesthetic, but it is also expressed through character action and metonymy within a fictional text. That is, the generic devices of the missing person genre that I mentioned above are only used to complete her dramatic growth *to an extent*. Her major growth in terms of a non-dominative mode of being comes from her own growth as trans bird. As a result, the missing child mystery and the trans bird plotline then mutually inflect each other and beneficially increase by adding the trans metonymic plotline, discussed at length in the next chapter. This models both Mathews’ transvaluative onto-poetics and also Sandilands’ paradigmatic shift and coalitional move.

In Jen’s case, the shift begins as a move from a dominative to non-dominative identity. She has said that her drawing will not save the world. In order to afford a transition from dominative to non-dominative, her contribution may need to occur elsewhere. This is plotted as follows. Jen’s treeboat night in an airborne nest is followed by another, albeit with a difference, in Chapter 56, just after the exhibition opening. She gathers all the little nature-mementos of Craig that are arranged in her studio – the fossils, eggs, sticks and stones – and drops them from the treetop. The text has not yet arrived at the world-changing/saving action of Jen’s giant nest-

building but this is the arc that leads there, beginning with the reveal of the treeboat that I have just described and represented in *Flightless Bird*. The arc is also (simultaneously) the transontological metonymic plotline, which will be introduced at the end of this chapter, then further elaborated in the next chapter.

In the same storm that reveals the bodies of Caitlin and Michael, the mementos of Craig that Jen had earlier let fall to the ground have been washed away. Soon after the bodies are released by the police, the moving and cathartic funeral for Caitlin occurs. Jen attends and has some emotional release. In terms of mental well-being, this is a small but important step in Jen's personal growth. After the storm there is tidying to do, and while Jen busies herself, she notices a pair of spotted pardalotes who are "pinching straw" for their nest. There have been several references to nesting in the text,<sup>17</sup> and there are also references to the birds "moving in" to Jen's own house (225). Five wompoo doves settle in the rafters above her bed, thus crossing boundaries themselves. The building of Jen's own nest is foreshadowed the morning after the funeral:

... all her baskets ended up with bottoms falling out but the pardalotes and finches for miles around had lovely woven nests. She had seen them, hanging in the understorey, where it was thick: grassy domes with a side entrance, nursing a clutch of white eggs. Very appealing residences, indeed, and much more snug and secure than an open nest (263).

Soon after, on an errand in town, she goes into the second-hand shop to find a seat for the garden. A "hanging ball had caught her eye from the carpark" (265). The pardalotes have been working on Jen's subconscious because three pages later, "Those pardalotes had given her an idea" (266). She takes the hanging ball home to the garden, strips it and begins work, wrapping canes of bamboo around the metal frame. We know that she has just represented herself as a birdwoman in her last major piece of art. What might become of this hanging iron frame?

Birdsong filled the clearing, the perfect accompaniment to her work [...]

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<sup>17</sup> One is detailed above in the treeboat section, another is in the house-cleaning section (discussed in Chapter 3 in the bird-action context) where Jen says her house is not unlike a nest, a foreshadowing of the giant nest.

The pile of bamboo was disappearing fast, but there would be enough to complete this layer ... Dappled light danced over leaves. Robins and fantails fussed about nearby, as if recognising what was beginning to take shape.

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She set off with her water bottle straight after breakfast. The nest was lying where she had left it, on its side among grasses. ... She started the day's work gathering the long slender sticks, preferably with a bit of bend in them (267).

[...] she could begin to imagine finishing (268).

[...] She alternated bark and vine ... as much as for camouflage as aesthetics. A good nest should not be visible from the ground.

The birds had grown used to her, and the monster nest, sing-songing all around and darting down to take insects she disturbed. The rope had bothered them for a while, resembling a super-long snake. She gathered it up now, and fed one end through the great steel ring at the top of the nest, knotting it off according to the instructions she had written out. She ran the other end through the pulley, and tossed it over the branch. She raised the nest, hand over hand. The nest's shape was almost as she had imagined, drawn and planned (269).

In terms of the actions Jen performs as protagonist, the point towards which I have been taking my argument is that *Flightless Bird* is a Jen-as-trans bird painting and that, followed by the building of the giant nest, both — as constructed works and narrative components of the novel — are representative of a conflation that is at the same time transontological in action as well as in textual theme and form. The transontological move that the text has been working towards has been actioned and Jen's journey towards a non-dominative way of being not “in nature” but “of nature” has progressed. It is not hegemonic-natural, but it is ecofeminist imaginary-natural and therefore new ontology-natural. Everything conflates into each other, like strands of fibre in a nest. There is Jen's desire to represent the nonhuman not like other but like herself or, equally, to represent herself as nonhuman or other or, equally, to represent each mode of being or onto-ness as the other — as transontological. This is an action that seeks to express through embodiment that which is beyond expression and it is a queer move. An abject move is that the painting aesthetically *cleaves* or removes the boundary between acceptable and not-acceptable bodies (cross-species again) while the nest removes an ontological boundary between what

should remain outside human biological experience (wild nature) and inside it (human nature). An apophatic element is that both the queer and abject moves had to be made by both Simpson as author and Jen as character because the languaging that could *speak* the complexities of those moves is only available as the narration of the aesthetic representation of the abject or negative or unrepresentable.

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Immediately after Jen has built the giant nest, the bones next to Caitlin are confirmed as Michael's. His family are contacted. Soon afterwards, two arrests are made and connected to Caitlin and Michael — the killers are an uncle and nephew from a neighbouring town. There is a memorial service for Michael at which Jen and her classmates regroup after decades of disparate lives and livelihoods. They finally have the closure they have perhaps yearned for over that time. Jen can grieve, as she advised Henry to do when Caitlin's disappearance was resolved. She reconnects with one of her and Michael's closest friends, Phil, who has brought several of Jen's works since she first exhibited. The service marks virtual closure on the missing children plotline but the service, combined with the ensuing building of the giant nest is what actually makes the space to find out about Jen's father. The idea of "if you build it he will come," (Kinsella) can be read into the action in hindsight (because Jen does build the nest and the information that she needs about her father does come to her), but Jen's nest-building is not a conscious desire to manifest her father. Rather, it can be read as a conscious desire to nurture herself and afford solution to the mystery of the lost child/missing child. I use both terms here to signal that for Jen, they are similar in that the nest, which was made from a discarded "something bought for a child", does provide a haven for Jen. She can be lost and missing and still safe in the nest. She can be an egg or a fledgling or an adult, but her unconscious desire is possibly the same. The *unconscious* desire is to resolve the lost-child complex (Waddell) that she has been living with for so long. This desire, or it can equally be expressed as an ambition, is what offers up the additional "discovery" of the book, just as the rain revealed the buried bodies of Caitlin and then Michael, just as there is a nest within a nest.

