

CREATIVE WORK:

LACEPEDE

VOL. 1

EXEGESIS:

DESIRING NATURE: FEMININITY, TRAUMA AND

DESIRE ON THE COORONG

VOL. 2

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Writing

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March 2014

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ABSTRACT

The exegesis and the creative work are complementary forms of a poetic inquiry into gendered engagements with the Coorong's landscape, ecosystem and human history. Through a framework informed by post-colonial theory, psychoanalysis and French feminist philosophy, the exegesis explores why the traditional conflation of nature and femininity has so often been occasioned by silence and as an unrepresentable space of absence in western writing and discourse. In both components of the thesis, the exploration of female subjectivity and alternative ways of connecting to place are rooted within the local details of the Coorong estuary as the grounds to particularising the aesthetic, ethical and political engagements at stake for this fragile ecosystem. This has required an examination of the ways in which dualist logic has shaped western culture, language, subjectivity and knowledge and, more specifically, how this dualistic conceptual ordering of the world has operated to negate a subjectivity and language specific to the feminine. The exegesis then turns to two male-authored texts which have deeply influenced mainstream representations of the Coorong and discourses of human engagement with its landscapes to identify the operations of masculine desire. Analysis and psychoanalytic interpretations of these texts are then contrasted with a discussion of the creative work's exploration of female desire, subjectivity, trauma and the aesthetics of a feminine engagement with nature. These ideas culminate with an exploration of the possibilities of a female sublime. Overall, the idea of a feminine aesthetic is an experimental one that engages with poetic language, narrative forms and psychoanalytic theory to re-imagine the conceptual framework that shapes subjectivity.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For their invaluable guidance and support, for their engaged commitment to my project, and for the wealth of insight they have provided which has contributed to my development as a literary writer, I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Eva Hornung and Dr Dianne Schwerdt.

Others who contributed significantly to helping me write and complete this thesis, in the way of long informal discussion of ideas, the reading of manuscripts and providing constructive criticism and moral support include Jan and Richard Love, the late Ngarrindjeri elders Uncle Neville Gollan and Uncle Matt Rigney, Vesper Tjukonai, Shane Crilly and Heather Stuart.

VOLUME 2: EXEGESIS

DESIRING NATURE: FEMININITY, TRAUMA
AND DESIRE ON THE COORONG

Geraldine Love

1. INTRODUCTION: DESIRING NATURE

1.1 A Coorong in the Feminine



Figure 1: taken from Alistair Wood, *Poor Man River: Memoirs from the River Murray Estuary*, 2007: inside cover.

In 1986 an aerial photograph was taken of the Coorong sea mouth as a record of the first documented occurrence of the mouth closing. River flows had come to a virtual stop and the break in the dunes had silted up with mud and sand until the high tides on the other side could no longer push through. In this image, the sand hills branch away from either side of the opening like thighs braced against the dark press of the surf against the sea mouth. The passage between the estuary and the sea is suggestive of a vaginal canal while further inside the increasingly exposed inner sandbars look stylistically ovarian. I first encountered this photographic image in Alistair Wood's book of fishermen's memoirs, *Poor Man River*, where it occupied the entire space of the inside of the front cover. Presented as a black and white image, the feminine sexual appearance of the sand and water was quite apparent, as

was the sharp disjunction between the erotic charge of this image and Wood's portrayal of an historical Coorong landscape from which women have been almost entirely removed, the place given over instead to the daring exploits of white fishermen prevailing over the slippery dangers of the estuary. While there is poetic sensitivity in much of Wood's writing on the Coorong, in the descriptions of the life-cycles of the mulloway and one man's sympathetic response to the failing health of the estuary, the extraordinary appearance of the photograph is left wholly unremarked upon. Was this a considered move, male diffidence in the face of such an, albeit stylistic, erotic image? Was it an unspoken acknowledgement of the Coorong's feminine nature or a belief in the evocative power of the image to 'speak' for itself?

Where, in the past, the conflation of nature and femininity has been occasioned by silence and constructed as a space of absence in masculine modes of writing and discourse, the creative work of this thesis seeks to reconceptualise the conflation of nature and femininity in a way that offers an alternative to a discourse of absence and the negation of the other. Both the exegesis and the creative work are motivated by an (ultimately unfulfillable) desire to translate the experience of a natural environment into an analogous experience with language, to foster what Onno Oerlemans describes as 'participative engagement' and Emily Potter as 'enchanted materialism' (Oerlemans: 18; Potter, 2005: 5). These terms describe ways of writing and reading works of literary, poetic and bioregional genres that, while recognising that 'nature' is nearly always to some degree a cultural construction, nonetheless seek to reconnect "culture to something much deeper and more fundamental than itself" (Oerlemans: 20). In regards to the sea mouth and the Coorong estuary, the desire I have described is explained by Oerlemans as "a sign of the significance of the experience – that its meaning is indeterminate and in need of reflection and reworking" (21). Hence this exegesis begins by exploring the landscape at the heart of the creative work, in particular, the aspects of the ecological and human history of the Coorong estuary that form interwoven payers of meaning for the framework of the "traumascape"

within which it is possible to particularise the aesthetic, ethical and political engagements at stake for this fragile ecosystem.

My reading of an estuarine environment as symbolising female genitalia and sexuality is not derived from an original idea: the feminising of wetlands, particularly in the register of the uncanny, has a long tradition in European art and literature which has been thoroughly explored in Rod Giblett's *Postmodern Wetlands* (1996). But I would like to focus for a moment on the homologous elements between the ecology of the Coorong and the physiology of the female body. The sea mouth, in its pre-Invasion state, was an estuarine environment, a wetland of the kind formed in the littoral and intertidal zone and among the most fertile ecosystems on earth with wildlife up to twenty times richer than the open oceans (Giblett, 86). The Coorong estuary functioned as the liver and kidneys of the Murray River system, cleansing and oxygenating the fresh water and floodwaters that flowed into the lower lakes and Coorong. This water was then flushed out to sea, much like urination, and in turn the estuary and lower reaches of Lake Alexandrina were regularly flushed with sea water.

The tidal mixing of the waters through the sea mouth of the Coorong supported a rich diversity of estuarine flora and fauna, providing specialised conditions for the breeding of particular species of plants, birds and fish. In late summer, when floodwaters were abating and lake levels dropped, seawater flowed into the lake at high tide, bringing with it a wealth of sea life ranging from seals, sharks and even the occasional whale to smaller fish, shellfish and crustaceans. By this time the mulloway had migrated to the mouth from the mangroves at the top of Gulf St Vincent to gorge on the congoli and tukari crowding into the remaining pockets of fresh water in the lake. Back out in the sea, the mulloway would spawn and the resulting juveniles, almost semen-like, would pass through the mouth into the sheltered womb-like nursery of the estuary. The tidal ebb and flow of salt and fresh water, and the generation of life that happened within, struck me as an allegory of the nature and physiological properties of bodily and sexual fluids.

From a different angle, the cycle of floods presents a set of aesthetic affinities between the natural processes of wetlands and certain theories of feminine desire. Another aerial photo produced in black and white in Wood's book, was taken during the 1956 flood and takes in the sea mouth, the Goolwa Channel and the discharge point of the Finnis River into the Lower Murray. In this image, the flood has burst through banks and channels, spilling over huge tracts of lands and swamping the straight gridlines of property boundaries, man-made open-drains and roads that were imposed upon the land and little reflect the natural contours of the islands and surrounding mainland. The image resonates with Luce Irigaray's description of the economy of feminine desire "often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity, that will swallow you whole" (1985b: 29-30). Irigaray argues that "it really involves a different economy...one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarisation toward a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse" (30).

The seasonal cycles of floods undermined the linear logic upon which the project of colonisation was founded by destabilising the temporal constructs of irreversible linearity and disjunction that colonial enterprise depended upon to self-validate its discourse of progress and development (Rose, 2004: 16-18). Floods are both destructive and regenerative; left unregulated, the inundation seasonally returns ecosystems and human enterprises back to a certain temporal point in the ecological cycle, with the level of intensity and destruction varying unpredictably from year to year. In her paper, "Water Justice", Rose draws attention to the contemporary scientific research that is grasping the extraordinary complexity of flood cycles and their vital role in the generation of life. The term 'flood pulse', nuanced with both somatic and temporal meaning, refers to the ecological disturbance and perturbation caused by floods which, in a much longer and cyclic time-frame, are vital to the meta-stability of the whole riverine system (2007: 14).