The birdwoman, trans bird or humavian now has a nest of her own, one species among many. As such, this monster (or, perhaps, monster's) nest, may seem to be a simply presented symbolic move that describes the human and nonhuman in peaceful co-existence. This alone would have some narrative import. But this nest is, because of a particular representational significance that I am about to discuss, somewhat more significant. Through the conflation of

the three plotlines, the novel becomes more than a structural reworking of a self-fulfilling, convention-driven Australian Gothic lost-child trope or murder mystery. If the text is read only at the level of mystery genre, its most crucial performance of meaning remains concealed within the textual nestings of *Nest*. I said earlier that the question the text is working towards is whether “the problem” that Jen as detective is solving is missing child or missing future. The question will be answered in the following, and final, chapter.

## Chapter Four —

### Future Apophatic: Lost Child Lost Planet

In the previous chapters I singled out the Jen trans bird plotline that began with robins in the birdbath and reached a plot crisis with the art exhibition. I compared the formulations of the Jen trans bird plotline with a second plotline, called the missing child mystery plotline, and scrutinised both via a lens of non-interpretative narrative elements, such as historical context and structural (as in formal) considerations including complications of the lost child plot and mystery-genre conventions. I then applied a more interpretative approach to discuss how genre conventions delivered new meaning when considered via Donovan's non-dominative aesthetic, Rigby's transvaluation, Mathews' onto-poetics and Sandilands' coalitional value, all of which I re-oriented as transontology. I am now going to show how these multiple theoretical expressions of the ecofeminist imaginary manifest in the third plotline, the transontological metonymy plotline, and how the text produces it as an effective means of pushing at what appears to be a foreclosing of some possible futures because of imminent environmental catastrophe. I do this by expanding my discussion of narrative strategies of action and language which began with a chronological overview of the connection between Jen and her bird neighbours. I then turn to the use of non-dominative language in Inga Simpson's *Nest*, and frame the discussion with further reference to the ecofeminist imaginary. Thus, in this final chapter of the thesis, I argue that an ecofeminist imaginary, after centuries of producing narratives as a means of understanding how the entrenched patriarchal system has devalued and exploited women and nature, is now pushing against its own foreclosure — can it write a future if a future is unlikely and, if that is the case, what language can express or even accommodate this eventuality?

In the second chapter I showed how Jen's actions held a relatively consistent ethical position. She begins the book as an artist, settler and observer of birds and ends not just alongside them but amongst them as co-habitant. I discussed Jen's actions in relation to character, relationships and setting, but I signalled some possibly problematic language in the way Jen *referred* to nature as opposed to how she acted within it and represented it. Considering Jen's actions — whether Jen has a certain set of values that she acts upon within an ethics of care context — suggests a need to question how Jen's own language and the language of the text supports and reflects that. *Nest* does employ a realist mode of prose writing recognisable as the

style “engine” of popular fiction. If the book is read only at this level, it continues to fulfil genre conventions after the plotline climaxes thus far identified (missing children and trans bird) and resolves with Henry going away to high school and Jen picking up her land-care duties with Lil, ending with the pair of them enacting a kind of understated baptism in the creek — they strip off and go for a swim. The text must be read at a deeper level, however, if one of its crucial performances of meaning is to be uncovered.

I argue that an ecofeminist reading uncovers this deeper meaning. In what follows, I follow a similar procedure to that which detailed both action and the lost child genre complications in my previous chapter: I set out a linear development of non-dominative language in relation to birds, describe the crisis and climax points of that particular arc, then compare these moments with a similar set of transitions that occur in and around the crisis and climax of the first two plotlines. My intent is to show how the possible foreclosure of the ecofeminist imaginary is produced and narrated in *Nest* when the two plotlines thus far uncovered converge and produce a third plotline, which I am calling the transontological metonymic plotline. This plotline has been working towards the climactic revelation of the metonymic device of the giant nest-building, a device that has in fact, while concealed by the array of more conventional formal devices, been structuring the plot since the epigraph. Here, my concern is with how *Nest* narrates the relationship between future and no future. I shall show that the Jen/birds/nest arcs, through their transontological relationship with each other, are formal and organising devices that “uplift” both Jen’s arc and the novel’s thematic ambition to a space of negotiating the impossible apophasis of “future”.

In *Noah's Ark*, Kate Rigby says, “If Global Warming Criticism is to live up to its name, then, it must face up to the ineluctability of eco-catastrophe” (2007, 166). In “The (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis”, Rigby suggests that, even though the narration of the limits of meaning will present difficulties in any articulation of or for the nonhuman, there are old tools — in this case compared with prehistoric Indigenous Australian practice — available to authors. In her essay, Rigby uses poiesis as means to discuss “the wider question of whether there could ever be a creative practice and a critical methodology that do not fall short of giving voice to the natural “world” (2004, 428). By poiesis she means more than literary form: “poiesis ... the older form of techne ... of bringing forth ... which lets things be in their obscure otherness in the very process of revealing them within the work of art” (ibid). Referring to Heidegger’s writing of the “broken and unhealable” post-war world, Rigby says, “The poet, I am tempted to say, borrowing a term from Australian aboriginal cultures, ‘sings up’ the dwelling place, weaving the fourfold into the

poetic word" (ibid, 432). Rigby goes on to qualify some of the limitations of the linguistic structures available to writers and artists:

... for it is only within the *logos* of the word that the otherwise undisclosed being of things is revealed. And Language thus not only constructs the horizon of understanding, the world, within which we experience the being of beings. It is also, more grandly, through language that we answer to the call of Being by drawing things forth into the "clearing" (*Lichtung*) of an articulated world ... This seems to me to risk falling back into the hubris of ... anthropocentrism (ibid, 433).