From the first days of European occupation, the variable flows and open nature of the system were antithetical to the ideals of instrumentalism and utility that informed the colonial obsession for economic and infrastructural progress. Furthermore, by the 1890s, the lower reaches of the river system and the communities that depended upon it were already struggling with the effects of over-extraction from further upstream and interstate. A system of locks was subsequently built to maintain artificially high water levels at all times of the year and to ensure an even distribution of water throughout the river system. By the early 1940s, the construction of the barrages was complete and the flood pulse effectively suppressed, causing the ecological integrity of the Coorong's estuarine environment, and indeed the entire Murray-Darling system, to fall into devastating decline. At present, the lagoon around the sea mouth and much of the Coorong is now considered to be a marine environment and no longer a true estuary. The lower lakes and the Coorong have lost much of their pre-Invasion biodiversity of flora and fauna while a range of specialised micro-environments that were crucial to the survival of certain species have all but disappeared due to the detrimental effects of siltation, rising salinity, the continuing accumulating of pollution and the curtailment of natural fluctuation in water levels.

As mentioned before, imagining the Coorong estuary as a geographical landscape of the feminine body is not an original gesture: this region has a Ngarrindjeri past and a Ngarrindjeri ethos which deeply honours the understanding of the Coorong as a body. As the late elder, George Trevorrow, explained to Diane Bell in *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin*:

With this part of the country, I can't get away from our belief. The Coorong is a body, is a whole, is one thing, a part of the body. That's what's been taught to us from our old people. The body needs sustenance to make that body survive and go through the seasons. If you start taking away from that body, that body starts dying, along with it our belief, a lot of our spirituality and things that link us in with that start dying as well, and as a people, inside, you start dying as well. (1998: 267)

George Trevorrow was very clear in his explanation to Bell that this knowledge was deeper than merely a strand of ‘environmentalism’ or that the Ngarrindjeri could distinguish the issue as limited to “the environment”. As Rose argues, “the social and ecological impacts of conquest can be analysed together as one process” (2004: 4), because, firstly, the domination of Indigenous people and of nature are closely intertwined through their shared relegation to a demarcated sphere of conceptualised otherness; and, secondly, because of the very real traumatic consequences and damage sustained by these human communities when their land and waters are devastated by the impacts of invasion. This damage is sustained through networks of relationships between country and people that go against the conceptual grain of modern western knowledge.

Throughout the country of the Ngarrindjeri nation, colonial subjugation of the land has in effect systematically destroyed the deep-layered experience and practice of connectivity on which Ngarrindjeri land management, religion, culture and identity are grounded. Their traditional practices were developed to sustain not just the human communities but the much larger community of people, animals and plants that belonged to their land and waters. On the level of the individual, this complex web of interconnections between country and people was and is known and experienced through one’s *miwi* which, in the Ngarrindjeri Symbolic, signifies the knowledge of these relationships “as at once visceral and intellectual” (Bell, 268). Thus drastic change, destruction and devastation wrought on the natural environment have deep-affecting spiritual, corporeal and cultural ramifications for its first people. In Jessica Weir’s words: “Connectivity not only ensures that life-benefits ramify, but can also become conduits for damage” (52).

Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), extends Rose’s thesis by recognising that race, ethnicity, gender, class and nature are all subjugated to the same logic of dominance in the western world and hence all these forms of oppression are interwoven. The nub of Plumwood’s argument is that Nature has been, for the most part, an

unacknowledged category of oppression that requires redress in the form of symbolic overhaul and reconceptualization. This is necessary as an integral step towards effectively dismantling inter-related structures of domination and resolving the problematic rationale that continues to justify the West's treatment of nature while simultaneously disabling the West's capacity to respond effectively to the unprecedented environmental crises of contemporary times. Significant academic contributions have been made towards understanding the inter-relatedness of the various impacts of conquest on the Ngarrindjeri and on the biosphere of their land and waters. In particular, Bell's *Ngarrindjeri Wurruwarrin* and Jessica Weir's *Murray River Country: An Ecological Dialogue with Traditional Owners* (2009) articulate alternative understandings of nature and human relationships with nature gained through their dialogues with elders and traditional owners. These works, while mindful of the ethics concerning cultural appropriation, suggest alternative conceptual frameworks with which to decolonise and re-imagine the human-nature relationship in western culture.

In this exegesis, I examine the less tangible and more philosophically-located woman-as-nature/nature-as-woman construct called forth by the sexually evocative photograph of the sea mouth. Taking its cue from Rose and Plumwood, this exegesis takes up the argument that the environmental damage caused to the Coorong, Lower Lakes and sea mouth, motivated by colonial ideals of progress and economical productivity, is more than an allegory for the patriarchal mastery and denigration of female bodies and the denial of feminine subjectivity: the damaging impacts sustained by natural environments and by feminine corporeality are the consequences of a single larger process of repression, domination and exploitation of the other.

Where Luce Irigaray writes of the patriarchal desire for mastery and control over women and their bodies, I recognised a parallel desire underlying the colonial quest for mastery and control over the lower lakes and Coorong, elicited by the wetland system's fluid and uncontained nature. Margaret Whitford provides a concise distillation of Irigaray's idea:

... man needs to represent her as a *closed* volume, a container; his desire is to immobilize her, keep her under his control, in his possession. ... He needs to believe that the container belongs to him. The fear is of the ‘open container’, the ‘incontournable volume’, that is to say, the volume without contours.... Or his fear is of the *fluid*, that which flows, is mobile, which is not a solid ground/earth or mirror for the subject. (1991: 25, 28)

These extracts provided a poetic approach to contextualising the desire of the colonial settlers for mastery over the flows of the lower lakes and Coorong. The overwhelming drive to regulate the flows of the system and to create a “closed volume” of water through the construction of the concrete barrages appear as a clear example of the patriarchal need for the containment of the feminine which Irigaray describes, while the contrasting image of the 1956 flood vividly evokes for me Irigaray’s idea of femininity as an “incontournable volume”. As Irigaray and many others have argued, the repression and exploitation of women and nature as a singular process comes about through their discursive conflation into a homogenous category of negated otherness. Colonial and modern subjectivity has been configured through the dualistic organisation of western culture and language which, through its conceptual ordering of the world into opposing pairs, has operated to separate and estrange the realm of nature from that of humanity – and more specifically, masculinity – and to negate a subjectivity and language specific to the feminine.

All these themes converge, then, upon the idea of the Coorong estuary as a “traumascape”, a term Rose borrows from Maria Tumarkin which enables specific places to be conceptualised as sites of wounding, places that are “repetitively bound by violence” and thus “marked by loss, by the absent ones whose presence is now only memory” (2004: 49). The idea of the traumascape provides one way of interpreting the compelling power of the sea-mouth image: that “any examination of place history and place making in this country is bound, sooner or later, to come face to face with traumatic legacies of colonialism [lying] silent in or addressing us through the continent’s ground” (Tumarkin cited in Rose: 49). As I have

described in the preceding paragraphs, the traumatic legacy of the sea-mouth is manifold, reflecting a repetitive pattern of violence that extends from the brutal dispossession of the Ngarrindjeri from early colonialism and its ongoing ramifications to the man-made ecological devastation of the area through to more historically recent conflicts such as that of the Hindmarsh Island bridge. The desecration of women's sacred sites due to the bridge's construction inflicted psycho-somatic damage on the Ngarrindjeri women and underscores not just the traumatic legacy of Ngarrindjeri dispossession and subjugation but the continued violation of Ngarrindjeri feminine sexuality which is so intimately tied to landscape through different forms of connectivity.

What makes this engagement with traumascapes not only postcolonial but potentially feminine is that the desire to empathise with a traumascapes – to bear witness to the loss of place, particularly to the “colossus of development”, and to give presence to the silenced histories and memories that a specific traumascapes embodies – “sustain[s] a moral engagement with the past in the present that gives voices, presence, and power to that which has been lost, abandoned, or destroyed” (Rose: 51). The feminine can be located in those ethics which search out and value alternative voices and which advocate for the ability to live with irreducibly different and conflicting narratives.

The second chapter of this exegesis, focusing on male aesthetic engagements with nature, explores the question: to what extent was the Coorong, either (sub)consciously or unconsciously, perceived and construed as a feminine entity in the colonial imaginary and in what ways did this cultural construction of nature impact upon the modes of western subjectivity and identity expressed in these aesthetic engagements? I explore this question through an analysis of two texts – George French Angas's *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand* (1847) and Henri Safran's film adaptation of Colin Thiele's children's story *Storm Boy* (1976) – both of which demonstrate significant aesthetic

engagement with the Coorong landscape and history and have had a lasting presence in the public domain.

I address aesthetic engagements since aesthetics is a particular form of intersubjectivity that underpins a construction of “the kind of universal subjectivity which a ruling class requires for its ideological solidarity” and thus “encode[s] emotive attitudes relevant to the reproduction of social power” (Eagleton: 75, 94). The focus of my analysis is to show how these aesthetic engagements conceptualise the conflation of nature and femininity to form the devalued polarised opposite of western masculine achievement and agency. This analysis extends to show some of the direct and oblique ramifications these constructions entail for the Coorong ecology, the Ngarrindjeri and feminine subjectivity. Hence, it is important to begin with a more thorough exploration of the ways in which gender is foundational to a dualistic conceptual ordering of the world and is disguised in the officially gender-neutral concepts of reason, culture and social advancement. More specifically, it is important to establish how dualistic reason operates both to negate a subjectivity specific to the feminine and to foreclose modes of relationship with the other based on connectivity and continuity.

1.2 The Feminine, Negated

The Cartesian notion of subjectivity was based upon the idea of the individual self as discrete and separate from the world; human consciousness was believed to be an autonomous source and cause of action, meaning and representation. Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault and many others have interrogated and overturned this model of subjectivity by recognising the profound impact of social relations and language on the formation of the self. In post-modern disciplines, the experience of subjectivity is understood not as a process of coming to transparent awareness as a “self” but of having an identity shaped and produced in ways that are not apparent or accessible to the subject’s consciousness. As Toril Moi describes it:

Conscious thought...must be seen as the ‘overdetermined’ manifestation of a multiplicity of structures that intersect to produce the unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the ‘self’. These structures encompass not only unconscious sexual desires, fears and phobias, but also a host of conflicting material, social, political and ideological factors of which we are equally unaware. It is this highly complex network of conflicting structures...that produces the subject and its experiences, rather than the other way round. This belief does not render the individual’s experiences in any sense less real or valuable; but it does mean that such experiences cannot be understood other than through the study of their multiple determinants – determinants of which conscious thought is only one, and a potentially treacherous one at that. (1985: 10)

This post-structuralist concept of subjectivity recognises language not as an instrument used by the “self” but as a medium through which subjects are constituted and produced. Since language is inextricable from the ideological and discursive structures that define social and cultural identity, it also plays a role in maintaining the structures of unequal social relations. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin define the impact of ideology on culture and language as “the system of ideas that explains, or makes sense of, a society, and is the mechanism by which unequal social relations are reproduced. The ruling classes not only rule, *they rule as thinkers and producer of ideas* so that they determine how the society sees itself” (1998: 221, my italics). Hence, language cannot be taken for granted as a medium of thought that is ‘pure’ and transparent, for it “carries the traces of its social use, in grooves that organise and constrain expression and thought itself” (Hodge and Mishra, 1991: 11).

The methodology underpinning this project interprets the language and ideological discourse of Western culture and society as structured and “grooved” by the logic of dualism: in its most simplistic form, the dualist template is the construction of two conceptually opposed categories that are mapped onto the gendered pairing of male and female. When read horizontally, the dualisms distinguish the difference between the two categories through opposing values: one is superior, the other inferior; for instance:

man/woman, man/nature, mind/body, human/animal, culture/nature, reason/emotion, rationality/irrationality. When these contrasting pairs are read vertically they reveal “interrelated and mutually reinforcing dualisms which permeate western culture [and form] a fault-line which runs through its entire conceptual system” (Plumwood, 1993: 42). Read this way, the category of woman belongs to a clearly demarcated and depreciated sphere of otherness. She is equated with nature, the body, the animal, emotion, irrationality; her status as the inferior category is thus continually reinforced and her subjugation is interwoven with the subjugation of various ‘others’: non-white people, the lower classes, animals and nature. Meanwhile, the positive value ascribed to the category of man is mutually reinforced by its ideologically synonymous categories such as humanity, the mind, civilisation, rationality, morality and so on. The dualistic structure of language functions as a social tool by conditioning perceptions, knowledge and modes of interaction according to an ideology that constructs gender difference into a foundational hierarchy.

If one reads the organisation of the social world as being structured on dualist logic, subjectivity belongs to the masculine sphere of power, presence and agency. Plumwood identifies the dominant model of subjectivity in the western world as that of “the identity of the master” to highlight that the subject-position and identity which is most privileged in western culture and language is not simply and purely masculine as many feminists have read it. Rather, the dominant model of subjectivity is a “multiple, complex, cultural identity of the master formed in the context of class, race, species and gender domination” (5). Plumwood’s study of the master identity describes an expanded phallogentrism in which the dominant subject claims that his possession of full humanity and reason places him at the centre with a concentric perspective of power. This perspective creates a field of multiple exclusions to which the marginalised others are relegated, discursively, as belonging to the realm of nature. The structure of this field of multiple exclusions is designed to maximise “difference and distance from the animal, the primitive and the natural” (25).

Thus racism, colonialism and sexism have drawn their conceptual strength from casting sexual, racial and ethnic difference as closer to the animal and the body construed as a sphere of inferiority, as a lesser form of humanity lacking the full measure of rationality or culture.

(Plumwood 1993: 4)

More than lacking the “full measure of rationality or culture”, exclusion from the category of positive definition is to be relegated to a sphere of absence and negation.

The imposition of submissive subject-positions upon marginalised others is further strengthened through a linguistic and discursive network that offers these excluded others limited conceptual material for self-definition or little ability to articulate difference in modes other than those prescribed by the master identity. The delimiting power of language is produced by discursive structures which shape language and create a lexicon that determines the terms which one can and cannot use to constitute the reality of one’s world (Ashcroft et al, 2002: 43). Hence, woman is constrained in the ways in which she can define and express herself, finding it almost impossible to escape language that does not constantly define her, negatively, in relation to men and the positive masculine sphere of culture and reason. If she wishes to express something of herself or alternative relations that go against or outside the conceptual grain of the dualistic code, she has to negotiate with the limits of language itself. Words have a tendency to ‘dry up’. Irigaray explains it this way:

Just as an actual woman is often confined to the sexual domain in the strict sense of the term, so the feminine grammatical gender itself is made to disappear as subjective expression, and vocabulary associated with women often consists of slightly denigrating, if not insulting, terms which define her as an object in relation to the male subject. This accounts for the fact that women find it so difficult to speak and to be heard as women. They are excluded and denied by the patriarchal linguistic order. They cannot be women and speak in a sensible, coherent manner. (1993: 20)

This difficulty in finding authentic speech is not only a challenge for women in a patriarchal society; in colonial and post-colonial societies, the same challenges are experienced, more

sharply, by racial and ethnic others who are alienated through a language entirely at odds with their pre-colonial culture and identity.

1.3 The Feminine, Sublimated

Plumwood's analysis of the western philosophical traditions that have cumulatively reinforced the master-identity's construction lead her to identify classical propositional logic as a specific tradition which has long determined discursive constructions of the other as an alienated and occluded realm and/or as a passive non-entity. As the following section will show, this tradition of logic has configured the construction of both the master identity as described by Plumwood and the psycho-analytic understanding of privileged subjectivity established predominantly through the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. A synthesis of the two models is one way to account for how the exclusion of women, ethnic others and nature from the field of subjectivity has come to be so deeply entrenched in western culture.