The *logos* is a limiting mechanism of enframement, where naming a "thing" (in this case human and more-than) according to the logic of the *logos*, thereby disavows the originating and "owned" logic of the thing that has been named. This logic of naming from within the ontology of domination is similar to Donovan's critique of the Kantian aesthetic principle I mentioned earlier. Asks Rigby, "If all naming frames, how then can the poet speak of things in a way that allows them their own being?" (ibid, 437). The text, says Rigby does so:

... to the extent that it draws attention to its own status as text and hence as a mode of enframing. In this sense, the literary text saves the earth by disclosing the nonequation of word and thing, poem and place. It may do so in a variety of ways, to which the ecocritic, in company, for once, with the deconstructionist, should be attentive (ibid).

Rigby, in reference to the fifth century BCE ethical debate of the *nomos/physis* (*physis*) divide, is saying that there can be an autonomy of things, but it is possibly not afforded by language, which is a disclosure of the nonequation of word and thing. This disclosure of nonequation is how the metonymic device of *Nest* organically evolves, as it were, emerging "out of" the dominative ethos and offering the idea of a non-dominative language. It does so, compelled by the need to *be* the inexpressible, autonomous thing; the thing that cannot be expressed. That is, non-dominative language develops throughout the text, from a mode of slight and qualified anthropomorphism, through a negotiation of androcentric and anthropomorphic perspectives until the metonymic launchpad is revealed at the climax of the plot. This is the point where both Jen and the text release themselves from the constraints of "the nonequation of word and thing" by, not just narrating Jen as "Birdwoman" and, after the building of the nest, "Trans bird", but also by fulfilling the ambition of the text, which is for nest (both as a concept

and material home) to be metonymic of planet and for the reader to consequently empathise with both nest and planet.

The languaging and structuring of the metonymy of nest as planet needs to be made evident from a variety of perspectives if the metonymy is to withstand scrutiny. In the first instance, a material ecofeminist perspective or viewpoint is useful. Considering the idea of the trans-corporeal from Stacy Alaimo in *Material Feminisms*, it can be proposed that the metonymy works as one materiality or “thing” standing not for another but enmeshed with another. That is, if we regard the human as trans-corporeally linked to the more-than-human, then you can never separate some “thing” from that for which it stands because they are not separated in the act of standing – they are materially linked and can even be considered as both the same unity. As Alaimo (2008) says:

Crucial ethical and political possibilities emerge from this literal “contact zone” between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the corporeal substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’ (237).

Alaimo’s theoretical position can be applied to the idea that in a non-dominative mode of being (preceded perhaps by a non-dominative mode of apprehension and perception), the relationship between representation and the material must take a linguistic shift. Metonymy operates as more than a representational device (and this goes back to Rigby’s impossible languaging) because in materiality, metonymy operates in everything all the time — ecologically, it is unwise to separate a “thing” from that for which it is standing “in” because everything “stands in for” everything “else”, more or less conflating the “else” and “something”.

### **Non-dominative language and the metonymy of *Nest***

A further perspective, and one that I shall now engage with extensively, is to analyse how the text performs in terms of non-dominative language in order to facilitate its endpoint — to narrate Jen’s mode of living as intentional non-domination. I show how Jen and the text move from a position and languaging of anxiety to less anxiety. This enables *Nest’s* metonymic leap whereby representation of a nest empty of eggs becomes metonymic for/with a lost planet when the three plotlines converge *within* the narrative structure afforded by the metonymy of nest. For it is in the metonymy of nesting, embedded in the third plotline, that the book reveals that its

project perhaps works in the interpretative rather than rhetorical. All of which is to say that the metonymic processes in *Nest* offer a way in to understanding an alternative to the given state of things and more importantly an alternative way of valuing the earth.

In order to best illustrate how this third plotline works, I need to reveal how the arc of metonymy develops throughout the text. I break down the longer narrative Jen-bird-nest arc into a set of moments that illustrate a development from dominative to non-dominative language which at the same time builds the metonymic arc. My aim is to show how Jen reaches the state to which Rigby refers when she asks, “How then does the work of art ‘save’ the earth by disclosing it as unsayable?”, recalling that Jen admits that she does not think her drawing can “save the world” (*Nest* 202). In my discussion, the work of art is both the giant nest *and* the text of the novel itself, by which I mean the text can be seen to perform the metonymy in order to go beyond disclosing the earth/nonhuman/nature as unsayable by offering it up as a transontological move within the ecofeminist imaginary.

The first moment in the strategy of metonymy occurs in the title. Before a bird is even mentioned, comes the title, *Nest*. This is the first element of the durative, text-long structuring of the metonymy. Birds are not the only creatures who nest, but it is “bird” who is introduced now. The opening pages contain an epigraph and a section heading “Wing”. The text’s next words are about the relationship between birds and humans. The epigraph is taken from Mabel Osgood Wright’s *The Friendship of Nature*:

The character study of the bird is beyond the mazes of classification, beyond the counting of bones, out of the reach of the scalpel and the literature of the microscope (87).

As Osgood Wright suggests, the relationship between birds and humans in itself carries tensions of understanding, perception and representation. Already the tension emerges in a language of non-domination, acknowledging that the character of the nonhuman is “out of the reach of the scalpel and the literature of the microscope” not just because it is unfathomable or beyond expression but because we have chosen to let it remain so by devising the mazes of classification. We have almost foreclosed a possibility of representation. The tension is thus related to the one covered in the previous chapter where I discuss how Jen’s actions narrate a struggle with drawing birds “well enough” to be regarded as a “good” artistic representation (“good” can here mean, whether abstract or realist, that it fulfils its own creative ambitions and is lifelike, characterful, showing personality, technique and so on), but by the end of the book the

idea of representation has been moderated by the more coalitional action of living amongst the birds as a participant rather than observer. This is a trans-corporeal non-dominative move by the protagonist that is foreshadowed by Osgood Wright's epigraph.

The idea of what Osgood Wright means by "beyond the maze of classification" is illustrated by an encounter with Indigenous ontology in Jon Young's *What the Robin Knows*. Young tells of a friend of his who has spent time with the Kalahari San bushmen and the friend recalls how one of them (who, Eurocentrically or just through bad editing or research, remains nameless in this text) describes their relationship with birds:

If one day I see a small bird and recognize it, a thin thread will form between me and that bird. If I just see it but don't really *recognize* it, there is no thin thread. If I go out tomorrow and see and really recognize that same individual small bird again, the thread will thicken and strengthen just a little. Every time I see and recognize that bird, the thread strengthens. Eventually it will grow into a string, then a cord, and finally a rope. This is what it means to be a bushman. We make ropes with all aspects of creation in this way (xxv).

Young goes on to describe how the bushmen use mimetic movement in their storytelling — moving like grass, moving like a giraffe — so that "a great deal of understanding, awareness and connection emerges ... essential to understanding bird language. As awareness grows, appreciation grows, so does empathy" (xxvi). If we are not aware of birds (and nature), how can we begin to understand them? And the better we understand them, the more we understand their perspective. Osgood Wright's words in the epigraph point to a use of non-dominative language in narrating what needs to be put forth — the fact that science isn't everything when it comes to understanding birds. That is, they are sentient and sentience is something that can actually communicate itself and needs to be understood through "modes" that might be empathic, non-literary, non-taxonomic and more-than-scopic.

There are transontological levels to these empathic communications and there are practical levels; for example, trying to express the former into practice through language. In *Nest*, one of the achievements of the text is that it engages our empathy by juxtaposing Jen's plethora of anxieties with her instinctive caring for her more-than-human environment. We empathise with Jen's predicament and we empathise with the birds that she wants to sustain. In a dominative way of living in the world, to empathise with small nonhuman beings is a radical challenge to the social and political hierarchy, and the text at times persuades us to identify with

that. In a move approximating the subjectivity of the San bushman [un-]named by Young, who describes not just a bird but a small bird, Jen moves from the not-recognising position to one emulating “roped to creation”; that is, a non-dominative world view. In the early stages of the text, however, we are made to consider how the negotiation of this view is symptomatic of the anxieties that Jen feels.

Following on from the title and epigraph, when birds are mentioned in the body of the book, it is typically a moment when Jen has a brief (sometimes almost peripheral) observation but still names the bird by species and attributes it with a certain quality; for example, a cockatoo flying past, “beating its wings at such a leisurely pace it was a wonder it didn’t fall out of the sky” (102). In this mode, Jen pays attention to a bird and comments briefly. This is not an engaged looking, such as when Jen is working on a drawing. In general, birds are mentioned in language that is not effusive, yet it is affectionate, not excessive, but neither is it restrained. This tension arises from the challenges of accurately describing the nonhuman, the discussion of which in the previous chapter contributes to the understanding here that Jen representing herself as *Flightless Bird* is a kind of open-ended and transvaluative languaging in itself, which is nevertheless underscored by tension. The epigraph serves to foreshadow these complications of language and representation and begins the languaging of a slightly *anxious* process of inquiry. As I have used this text before, I highlight the “inquiry” words in bold and underline the anxiety-producing:

She was **trying to capture** the wild. The **secret** to what made it **unique** and **other**. She had been **trying her whole life**.

**Today** it was the eastern yellow robins bathing. **Of all the birds**, they were the most ridiculous, pitching chest-first into the water and shaking themselves into fluffy rounds until their eyes and legs disappeared. Even with the softest pencil, she **couldn't achieve the same effect** on the page (3).

Immediately there is language that foreshadows the ethical concerns of the text. The human animal (Jen) seeks to represent and live alongside nonhuman species such as birds, plants and trees but it is problematic, there is a secret that must be uncovered if this is to happen. The secret is as much a foreshadowing as the epigraph. The epigraph foreshadows that a deeper understanding of birds will be explored in the text whereas, in the first words of the book, (“secret”, “wild” and “other”), are foreshadowed three thematic strands that are structured through the three plotlines that contain the story tensions that drive the narrative — missing

child mystery, Jen trans bird and metonymy/transontology. Also, the more-than-human world is, in order of appearance, used to figure a further tension between wildness and civilisation — the eastern yellow robin, water, the pencil, the page, plants (Singapore daisy and grass lawn, both introduced species that have become, or have the potential to become, invasive). These more-than-human elements are all presented in terms of an inquiry based on understanding and concern, ranging from the desire to render an abstract concept through drawing to a desire to position herself as an ecological subject. There is also a language of valuation in play here, by which I mean a language that is ascribing ecological value to certain nonhuman beings by respecting their right to an autonomous existence, which is a preferable practice than valuing a nonhuman being because it has monetary or resource-value (Plumwood 2002 109). Even the word “ridiculous”, which can mean “worthy of ridicule” but can also mean “amusingly absurd”, can be read as a valuation of sorts, but not one that is based on what Plumwood calls a “value dualism” (Davion 235) where the human values are in opposition to the bird values. What we discover by reading on is that this language of valuation has its source in an empathetic mode that avoids anthropomorphism.

An “anthropomorphism!” antenna-alert can easily be triggered by phrases or descriptions such as “they were the most ridiculous” and also, “The robins made the most of it, their chests and rumps flashing a complementary yellow as they darted for insects”. Nik Taylor in “Anthropomorphism and the Animal Subject” says anthropomorphism is a remedy for the Cartesian idea that animals are “merely machinic beings” that (not “who”) have no feelings, emotions, characteristics even. It is preferable, Taylor maintains, to sustain this empathy rather than, in an androcentric fashion, aggrandise our position through acts of superiority. This is better than the attribution of emotions and mental states to animals that cannot be proven by scientific standards (N. Taylor 266). Taylor speaks as a sociologist who views anthropomorphism as follows:

Anthropomorphism ... makes murky the previously assumed clear delineations between human and non-human, between human and animal, or even between human and the broader category of everything that isn't humanity — nature. In doing so, it calls into question the superiority of humans [...] This means, then, that to progress we need to do two things. The first is to recognise and deconstruct this particular function of discourses about anthropomorphism, and the second is to clear a space where what actually happens between humans and other animals in practice can be seen (267–268).