Plumwood's definition of nature as the dualised other in polarised opposition to culture and humanity is a near exact approximation of the definition and functional purpose of the positionality of the feminine in the psychoanalytic theory of subjectivity, as is shown in the following passage:

To be defined as 'nature' in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the 'environment' or invisible background conditions against which 'foreground' achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. It is to be defined as *terra nullius*, a resource empty of its own purpose or meanings, and hence available to be annexed for the purposes of those supposedly identified with reason or intellect, and to be conceived and moulded in relation to these purposes. It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply 'natural', flowing from nature and the nature(s) of things. (1993: 4)

By exploring the intersection of subjectivity, desire, the feminine and the natural world, this section seeks to show that ecological crisis is as much concerned with one's personal (dis)engagement with nature as it is with a society's (dis)engagement.

The theoretical interlinking of the Freudian realm of pre-oedipal drives and the visual domain of the Lacanian Imaginary present a complex model of the early stages of the mutually-constituting structures of subjectivity and desire. According to Lacan, the child's passage from a position of undistinguished unified wholeness into the split and desiring subject of the Symbolic is precipitated by the Mirror Stage. In mirrored reflections, in other children and in its mother's expressions, the child becomes aware of the image of his body as a complete and separate entity from the body of his mother. While the child sees that he can govern the movements in his image through the actual movements of his body, this vision is contradicted by the interior experience of his body as one that is still in parts and over which he lacks mastery and control. The external mirror image comes to be internalised as the imaginary foundation of the child's self or, in Freud's term, the ego. In Sean Homer's words, "[t]he ego is both formed by and takes its form from the organising and constituting properties of the image. The ego is the effect of images; it is, in short, an imaginary function" (25). The internalisation of the external image entails the psychical structure of alienation that constitutes subjectivity as a "lack of being", for the child's sense of self lies outside of himself, in an-other place – it comes from the field of otherness and remains forever external and unassimilated.

For Freud, who had earlier recognised the alienating power of images in establishing and organising the visual domain of the ego, this stage is simultaneous with the development of libidinal drives that embody the child's fantasized identification with the (m)other. The brute biological realm of need is incrementally overlaid and configured into linguistic, interpersonal and cultural meanings learnt by the child from the (m)other, which Freud terms "demands". As Elizabeth Grosz explains, the whole machine of desire is set in motion when a demand "articulates and thereby narrows down and specifies the amorphous need by tying

it to a concrete object, thus particularizing it” (1990: 61). Consequently, there is a residue or remainder of that amorphous territory which is left out of the articulated demand, now lost and known only through its absence as lack. As the pre-oedipal drives “borrow the sites, sources and techniques of satisfaction generated by instincts to develop its own modes of (sexual) satisfaction”, the demands generated by these drives are inherently unattainable from the first moment since they are ultimately appeals to the (m)other for “a love that paradoxically entails its own annihilation, for it demands a fullness of the other to stop up the lack that conditions its existence as a subject” (56, 62). The pre-oedipal drives that embody the child’s libidinal relations arise from the child’s desire for access to the lost and impossible plenitude of the (m)other which is rendered inaccessible as an effect of the child’s acquisition of language and consciousness.

This process of losing “something” as the child enters into language is the essence of the multivalent concept of castration. In the above paragraph, castration occurs as the deepening rift between the Real and the Symbolic, where the “death” of the “thing” is that amorphous territory of the mother-child dyad that is left out of or excluded by the symbolic articulation of demands. Another aspect of castration emerges from the revelation of sexual difference between boys and girls in the Mirror Stage, namely that the boy has a sex organ and the girl apparently does not. The oedipal complex arises, in part, because of this visual difference: in Freud’s paradigm the girl, perceived as already castrated and thus already punished, instils fear in the boy of the same fate befalling him at the hands of the father as punishment for his desire towards the (m)other. The oedipal complex is resolved through the repression of the pre-oedipal territory and the sublimation of polymorphously perverse pre-oedipal drives and desire by identification with the same-sex parent/super-ego/the Symbolic. Castration as the successful resolution of the complex is argued by Freud and Lacan to be foundational to human subjectivity, referring to the successful repression, if not the total destruction (considered ideal by Freud) of the pre-oedipal realm.

The Freudian resolution of the oedipal complex as identification with the super-ego equates with the Lacanian passage from the Imaginary into the Symbolic, where the process of internalising otherness as the condition of subjectivity shifts away from the “(pointed at, reflected, identified with and loved)” (m)other of the Imaginary to the linguistic signifier of the Symbolic Other (Ettinger, 1992: 191). At the same time that the subject is constituted as sexual and desiring through the castrating processes of entering into language, the subject is also constituted as sexually differentiated. The Symbolic as the field on which self-recognition depends provides the Phallus as the only symbol to signify sexual difference. Griselda Pollock describes the issue for feminine language and subjectivity when there is only one symbol for sexual difference and subjectivity: “What has been taken as the neutral and universal concept of the subject is in fact a phallic model premised on an on/off logic that positions the feminine negatively, below the threshold of any kind of symbolization”

(2). For Irigaray

patriarchal cultures have reduced the value of the feminine to such a degree that their reality and their description of the world are incorrect. Thus, instead of remaining a different gender, the feminine has become, in our language, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract non-existent reality. (*Je, tu, nous*, 1993: 20)

Hence, the theory of castration entrenches the repression, repudiation, sublimation, and the “death” of the feminine at every stage of development regarding human subjectivity. The Symbolic, as the realm of culture, history and human social laws, demands this castration if the dominant mode of human subjectivity and the social and cultural privileges that accompany it are to be achieved by the individual.

As feminist theorists such as Irigaray, Ettinger and Grosz have already argued, rather than perceiving an irreducible sexual difference, Freud’s understanding of female sexuality was always already configured through the theme of lack: his notion of female penis-envy as the

defining aspect of the female oedipal complex contains all the salient features of psychoanalytic theorising on feminine subjectivity and sexuality as inherently incomplete and malformed, as a signifier of absence. What Freud succeeded in generating was an original set of terms and ideas that were, inherently, expressions of a centuries-old discursive tradition that cast women as belonging to the realm of absence and negation. Plumwood puts forward a convincing argument that the dualistic template that informs cultural and social assumptions about sexual difference in western colonial discourses can be traced back to a specific form of logic. Classical propositional logic supplies a specific account of otherness and negation

which forces us to consider otherness in terms of a single universe consisting of everything. In classical logic, negation ($\sim p$) is interpreted as the universe without (p), everything in the universe other than what p covers. ... $\sim p$ can then not be independently or positively identified, but is entirely dependent on p for its specification.... This corresponds to the relational definition feature of dualism, to a logic of presence and absence in which the other is specified as the absence of the condition specified by p , rather than as an independent other. (1993: 56)

Like western colonial discourses which define nature, femininity and racial differences as realms that cannot be specified or defined independently of the elite group that solely represents presence – masculine, white, rational – psychoanalytic theories of castration, alienation and sexual difference (as phallus and no-phallus) also adhere to these same concepts of negation and absence in their paradigm of human subjectivity.

While feminists have thoroughly criticised colonial and psychoanalytic discourses for essentialising femininity as lack, Julia Kristeva recognises the discursive definition of the feminine as that which is confined to the margins of symbolisation. Marginality, for Kristeva, describes the positionality of femininity in the Symbolic order, as the margin or boundary-line between man and chaos, between the symbolic and the territory of the feminine pre-oedipal which is associated with those anxieties about “falling to pieces and of

psychological disintegration resulting in an undifferentiated, amoebic condition” (Ettinger, 1992: 184-5.) The related terms of domination also demonstrate this position of marginality: nature, the body and racialized others. As categories of domination yoked to one another, they all share in the contradictory and ambivalent set of representations symptomatic of the margins: darkness and chaos on the one hand, “representatives of a higher and purer nature” on the other, “neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown” (Moi: 167). As the limits of the symbolic order, marginalised others embody disturbing glimpses of the chaotic unconscious wilderness of the world beyond the symbolic where any notion of ‘self’ dissolves and disperses, or they provide the inside limit, the protective shield from the imaginary chaos (167). Hence the double-bind pattern of the representation of repressed others – of mothers, for instance, as abundant and nurturing or as voracious and destructive, typified by the western representation of “mother-nature”.

The marginal construction of femininity is mutually reinforced by its related terms of subjugation: the body, nature and the primitive. Where the female body is perceived as merged with the unknowable and threatening outside of the Symbolic, it is construed as a dark and dangerous continent to be feared and repressed, especially for its disorderliness and lack of containment manifested in physiological processes such as menstruation and childbirth. Assumptions about the disorderliness of the feminine psyche are thus mutually reinforced by the related category of the body as fluid and not wholly hemmed in, and by the category of nature, particularly by environments such as wetlands that so vividly evoke bodily fluidity, rank fertility and darkness.

Western discursive representations of racialized others also manifest this pattern of marginality. The second chapter of the exegesis establishes two different discursive modes of representation of Aboriginal people which demonstrate the Ngarrindjeri’s positionality as on the margins of the western/colonial Symbolic. Angas represents the Ngarrindjeri as belonging to a barbaric culture that engages in such practices as cannibalism, human sacrifices and post-mortuary rites that fail, in his eyes, to keep the dead separated from the

living. The power of this representation to trouble and disturb Angas's sense of self derives from the way in which these cultural practices, in his understanding, transgress and collapse the dualistic structure of western culture. On the other hand, in Safran's *Storm Boy*, the Aboriginal man is constructed through the trope of the noble savage, representing a pure and uncontaminated nature that enables him to enjoy a spiritual relationship with the vitalistic forces of nature, but nature only as western culture has idealised and desired it. Inherent in both stereotypes – of Aboriginal people as the embodiment of savagery or as the embodiment of spiritual purity – is the discursive assumption that due to their ineffective subjugation by the rationalising Symbolic, the pre-Oedipal and the feminine remain accessible to them, thus their status as inferior human beings. Stereotypes depict barbaric rituals – whether feared and denigrated or admired by the western spectator – as the path of access to the excessive *jouissance* of the Other, that is, a knowledge of the world beyond the rational and sense-making logic of the Symbolic, which thus creates the illusion of racialised others as whole and un-split subjects, unalienated from the essence of the maternal, the feminine and nature.

1.3 Disturbance and Fertility

The most significant contribution to knowledge this exegesis will produce is to be found in the second chapter which is primarily focused on a psychoanalytic interpretation of the human/nature dualism as it is portrayed in Angas's writing and the film *Storm Boy*. In *Ngarrinjderi Wurruwarrin*, anthropologist Diane Bell, in collaboration with Ngarrindjeri elders, strives to present the Ngarrindjeri's side of the story concerning Angas's written depictions of what he witnessed of their culture and society. Recognising where Angas's colonial perspective foreclosed upon any true sense of cross-cultural understanding, Bell and the elders provide illuminating explanations of what were in fact sophisticated and complex social structures, cultural knowledge, land management practices and so on. To date, very little, if any, literary critical attention has been directed at Angas's work, thus a

psychoanalytic study of his aesthetic engagement with the region of the Coorong and Lower Lakes and with the Ngarrindjeri is entirely original. Surprisingly, the *Storm Boy* film has similarly attracted very little in the way of critical analysis saving one substantial essay written by Jo May and John Ramsland in 2007 which examines the theme of disillusionment in constructions of childhood in three early Australian films. Hence, a psychoanalytical study of the ways in which the film *Storm Boy* engages with the process of othering and repressing nature in order to constitute a phallic model of subjectivity constitutes original research.

In regards to this project's objective to reconceptualise the conflation of women and nature through a critical and qualified re-affirmation of the relationship between the two, the tautological trap of *Symbol = Phallus, Phallus = Symbol* will likely defeat, at the level of logic, most feminist theoretical and creative projects to find a language and subjectivity specific to female sexual difference. Nevertheless, Ettinger still insists on the vital importance of creating smaller theoretical and creative gestures which can "infuse the symbolic universe – already burdened with ideas concerning femininity – with other suggestions, in order to enrich the cultural historical 'text' concerning women and the feminine" (1992: 180). The contribution which the creative work makes to knowledge is a case which can be made for most works of creative, literary and artistic merit: through its contribution to "enlargening" the text of culture by the presence of what Ettinger describes as "Trojan horses" (195). These are inscriptions of particularised subjectivity that come from the margins of consciousness and leave their mark, in some way or other, in nearly all works of artistic production, particularly through the symbologenic function of art. The generation of new symbolic imagery and language opens pathways to creating or forging concepts "which indicate and elaborate traces of an-other Real and...change aspects of the symbolic representation of the feminine within culture" (196).

The third chapter of the exegesis, focusing on the creative writing component of the thesis and its feminine engagement with the Coorong, re-directs the analysis of the

relationship between cultural constructions of nature and subjectivity into creative territory. Less analysis and more creative enquiry, the chapter considers some of the strategies forged by Elizabeth Grosz, D.B. Rose and Bracha Ettinger which are aimed at reconceptualising difference in non-hierarchical ways. This leads to the central concern of this chapter, and of this exegesis as a whole, which is the creative implications these reconceptualisations can have for the two central themes that emerge in the exegesis's analysis of Angas's text and *Storm Boy*: the imaginary anatomy and aesthetics of the uncanny and the sublime.

2. MASCULINE ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE COORONG: THE SAVAGES AND THE BIRD-BOY

2.1 “A perfect idea of solitude and desolation and death”: the uncanny and the sublime in the writings of George French Angas

George French Angas, a prolific artist and travel writer, accompanied two different expeditions into the region on the Lower Lakes and Coorong in 1844. His experiences and “impressions” were published in 1847 as two chapters of his *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, while his landscape and ethnographic paintings were collected into a publication titled *South Australia Illustrated*, published in 1846, and exhibited in Adelaide and Sydney in 1845, and in a grand exhibition in London in 1846. Janeen Webb and Andrew Enstice, drawing attention to the extent to which the colonisation of Australia was an “eighteenth century media event” in their book *Aliens and Savages*, note that “the journals, letters and reports of these explorers and settlers were never written as private documents; they were written as literature, intended for publication and designed to be read by a popular audience ‘back home’” (4). The colonisation of Australia provided popular and sensational subject matter for the British media and first-hand accounts of explorations and life on the frontier were highly sought after by British publishing houses.

As the following study will show, Angas’s reading of aesthetic categories into the alien otherness of the landscapes and people he encountered was inextricably enmeshed in colonial discursive modes which vindicated the colonising imperative at every turn. Popular literary tastes appear to have influenced the style in which Angas portrayed his experiences; his writing evinces a Romantic sensibility with early inklings of a Gothic presence in the Australian Imaginary. In particular, my analysis of Angas’s literary portrayal of the Coorong and Lower Lakes region uncovers a clear dialectic between the uncanny and the

sublime which have central implications for the construction of modern western subjectivity, linked as they are to the rise of colonialist discursive traditions and modern capitalism itself.

Chapter II of *Savage Life and Scenes* recounts the first expedition when Angas was offered the opportunity to accompany two men, Giles and Randall, and a third man, Corporal Mason, who joined them at Wellington, on a journey in search of sheep and cattle runs. They set out from Adelaide in January of 1844 and travelled down the south-eastern shoreline of Lake Alexandrina, continuing around Lake Albert until they reached the Coorong. From here they explored part of the Narrung peninsula before turning back for Adelaide. Chapter IV recounts the second expedition in April led by Governor Grey and consisting of a party of eighteen men including mounted police. They travelled from Adelaide through the Coorong and south-eastern coastal region to Mount Gambier with the intention of exploring the region as a preliminary step to extending the colony of South Australia.

Angas begins his accounts of both expeditions with descriptions of the environment of the Mount Lofty Ranges which provide an illuminating contrast to his descriptions of the Lakes and Coorong. In both landscapes the natural environment is feminised through specific aesthetic modes which Angas draws upon to make sense of the strangeness he perceives, and it is in the contrast between these modes that a pattern of the feminine-as-marginal in symbolic discourse is revealed. As the group rides through the ranges and the Bremer River region, passing through the newly-established settlements of Mount Barker and Macclesfield, Angas draws upon the aesthetic modes of the beautiful and the picturesque to characterise much of what he sees as the fulfilment of a Romantic agricultural idyll. In both aesthetic modes, objects or scenes that are beautiful or picturesque are often “extrapolated from the beauty of the female body” and founded on the experience of pleasure (Korsmeyer, 43). His language overflows with adjectives expressing the beautiful: “in a couple of hours it [the rain] cleared off, the evening sunlight gilding the vaporous mist

that still hung over the hills, the ground set forth a sweet fragrance from the moisture, and all nature looked fresh and revived” (1847: 46). He is constantly met with views that are full of “beauty” and “grandeur” (42, 46), “stupendous” and “magnificent” (42); he frequently encounters “glens” and clearings that are “enchanted” and “romantic” (41, 42, 118); the winds are “gentle” and the air “refreshing” (46, 77, 119).