It seems that Simpson, rather than doing the unforgivable and have Jen attribute emotions to the nonhuman, has done what Taylor suggests and cleared the space for us to see just what Jen sees. She sees “yellow fluffy”, she sees “ridiculous”, she sees “making the most of it” without overly equating the animal behaviour to the human. She is re-presenting (Trussell) the nonhuman in the narrative human space and she is placing the human within the nonhuman space in a non-invasive manner, from her perspective. Or, as Serenella Iovino says, we need an antidote to the absence of *bios* in ecological humanities, and be aware that “this thing we call literature” has traditionally treated “the *nonhuman* ... as *subjects* but bereft of subjectivity—*symbolically* present but absent as concrete entities, material actors” (113). Such an antidote is necessary as writers of literary and popular fiction do not normally portray nature on equal terms with a protagonist.<sup>18</sup> Simpson does so in *Nest*. Nature is not written as background, and the nonhuman *bios* is ecologically present and in relationship.

To continue with my discussion of the underlined text above, the anxiety about anthropomorphism that I experienced may be expected of an ecocritical reader.<sup>19</sup> The words I underlined above — “the secret of what made it [the wild] unique” — suggests there is a secret that must be uncovered, but as humans on this planet, in the Anthropocene, we know that time is running out. Now is a good time for secrets to be revealed as they can possibly help to soothe the crisis and therefore the tensions of dealing with that crisis. Here, the secret is evoked as a nirvana-like relationship, or even the ultimate perfection of Eden recovered: the God-given balance between “man” and “nature” that humankind was granted and has abused. Even if a reader is not rendered anxious or tense, we soon discover that Jen *is*. By the end of the first chapter have been revealed tensions with which the ecofeminist imaginary is very concerned —

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<sup>18</sup> There are exceptions, Virginia Woolf being oft cited. But the nonhuman still tends to be merely setting and material context, unless elevated to the role of setting-as-character, as in (to give just two examples) the short stories of Rick Bass and E. Annie Proulx's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. A web search typically reveals 15 or so titles from the modern period onwards, in which nature is a discrete and active part of the narrative strategy. See <https://electricliterature.com/14-novels-of-wildness-wilderness/>

<sup>19</sup> As Hollis Taylor points out in “Anecdote and Anthropomorphism: Writing the Australian Pied Butcherbird” anthropomorphism is “loaded with cultural bias – what is anthropomorphism to one group could be accepted orthodoxy to another. Secondly, since so few species have been studied, we scarcely know what is indeed uniquely human and what is not” (5).

balance of nature, acts of non-domination, interspecies relations, property maintenance, sustainability.

Soon, a less peripheral mode of observation occurs and when Jen comments on the birds (with only occasional anthropomorphism), it is more thoroughly contextualised within a discussion of environment (including some historical and political references). For example, in the narration of the “cocktail hour” (29), there is the feeling of an objective but involved (because the reader is placed *there* with Jen at a place where the wild is present) beasts at the waterhole scene from a safari documentary. Anxieties are alleviated. Interspecies relationships are comfortable, boundaries are observed. It is easier to relax and drop the dominative position when one is, and the wild creatures under observation are, relaxed and safe:

The sun had disappeared behind the mountain; it was cocktail hour at the birdbaths and she was missing out. Jen took a bottle of white wine from the fridge without looking at the label, opened it, and filled a glass. She carried it out to the back deck to join the birds. One rufous fantail, four Lewin's honeyeaters and three scrubwrens. The whole forest singing. A treecreeper hopped up the pole from underneath, made blind by the base of the bath.

The robins arrived at last, splashing and fluffing, sending the other birds off. Their golden yellow was luminous at dusk, as if carrying the last gleams of the sun. Only now did they sing, with their sweet piping whistle, and first thing in the morning. Their song was best suited to dusk and dawn — the in-between (29).

In the birdbath cocktail hour, nature is entertainment and spectacle and Jen is spectator. This spectator-spectacle perspective could be problematic if it is read as Jen being the privileged yet separate colonist viewing her domain, or was claiming the scene with “a conquering gaze from nowhere” (Haraway 1988, 581). The unspoken tension in my reading is currently only inferred: what happens when the boundaries are erased? But the language evokes a cocktail hour that they all share, to which all creatures have been invited (and not by Jen). Jen has wine, the creatures have their water; it's not her party, it is a shared space of refreshment and nourishment. She “join”[s] the birds rather than watch[es] the birds. Of course, she is restricted to watching because she can't actually join in. If she did, the birds would fly away. We are (generally) trained as children to watch quietly and not scare the wild animals. It's “their” area not ours, so leave them alone. Jen still has the separate space of spectator, like being on safari at the elephants' watering hole at the end of the day when they come to drink and she is “rewarded” both by the

presence of the animals and by behaviour that is particular to this hour. It is a problematic representational space when a natural environment is softly exploited in this way but it is evident in the phrase “Only now did they sing ...” that the text is now negotiating a position closer to the non-dominative. In fact, Jen endows the birds with a representational ethos that she has declared herself not able to “capture”; that is, the robins are “luminous ... as if carrying the last gleams of the sun” (29). Her (implied) descriptive power comes here through language and not action; although her observation is an action, it is from a distance. Jen is not expressing a desire to transgress any material boundaries. If one wishes to cohabit, this is an important distinction and it has been made. Hence, in an “in-between” move, she “joins” rather than watches.

There is a moment at the end of the passage when Jen says that the song of the robin is “best suited to dusk and dawn — the in-between”. This evocation of the liminal space is again used (and discussed later in this chapter) when Jen finds an empty nest and thinks of “the promise of what might have been inside” (91). These beats constitute further moments in the structuring of the transontological metonymic arc. A nest is a liminal space and a space of transitioning. There is laying, gestating, hatching, fledging, flying, leaving, returning — all states that transition from one to another. But the “next” that should be fulfilled as the promise of what *should* have been inside (an egg), once the greater metonymy is revealed, is problematic. Like the nest and the egg, if either is missing, there can be no future. Thus, because this metonymy represents a possible future, the problem that the ecofeminist imaginary is addressing *through* the metonymy is whether there is, or can be, a future.

After thirty to eighty pages, bird descriptions can be more elaborate and the use of non-dominative language more indicative of Jen holding the birds in equal regard to herself. It grows more noticeable that many other flora and fauna species that *may* be mentioned in an Australian nature narrative (and so often are — kangaroos, koalas, wallabies, lizards, many other marsupials) are *not* mentioned because they are not the thematic core of the book and they are not part of the important chain of signification that is working towards the metonymic gesture. As the text unfolds through the first eighty pages, there is an occasional burst where the reader is given detail of a certain bird species by the use of descriptive language, expanding our sense of Jen’s connection with the nonhuman. This illustrates the text’s strategy of aligning Jen, and perhaps also ourselves, with the birds, encouraging us to empathise with them.

In the chapter titled “Heath”, there is a protracted chapter-long engagement between Jen and the bushy heath, only infrequently punctuated by past memories, when Jen goes for her first

hike of the season. This is the hike that takes her to the treeboat spot discussed in my previous chapter. Jen drives to a nearby national park, “only forty minutes from her own forest, but a world apart” (78). She has been walking for some time, describing the area, reflecting on the missing Caitlin, parents, mothers. Then she reaches the area she has been walking to, a shallow mallee heath valley, and there is a sense that it is surely time for a bird sighting:

There were pictures everywhere ... she had drawn from this scene many times and would draw it again ... it was impossible, though, to capture what it was like to be in the clearing, immersed in birdsong and soft floral scents, warm air. Not the work of one picture, but of many.

Jen scanned the undergrowth through binoculars [...]

Ha! There it was: the red-backed fairy wren. This one's shawl was more orangey than usual but still striking against the black body, the intensity of colour impossible over such tiny bent sticks for legs. She watched him hop about on a limb, enjoying his time in the sun. He was the sun.

Jen imagined ornithologists becoming more and more birdlike, nesting in their hides in the trees. Beginning, over the years, to imitate the behaviours they observed (82).

There are significant points here. In this encounter, the wren's fragile beauty, “impossible over such tiny bent stick legs”, is once again difficult for Jen to comprehend and thus satisfactorily describe. To describe *this* quality, of *this* bird — the tiny legs under a proportionally much larger body — remains a difficult linguistic move for her as well as a difficulty of praxis. That is, Jen tries to articulate in word/thought, what she grapples with as an artist (and Rigby's point is demonstrated here): the (Im)possibility of making or producing what nature makes of itself. At the same time, there is an almost worshipful praise for the ineffability of the tiny bird, similar to that used in the “waterhole” scene, where the yellow robins are luminous and “carrying ... gleams of sun” (29). There, Jen rejects a realist description and elevates the robin's signifying status through use of imagery. Here, the red-backed fairy wren is arguably elevated to higher status through the metaphoric “he was the sun”. I do not mean higher status in terms of Jen's favour, or in terms of power or class. But the use of metaphor here does make a call to our attention by once again endowing the smallest of creatures with the qualities of the largest and most powerful natural presence available to our visual perception, and on which all life on earth relies — the sun. In such a manner, says Rigby, “Works of ecological art might be invaluable in calling us to attend anew to the complex interweaving of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals” (2006 440).

The task of artists in “calling us to attend” is, however, susceptible to androcentric forms of expression. Furthermore, it presents one of the difficulties of what Rigby calls the “impossibility of ecopoiesis”. Rigby raises a question that is useful in a discussion of linguistic strategies in *Nest*: “Is there then a dimension of being which, far from being made possible by human language, always, somehow, escapes it?” (2004 435). How does the text approach this question and what solutions does it offer in engaging with the problems raised by this purported escape? The answer the text provides, once an ecofeminist interpretative lens is applied, is “language can mitigate the escape through the use of metonymy”.

In the chapters that follow “Heath”, there is further progression towards a non-dominative perspective and language. There is a more direct mode where Jen interacts with birds and practises an ecofeminist ethics of care — feeding them, giving them water and a nice bathing area, keeping them safe, watching out for them. Writing may not be more highly detailed, but the birds are higher in the hierarchy of description as Jen endows these moments of bird-contact or bird-reference with significance or importance. By page 96 she is strongly identifying with and as a bird.

The shrink said she had to let go of Craig. As if she were still hanging on by her fingertips and hadn't already plunged to the bottom of the gorge. He said it was time to let go of her grief, too. Jen had made a note in her diary, and dutifully reported on her progress each month. But she hung on all the same, nursing it like a blown egg, the fragile shell of what it had once been. It was what she had instead of him. Instead of love. It was all she had and she had no intention of casting it out of the nest (96).

This is the first time Jen has imagined embodiment as a bird and narrated that through the filter of her own embodiment. In terms of the metonymy of Jen building the nest, this is a transontological move that redefines the boundary between Jen's human self and a potential bird self. If the paragraph had ended with the image of the blown egg, the inclination towards transitioning would not be complete. It is the identification of her human self as a parent bird, embodied within a nest, that makes the first evocation of Jen's inclination towards trans bird (who is also mateless and childless let us not forget). This passage is preceded by the walk on the heath, and in terms of plot cause and effect, it was the previous chapter that contains the moment of affordance for this action. Jen's realisation that her reluctance to let go of Craig and to keep sitting on that egg of grief is a barrier to her personal growth, sets in motion a series of narrative moments that are building towards the giant nest. There is a foreshadowing here of

Jen's move to inhabiting (or, rather, sharing) *through* producing a work of ecological art in the giant nest, claiming a more-than-human subject position which is foreshadowed by the image of herself, as bird, nursing a blown egg rather than cast it out. The signifiers of nest and egg are now well in place, but we are, as yet, not certain of how and when they will complete their chain of signification.

An important link is revealed in the next chapter, "Still Life" (Chapter 21). The chapter opens with Jen making a breakfast of oats and coffee. A brief three lines of action is followed by three paragraphs of observation and reflection.

A fantail flitted between birdbaths, only to be dislodged by a troop of naped honeyeaters. No robins.

Birds marked the seasons with greater accuracy than the shifting sun and the shortening and lengthening of days or even the appearance of flowers ... Every year, without fail, the robins disappeared for several weeks at the end of autumn, though she still didn't know where to, or why. The first year she was worried they had fallen prey to the owls she heard every night, or worse, had eaten the termites she'd had a man out to poison, and died. Without those flashes of yellow she'd become very glum indeed.

Then, in the first weeks of winter, they had returned. Perhaps they had been off building nests or searching for mates. Now that she knew they always came back, she could get through those colourless times (90).

Jen takes her breakfast to the studio and begins work. She has been trying to draw a found empty nest for days and is once again constrained by a lack of perception (although it is expressed as some sort of empathic shortcoming as well). Her technique is not faulty, but both her perceptual and conceptual abilities fail her:

She turned a new page and sat for a while before picking up her pencil. Sometimes, when you looked at a thing too long, you stopped seeing it. Today she needed to focus on what had drawn her to the nest in the first place — its shape, and ... *the promise of what might have been inside* (91, my emphasis).