In Angas’s lavish descriptions of the ranges is an example of the colonial discursive mode of appropriation in which the land is represented as being appealing for the civilising effects of the colonising culture (Spurr, 28). Angas’s choice of the word “primeval” to describe the mood and appearance of the forests denotes absence and originary earth that has been waiting for the presence of civilised culture to master its chaos and put it to productive use; in doing so Angas “transfers the locus of desire onto the colonized object itself” (Spurr: 28). Angas’s mood seems endlessly exultant as he stirs to “the sharp sound of the axe...echoing through the solitude” which proclaims “the dawn of civilisation and industry” (44). For Angas, the aesthetic of the beautiful is associated with fertile agricultural country that has been transformed through domestication so as to be recognisably English and, therefore, homely and benign.

In the accounts of both expeditions, Angas’s sumptuous style abruptly changes register when he crosses the Murray River at Mason’s hut. Where the town of Wellington now stands, Mason’s hut was the last outpost of the South Australian colony and, significantly, where Angas first encounters the Ngarrindjeri. The river is represented, then, as the physical and figurative boundary of the western symbolic. The gentle surface belies powerful currents and potential death traps beneath; the second expedition tries to cross during several days of storms at a time when the river was prone to sudden flash floods amidst hail and squalls of rain. Crossing the boundary from the known world into precolonial darkness, on both expeditions, is represented as being an arduous and dangerous undertaking.

The nature of the Lakes and Coorong in their pre-settlement state are beyond the purview of Angas's language and experience and difficult to bring into the realm of what he can express. His style of writing becomes more functional: his descriptive passages are less flowing and continuous and more segmented and disconnected; his vocabulary of adjectives to describe the region is limited and becomes well-worn. This difficulty has a number of causes. Firstly, as David Malouf observes of a range of colonial writers and poets, many of the elements of this alien environment have few symbolic associations for Angas to allow them full entry into his language (1992: 38). Secondly, and more significantly, the choice and reiteration of certain words in his many descriptions are consistent with the discourse of negation. Negation, as David Spurr explains, "serves to reject the ambiguous object for which language and experience provide no adequate framework of interpretation" (29). Negation, therefore, "acts as a kind of provisional erasure, clearing a space for the expansion of the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire" (29).

Angas creates a dismal and monochromatic representation of the lower lakes and Coorong: the shores of Lake Alexandrina are "bleak and desolate" with "a chill south wind blowing strongly across its dark bosom" (61); on another day it is "dark and dreary" (71), the limestone hills are "barren" (132) and "dreary" (133), "the Coorong is truly a wild and desolate place" (65), and the sand hills are "bleak" (133). During a storm the Coorong presents "a dismal scene" with the "shrieking of countless seafowl" (133); the Coorong scrub is a "barren and dreary region" (146) and tea-trees "impart a gloomy character" to the salty lagoons that dot the margins of the Coorong (139). Angas's frequent use of words such as "solitude" and "desolation" to carry the burden of that difficult discontinuity between language and landscape at the same time also serves to homogenise all aspects of this environment that do not lend themselves to Angas's colonialist vision into a space of absence which negates the land's Indigenous human presence and history prior to the arrival of the colonialists.

Where the British colonisation of the Mount Lofty Ranges – evidenced in idyllic scenes of whitewashed cottages, cattle resting in the shade and wooden-railed graves in romantic twilight clearings – constitutes for Angus the inner limit of the Symbolic, the uncolonised and “wild” state of the Coorong affords him glimpses of the disturbing and unknowable realm beyond, which he often portrays, perhaps not consciously, through the aesthetic mode of the uncanny. As the closest English correlation to the German *unheimlich*, the ‘uncanny’ has its definitive formulation in Freud’s essay on the subject, in which he identifies the uncanny as a very specific kind of dread and horror. *Heimlich*, ‘homely’, as the antonym of *unheimlich* has two distinct meanings: the first describes that which is intimate, familiar and cosy and usually pertains to a domestic setting; the second refers to what is secret and withheld from others. As Freud explains, the term *heimlich*, in both senses, alludes to something which is “*withdrawn from the eyes of strangers, something concealed, secret*” (his italics, 225) and “thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (226).

The uncanny effect is thus produced when concealed material, hidden deep within the unconscious where it “ought” to remain, comes to light; the “something concealed” is whatever was once “familiar and old-established in the mind” but has since been alienated through the process of either surmounting or repression (241). Freud is specific about the difference between these two processes. The former is used to overcome the “old animistic conception of the universe” which dominates the reality of children and primitives but which the rational white male subject “tones down” in the “higher strata of the mind” (243). This conception includes frightening beliefs in such things as the ability of the dead to return, and the belief that certain individuals harbour injurious powers or are capable of omnipotent thought. Repression is the process by which the multitude of infantile memories, fears, phantasies and desires that revolve around the intimate connection between the infant and the archaic body of the mother are locked away into the unconscious. Freud locates the impetus for repressing this material in the castration complex and thus one class of uncanny

effects are produced when certain thoughts and emotions hint at the threat of castration – anxiety about one’s eyes, the fear of going blind or losing other organs – and arouse the dread and anxiety that first precipitated the child’s repression of pre-oedipal desire.

An uncanny experience occurs, then, “when infantile complexes, which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed” (249). Because both infantile complexes and primitive beliefs belong to a stage where the ego is yet to sharply demarcate itself from the surrounding environment and other people, in short, to move beyond the pre-oedipal realm, these two forms of uncanny experiences are, Freud maintains, usually difficult to distinguish (249). In both cases, the essence of the fear that defines the uncanny is the same: uncanny effects threaten “to undo the achievements of repression and sublimation,” and threaten “to return the subject to the powerlessness, intensity and anxiety of an immediate, unmediated connection with the body of the mother” (Gallop, 1982: 27).

Angas’s portrayal of the Ngarrindjeri is consistent with the tradition of the colonial uncanny in which the coloniser’s fear of the strange and unknowable environment becomes embodied in the human form of the Aboriginal inhabitants (Webb and Enstice, 105). One of the ways in which this is most strongly evinced by Angas is in the several instances where he denies them the language of civilised society. Angas uses the word “barbarian” conscientiously in his preface, in reference to all the Indigenous and ethnic groups he encountered in his travels throughout the British Empire. The term “barbarian” translates literally as “one who babbled, who did not speak the language of humanity” (Spurr, 102); Spurr explains that this incoherence was linked by the coloniser to “their lawlessness and homelessness, their incapacity to master the instincts and passions of their body” (102). Put more simply, the language of the barbarians is the language of nature. According to Angas, the Ngarrindjeri do not talk but “chatter” (61, 62, 149) and “loudly vociferate” (62, 135); the women “jabber” as they flee the men’s approach (58), and the men “scream” and “dance with astonishment”

at Angas's sketches of them (134). Throughout his writing, the Ngarrindjeri personify all that Angas finds alien and unknowable in the landscape; in particular, he hints at a singular malevolent agency that runs through both the environment and the Ngarrindjeri people.

On the first expedition, the events of the Maria massacre weigh heavily on Angas and his companions when they reach the Coorong. Four years before the first expedition, the brig *Maria* was shipwrecked in Lacepede Bay near Kingston. A group of twenty-six castaways, including women and children, were cared for and escorted along the coastline in the direction of Adelaide by the different family groups whose country the castaways were walking through. At some point in this journey, interaction between the castaways and the Ngarrindjeri turned hostile and the castaways were massacred in the area of Long Point and Dodd's Landing. Among the Milindura group, Angas reflects:

The Coorong is truly a wild and desolate place; and the loneliness of the scene is heightened, rather than otherwise, by the occasional rude huts, and the naked forms of the savages.