Then Jen performs a series of chores that invoke a discussion of her trees, followed by a bout of sweeping leaves off her veranda. The section is evocative of Jen's personal experience of place. It has a sense of her belonging, with her acts of caring, her cultural values and the threads that connect her to her home. Edward Relph, building on Yi-Fu Tuan's *Topophilia*, calls this

“placeness”, or that which connects human and place to each other (88). What is missing (in Relph and also in this passage) is a sense of how she is connected to her fellow sentient species. But that is to come, as this discussion is about the progression from a narration of dominative language to a less dominative form and it is in the phrase I italicised, “*the promise of what might have been inside*”, that a significant moment of mirroring between promise and fulfilment occurs.

Some days ago, before her walk on the heath, Jen “saved” an asparagus fern that was expiring in a hanging basket inside the house. In its foliage there was a tiny, abandoned nest which she did not remove because of its pleasing organic shape amongst the fern fronds (she later calls it a “nest within a nest” on page 202). She has moved the plant and its hanging basket to the veranda, where it is recovering, nest intact if empty, still with “the promise of what might have been inside”:

At the front deck, she changed directions with the broom, sending leaves flying over the edge into the garden bed. She stopped in front of the hanging basket. The fern was doing much better. But there was something else, someone in the nest: a scrubwren, her yellow eyes scowling beneath white eyebrow markings.

Jen backed away [...]

While drawing her empty nest, she had imagined its lost inhabitants, trying to bring life and loss to the page. Somehow, she had drawn life to the nest instead (92–93).

This is the moment when the idea of nest as metonym is fully seeded and can be expected to develop further and actually reveal a different promise, a greater one, perhaps. Also, in terms of relative balance, this passage can be regarded as the “three-quarter mark” between dominative and non-dominative language. I determine that measurement according to the notion that the crisis of the transontological metonymic plotline can be expected at about the same time as — shortly after or before or concurrent with — the crisis of the Jen trans bird plotline. The giant nest itself is, as yet, merely foreshadowed in a very unconscious level to both Jen and (one can presume) the reader. In arriving at this juncture, the transontological metonymic plotline has developed throughout the following sequence in which plot points “conceal” or embed within themselves the following chain of signification: from book jacket, to title page, title, epigraph, the discovery of the abandoned nest, the attempts to draw an empty nest, the image of herself as bird (not) throwing out the egg that symbolises her grief for Craig, the “saving” and moving of the asparagus fern containing the nest (and its promise), and now this tiny nest and this tiny

scrubwren who replaces the Craig/relationship egg occupies a pivotal moment in the chain of signification that sustains the metonymic continuum.

### **Planet nest and the final superfecta**

How does the representation of the giant nest extend its metonymic intertextual referentiality to the whole planet? How is this metonymic act best understood? Firstly, coupled with its materiality and biospheric shape and quality, suspended in space (the nest hangs from a tree), the giant nest, along with the smaller one on which it is based, is visually similar to Yaakov Garb's "Whole Earth image". If the whole earth image is encountered in the media, for example, it is usually very small — perhaps a digital image as small as a thumbnail on a phone, sometimes on the cover of a magazine, either way incalculably smaller than its true size.

Small moments and small objects and small beings have been contributing to and layering the metonymy throughout the text. The blown egg, tiny robins with matchstick legs, the tiny nest and its tiny scrubwren, the relationship of Jen's name to small birds (Jenny Wren is common in English folklore) — even the smallest life forms are endowed with significance and importance and an autonomous sense of growth and being. Therefore, the metonymic leap of Jen's giant nest as planet is arguably going to be more powerful because it is becoming fertilised (as it were) in this moment of small significances. Each significant small life-form is narrated to be as important as the other, both in sentient and non-sentient material form. When the metonymy is completely formed in the production of Jen's giant nest, even a small bird becomes as significant as the planet. This idea is resonant with the movement towards the giant nest, but it has to start small because the metonymy that is being set in motion relies on an assembly of small parts, just like a nest; in fact, just like the "intra-actions" of all matter (Barad 33).

This relationship of small parts continues a thread, present in the text from the epigraph onwards, where complexities are presented within simpler forms, which are also, co-incidentally, small, vibrant and compact. Tiny birds such as wrens and robins make tiny things (nests) by collecting tiny things (twigs, leaves, fibres) that fit in the beaks of tiny birds. The text of *Nest* imparts value to the small live creature and marvels enough at its way of being and way of life to have the protagonist go from representing it on paper and canvas to actually co-habiting with it in a super-size replica of its habitat that doesn't actually take over or dominate said habitat. So, building on this discussion of metonym in *Nest*, what now emerges is evidence of the textual strategy to use this small collection of nonhuman and even non-sentient materials as the text's central symbolic device and an application of ecofeminist imagination.

There are associations that arise in comparing the whole earth image to a nest. They are both biological systems that are round or half-round because, generally speaking, we only ever *see* a sphere as a hemisphere. Nevertheless, because we know the Earth to be a sphere, we have come to assume it is a regenerative, holistic, self-regulating, self-cleansing, happily functioning yet somehow *inorganic* organism and all those associations conspire to erase the realities of space, materiality and *time*. We usually see a still image of the “Whole Earth” that gives the illusion of a healthy and “whole sphere fixed in time” as if no time has passed, as if there is no accumulation of environmental damage and that all we need to do is assume the “Whole Earth” perspective (which is the same as the “prospect view” of the entitled landowner, the apex of the capitalist system) and we can act as if nothing has gone wrong and therefore nothing will go wrong, the Earth will keep on turning in this illusory state of wholeness and wellness (Garb 658).

But to consider the round nest that Jen builds, and to compare it to the whole earth image, produces layered complexities of representation that can also be regarded as part of the same structuring device that produces the giant nest as climax of the novel. What also emerges is the idea that the text functions like a nest because it is structured like a nest, which is to say the metonymic device is gradually built up, progressively structured, from page one. The text is a larger whole built up of smaller parts and all itself operating within the boundless social imaginary of which the ecofeminist imaginary is but one part. Furthermore, each element of the nest comes from a larger part. Hair comes from human, feather comes from bird, wool comes from sheep, twigs and leaves come from branches, creepers, trunks, leaf. And that larger nonhuman part — tree, shrub, plant, animal, bird — is at the same time part of a larger species while containing the smaller elements of the biological blueprint of that species. The tree or shrub or plant has branches which have smaller branches which have leaves which have veins which have capillaries which carry water and the tree is growing in earth/soil, moss/fibres/humus which is itself made of old trees that have decomposed, just as the bird excrement does when the bird throws it out of the nest. I said before the whole earth discussion that “evidence of the textual strategy to use this small collection of nonhuman and even non-sentient materials as the text’s central narrative device and an application of ecofeminist imagination” would be revealing of the ecofeminist imaginary at work. The metonymic strategy that threads itself through the book like twigs in a nest can all be seen as a product of Jen’s imaginary, which itself can be seen as a product of the ecofeminist imaginary — *Nest*, the text, functions as a nest while also representing “nest” while also standing for planet. The metonym is pregnant with itself.

The whole earth discussion has shown the transition from the small object (nest and bird) being used metonymically to stand in for the larger planet and all sentient beings. But there is a further important element of this metonymy that connects back to the lost child trope and affords the last chunk of the nest metonymy to be put in place, although in fact it is an apophasis and thus is not strictly “a chunk” as it has no materiality, as yet. It is the future, or more accurately, an apophatic future. This is expressed through the action of Jen in the nest that she has built and in which she lies. I have argued that embedded within this action is the metonymic-nest engine that drives the descriptive project of the text. I also said previously that the book jacket blurb promises “a gripping and thought-provoking novel about finding the lost child in all of us” but how is “finding the lost child in all of us” narrated? The answer suggested by the metonym and the ecofeminist imaginary is: in order to nest ourselves, we must first make the planet nestable. We must be the work of art that saves the planet.

In the last lines of the book, Jen has an almost baptismal moment. Having built her giant nest and then discovered the truth about Michael's death, followed by a memorial service, it would seem that most plot points have been resolved, except what happened to her father:

The light came in all colours through the stained glass. At the end they stood, as one, to say a prayer for Michael and missing children everywhere. All down the rows, they held hands, schoolchildren again. The words, and the warmth of the men beside her, were too much and she cried. For Michael (279).

And then, just as the small empty nest in the hanging basket brought forth the little scrubwren (91), the burial of Michael seems to bring forth news of Jen's missing father, who, the policeman tells Jen, has no connection with the death of Michael. But, sadly, he has only recently died. There is, however, a surprise for Jen — she has two brothers in Western Australia, should she wish to make contact. After an emotional evening, Jen spends the night in her nest, suspended high in the trees:

She was a nesting bird.

Perhaps, from here, she could take flight and leave the land altogether. Leave this life. She swung a little, and turned.

A robin landed on the opening, head cocked, feet hooked over a stick within the nest she had woven. That cheery splash of yellow.

‘Morning,’ she said.

The bird stayed, looking right at her, and chirruped (289).

The next chapter, “Release”, follows immediately and seems continuous. And it contains the only sustained piece of “generic” bird writing, immediately followed and concluded by a return to the specific:

Jen walked around the garden, admiring all of the new growth ... It was pretty good, being here. Being back here. Birds, after all, leave and return, build new homes in old places, their lives defined, in the end, by a relatively small patch of territory. Their patterns, flight paths and habits were their own, though driven by something larger, and shaped by the season, the forest, the rain, the earth.

She stopped beneath her nest. The colours had already dulled, such that it would soon be almost invisible to anyone else. It swung in the breeze... (288).

[...] Scrubwrens chattered about the lomandra by the deck, a new generation or two swelling the numbers (289).

Jen feels good, being here, in her new transontological state. She may be childless but the scrubwrens are multiplying. The book ends four pages later. Henry has gone off to high school (with one of Jen's drawings, *Robins Bathing*, as a gift), and Jen is at a planting with her land-care friend, Lil. It has been a hot day and the creek is full after recent rain. The other team members have gone home. Lil suggests they have a swim, takes off her clothes and jumps in. Jen's last action in the book is as follows:

Jen stood in the rain, beside the pile of discarded clothes. She pulled off her boots and socks, struggled out of her jeans and unbuttoned her top.

‘Come on! It's gorgeous,’ Lil said.

Jen slipped and slid down the slope into the water, laughing and splashing (293).

She may be old, childless, mateless and trans bird queer but she is wet and happy. To be enjoying the personal freedoms of being happy and alive, fed, able-bodied ... all this, Jen knows, can never be taken for granted. Jen assures her birds and forest that they will remain autonomous and she has freed herself of possible entanglements with the past but there is no certain future for any of them. As to the future transontologies of *Nest's* story world, and therefore our own, what can the ecofeminist imaginary suggest? If Jen represents childlessness, egglessness, Craiglessness, motherlessness, fatherlessness and the superfecta of the female abject, then ultimately all this disrupts the possibility of future. The actual metonymic gesture of *Nest* may be just that — the (im)possibility of future. Future apophatic. And not only does Jen have

no future, it is because, in terms of the superfecta, she has not *won* everything, she has lost it. Her fertility, Craig, Michael, Mum, Dad. All she has is Aunt Sophie, Lil, Landcare, a bunch of trees and birds; in effect *all she has is an empty nest to curl up in ... what future is there in that?*

Caitlin and Michael have been killed. Jen's certainty about that has resonated throughout the novel. The dead child and eggless nests mean dead future. The return of the *lost*, dead child in *Nest* (Caitlin, then Michael) cannot, as the jacket promises us, "deliver the lost child in us all" and offer the continuing and unmoderated capitalist colonisation of the Australian space. To reproduce seems a very bad idea because of the harm we do and Jen has chosen not to reproduce as human. In her superfecta of the female abject, Jen also represents an ageing ungendered Eve, her only friend the demon Lil(ith). She is no longer young, female and fertile. Here, the final transontological metonym falls into place — Jen has not reproduced but she does produce — art. If *Flightless Bird* is her "best" egg, her noblest child, the apex of her broodline, then it's a generative contribution because of its transontological power. And as trans bird, Jen does produce a nest, which is also a generative and beneficial contribution. But she can't put eggs in it, unless they too are part of the chain of small metonymic gestures, which in turn will produce a *Nest*.

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