Instead of inspiring the traveller with confidence, and the feeling that he is amongst others of his fellow-species, these dark and treacherous beings, quivering their merciless spears, with their hands lifted against every man, seem to complete the inhospitable picture, and fill him with apprehension and constant dread. (65-6)

Though he speaks about himself in this passage in the third person, Angas draws a direct link between his feeling of loneliness and the rude huts and naked bodies of the Ngarrindjeri.

The Ngarrindjeri are uncanny beings: recognisably human and thus familiar, yet rendered unfamiliar by a human nature Angas finds dark and unknowable.

Angas writes that the Maria massacre lends a "melancholic interest to the dreary region" (66). Angas's awareness of the tradition of meaning associated with "melancholy" is suggested by the context in which he uses the word. Suzanne Falkiner writes that in the Australian colonial context it was often used to allude to "an early hint of something larger within the landscape, capable of producing a profound effect on the human imagination" (13). When Marcus Clarke used "melancholy" to describe the mountain forests of

Tasmania, he elaborated its meaning as “funereal, secret, stern” (Clarke: vii). Each of his chosen adjectives echo the meaning of the uncanny: the grim unknown of death, the “something concealed” which renders a place unhomely, and the sternness of an unfamiliar Nature that refuses to allow itself to be adequately described in the explorer’s language and thus to become, to some extent, knowable. David Matthews identifies Clarke’s use of the word and concept of “melancholy” to convey a sense of malignancy animating the natural environment (12). Similarly, Angas finds the source of malign agency difficult to locate: where it begins and ends between the Coorong nature and the Ngarrindjeri is blurred, as his paragraph above and below suggest:

At night, whilst sitting round our fire, listening to the distant roar of the ocean, the demon-like shouts and wild chanting of the natives performing their corrobory amongst the opposite sand-hills, and the almost unearthly howl of the wild-dog, broke on our ears at intervals. (69)

The demon-like shouts, the wild chanting, the unearthly howls and the roar of the ocean all meld together in the darkness and seem to confirm an old animistic belief that humans can be impelled and animated by a dark and treacherous agency within Nature.

It is Freud’s contention that our relation to death can produce the most unsettling of uncanny effects, its strength attributable to his notion that “almost all of us still think as savages do on this topic” (242). For Freud, while rational and educated people learn to sublimate the primitive fear and emotion towards death into “an unambiguous feeling of piety”, the nature of the original fear remains unchanged and remains “so strong within us and always ready to come to the surface on any provocation” (242-3). Death overwhelms the living world of the Coorong with the remains of the Ngarrindjeri, whose post-mortem and funerary practices transgress Western boundaries between the living and the dead. The signs of the dead and dying are visible everywhere: whitened bones litter the ground; burial platforms line the

edge of the lake where bodies are drying out in the sun while other bodies have been placed in the forking branches of trees; the Ngarrindjeri use the skulls of human loved ones as drinking vessels.

The nature of the lakes and Coorong take an active part in the deathly landscape with the wind that “makes dirge-like music amongst the reeds...and blows chill across the dark and dreary lake; conveying a perfect idea of solitude and desolation and death” (70-1). Solitude is regarded by Freud as a powerful cause of the uncanny experience, being an element along with darkness and silence that generates “the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free” (1955: 252). A passage from the second expedition locates the unknowable agency and realm of Ngarrindjeri mortality firmly within Nature:

Beneath a she-oak tree, human bones lay scattered about, whitening in the sun and wind, and the low sepulchral croaking of a raven causing us to look up into the branches, we saw a dead body resting on a rude platform of boughs. It was an exceedingly desolate place: no one was there, and we had not seen a native during the day; a storm was coming on across the lake – the wind murmured over the reeds, and its melancholy sighing through the branches of the she-oak tree caused an unceasing and almost fearful sound, that one might imagine to be the distant wail of spirits. (124-5)

Angas’s most vivid and uncanny experiences produced through his engagement with death involve Ngarrindjeri women, most notably his encounter with a woman who formed a haunting final image of his first expedition before he crossed the river back into the known world of the established colony. A mother with a digging stick is wandering in search of roots, carrying on her back the decaying corpse of her dead child. Angas is sufficiently moved to write with uncharacteristic emotion regarding the Ngarrindjeri: “Oh! how strong is a mother’s love, when even the offensive and putrid clay can be thus worshipped for the spirit that was once its tenant” (75). He then describes her as passing “into the wilderness – a dark and solitary mourner, beneath the bright sky” (75). Here and elsewhere, Angas

evokes the idea of “wilderness” as a place of banishment and exile; in psychoanalytic terms, the darkness into which she disappears can be construed as the darkness beyond Angas’s Symbolic realm (Falkiner, 12). He presents, perhaps unwittingly, a striking image of a primal mother-figure powerfully connected with death and the land of the dead, being absorbed into the natural surroundings.

A more complex dynamic emerges from Angas’s representation of Coorong nature when read through the framework Rod Giblett outlines in *Postmodern Wetlands*. Here he demonstrates that the aesthetic of the uncanny and of the sublime are interrelated discursive modes. Citing Zoë Sofoulis, Giblett reminds us that the uncanny is the ‘obverse’ of the sublime: “its other side, that from which it springs and that into which it turns’, and even that into which it returns” (27). This connection between the aesthetic modes of the uncanny and the sublime hinges on the notion of sublimation – the act of repression – the moment when, for Freud, “sexual desire is displaced or deflected into ostensibly non-sexual realms, particularly the aesthetic and the intellectual” (27). Elaborating on Giblett’s argument, where the uncanny is the insidious return of long-abandoned ideas and repressed sexual desire, the sublime moment takes place at thresholds where the division between self and other is most highly charged (Lee Edelman, 214). It produces an experience Thomas Weiskel describes as “cognate with the experiential structure of alienation” that lies at the heart of subjectivity (36). The other of this highly charged division is signified in landscapes that signify undifferentiation, excess and infinitude – mountains, deserts, oceans and impenetrable forests are rough, jagged, unbounded, dark and formless. An encounter with the powerful and potentially destructive forces of sublime nature, though perceived from a distance, induces terror by forcing the perceiver to reflect on the limits of the human mind and human mortality at the same time as it struggles to comprehend the seeming infinitude of the landscape and its forces. However, what is judged as sublime is not the landscape

itself but what Kant describes as the “mental attunement” which establishes the self as independent of the causal forces that govern the world beyond human agency (Korsmeyer, 135). As Giblett concludes, modern subjectivity draws upon “the sublime as a faculty...for estimating ourselves as independent of and superior to nature, including the mother’s body, as a defence against the power of nature” (38).

Angas’s sublime moment forms his concluding impression of the Coorong in *Savage Life and Scenes*, in which he reaffirms the mastery of colonial subjectivity over the feminised and uncanny Other that, in the form of the Coorong, the Ngarrindjeri and the disturbing blurring of boundaries between life and death, has presented a constant threat to his own boundaries of self-definition. To present the full arc of Angas’s sublime moment, I quote him at length in the following:

Finding the water shallow all the way, several of our party waded the horses across, and reached the sand-hills of the other side, which we had contemplated for the last seventy miles as unapproachable; though we frequently longed to stand upon their summits and behold the great Southern Ocean, whose boundless waves they shut out from view. The scene that we thus entered upon was wild and desolate in the extreme: a region of the most dreary and melancholy aspect lay before us, where the white man’s foot have never before trod, and pervaded by a profound stillness, scarcely disturbed by the low moaning of the ocean. (145)

...

After toiling for nearly a mile over these sandy mountains, the roar of the surf grew nearer and more distinct; and as we gained the summit of the final ridge, the first sight of the ocean burst upon our view. It was a grand and solemn scene: a dull haze shut out the horizon, and the utter and almost awful solitude was unbroken by any living thing. There were no white sails glittering on the waves; no proud ships bearing their precious freight of life across the tumultuous bosom of the deep; all was one vast blank – a sublime and terrible wilderness of nature. The roar of that ocean had responded to the winds of heaven unheard by human ear;

and no eye, perchance, but that of its great Creator had looked upon this scene of desolation.

(146)

The first paragraph describes the blockage that is characteristic of the sublime experience: a loosely defined prefacing moment usually in direct relation to the mental exertion of establishing mastery, but it can also include other constraining factors that temporarily inhibit the sublime moment from taking place, thus making it all the more intense. In the journals, Angas is frustrated throughout the expeditions by the fact that the ocean remains inaccessible, barred by the Coorong and hidden from view by the continuous line of sand-hills.

The theme of self-preservation, also central to the experience of the sublime, has been an underlying tension throughout both expeditions for Angas and his companions. Angas implicitly acknowledges his sense of vulnerability in the first expedition when he describes his feelings of intense loneliness, apprehension and dread when they are among the Milmandura group. He regards Corporal Mason as an indispensable companion for his ability to communicate and effectively placate the unpredictable Ngarrindjeri, and he alludes several times to the sense of security that guns, armed men and the mounted police lend to the expeditions. Psychological vulnerability is also suggested by Angas's discursive mode of debasing the Other which Spurr analyses elsewhere as arising "not simply from fear and the recognition of difference but also, on another level, from a desire for and identification with the Other which must be resisted" (80). In the quoted paragraphs, Angas clearly works towards an erasure of the Ngarrindjeri as a category of humanity by his emphasis that no *white* man's foot has walked among the melancholy sand dunes and that only God had seen the desolate and sublime landscape of 90-mile beach before Angas and his party came upon it; Angas does not pause to consider that the Ngarrindjeri people would have walked down to the ocean's edge or known these landscapes with intimate familiarity. Angas's underlying concerns for self-preservation come to a climax when he is met with the thunderous power of the Southern Ocean and its profound geographical isolation.

The second paragraph contains all the hallmarks of a sublime experience. The sense of the ocean as an uncontained excess is emphasised by the hazed-out horizon and the formless chaos of the deep. The “utter and almost awful solitude” is the equivalent of the sublime terror induced by the ocean as a vast and violent realm beyond the order of the Symbolic and the knowable world, reflecting back nothing of humanity and culture. The momentary blockage is signified by his finding it “all...one vast blank” before he achieves what Weiskel describes as the “meaningful jargon of ultimacy” that enables Angas to estimate the infinitude of the ocean symbolically in its relation to a transcendent order. Through the allusions to heaven and the Judeo-Christian “great Creator” as exerting power over the ocean, Angas’s confrontation with the “awful solitude” of mortality is transformed into a reaffirmation of European masculine endeavour and power.

The gendered bias that shapes the traditional aesthetic of the sublime throws into sharp relief the relationship between the sublime mode and the humanist Cartesian construction of modern imperial selfhood, and has far-reaching implications for understanding colonial violence and environmental degradation. The sublime is a mode of domination in which the sublime object, the unknowable ‘excess’ of the feminine realm, is successfully forced back below the threshold of Symbolic representation. Kant provides a basis for this gendered interpretation when he writes that the attainment of the sublime occurs when we reconsolidate “our superiority over nature within *and thus* over nature without us” (114, my italics). The presence of the masculine divine in sublime experiences restores the channels of sublimation whereby the noumenon which has been glimpsed in the sublime moment as “a brush with a region of life and death long associated mythologically with terrible feminine forces” is recast as the realm of the omniscient power of a monotheistic masculine divine creator who validates the superiority and authority of an elite European masculinity (Korsmeyer: 137).

In effect, the faculty of the sublime amounts to a form of self-worship of the Cartesian male self. Terry Eagleton makes the link between the sublime tradition, desire and the project of capitalist modernity when he writes that the sublime is

in effect a kind of unconscious process of infinite desire which like the Freudian unconscious continually risks swamping and overloading the pitiable ego with an excess of affects. The subject of the sublime is accordingly decentred, plunged into loss and pain, undergoes a crisis and fading of identity; yet without this unwelcome violence we would never be stirring out of ourselves, never prodded into enterprise and achievement. (1990, 90)

Angas's sublime moment serves to sublimate not only a connection with his own physicality and with his material existence in nature, but also the integrity and cohesion of Ngarrindjeri history, language and culture by conflating it with the undifferentiated and disorderly mass of the feminine. He uses the sublime mode to narrativise his attainment of symbolic domination over nature and her savages, designating the space as one of vast absence that awaits the triumph of European civilisation.

2.2 “He knows no other world”: the imaginary anatomy of *Storm Boy*

Henri Safran's 1976 film adaptation of Colin Thiele's children's novel *Storm Boy* became one of Australia's most long-lived successes of the New Wave cinema and showcased the region of the Coorong to an international audience. It is for this reason that I have chosen to analyse the film and not the novel. Storm Boy is a young child who lives in the sand dunes of the Coorong coastline with his reclusive and emotionally remote father, Hide-Away. While exploring the waterways and sand dunes, Storm Boy crosses paths with an Aboriginal man, Fingerbone, who gives him three orphaned pelican chicks to look after. Storm Boy forms a close bond with the chick he names Mr Percival, and the bird becomes his constant companion. A fishing boat is wrecked on the beach one night and, in gratitude for saving their lives, the fishermen offer to pay for Storm Boy to go to boarding school. Torn between

his curiosity about the outside world and wanting to escape his loneliness on the one hand, and his attachments to Mr Percival, Fingerbone and the Coorong, Storm Boy's conflict is resolved for him when hunters shoot Mr Percival.

A psychoanalytic reading of the film uncovers a classic narrative of the male child's passage from the Imaginary to the Symbolic. The Coorong functions as the feminine space and temporality of the Imaginary, where the character of Storm Boy, in the tradition of the child-of-nature, forms specular identifications with the natural world around him and in particular, with the orphaned pelican, Mr Percival. The film, while conferring an honorific status on nature, remains well within the parameters of the established discourse on human subjectivity and thus has to resolve this dyadic dynamic between Storm Boy and the pelican if the child is to take up language and thus the privileges of masculine subjectivity.

The idea of childhood as a discrete and individual state of human life came to pre-eminence during the post-Enlightenment decades and gave rise to the figure of the Romantic child, which encompassed several contiguous constructions of idealised childhood as lived in a "state of nature". Such constructions succeeded in "naturalising" this emergent discursive theme as both the normative model of childhood and "the fetishized 'sublime object' that deploys multiple cultural fantasies" (Judith Plotz, 4-5). In both literary and pedagogic modes of representation, the construct operates on the assumption that the child is innately closer to nature than the adult. The assumption is informed by the dualism that reason, a faculty the child is yet to develop, is what separates 'man' from emotion and nature. The Romantic poets reversed this dualism to privilege the child's attributes – emotion, communion with nature and innocence – and bestowed on Nature an honorific status. The trope of childhood lived in a state of nature embodied the Romantic belief that certain "socially-endangered" mental faculties were cultivated and preserved, such as idealism, holism, animism and syncretism.

John Locke, one of the first proponents of the child-of-nature from within a pedagogical context, theorised that a child's mind was a *tabula rasa* which made him vulnerable to being indelibly imprinted with the prejudices and corruptive influences of the adult world. Alongside a proposed curriculum that he argued would ensure the best foundation for a child to cultivate reason and self-discipline, Locke detailed the ideal environment for a child to develop physical robustness and discipline, advocating that children spend as much time as possible outdoors exposed to all types of weather without the protective coverings of hats, gloves, scarves, waterproof shoes or suitably warm clothes in the winter. He also insisted on restricted physical comfort: that they wash in cold water, only occasionally be allowed to sit by the heat of the hearth, sleep on hard beds and be made to rise early (Kenyon-Jones, 51).

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a century later and more aligned to the Romantic poets than Locke, theorised that the child was in some ways superior to the adult, having “qualities of innocence and truth-to-nature, which must be lost because of the injurious effects of society as adulthood approaches” (Kenyon-Jones, 53). Rousseau's ideal of the child's sensory and experiential world is suggestive of a prolonged period of the threshold stage between the pre-Symbolic and the Symbolic, where the incursions of the Symbolic – language, socialisation, reason, cultural identity and so on – are unavoidably present but stringently minimised. Christine Kenyon-Jones threads together the main principles of Rousseau's ideal:

Rousseau's plan for Emile's education consists...in 'well-regulated liberty'; 'not in gaining time but in losing it'; 'doing nothing and allowing nothing to be done', so that the pupil is brought 'sound and robust to the age of twelve years without his being able to distinguish his right hand from his left.' (Rousseau, 55)

The concluding quotation, implying the cultivation of an intuitive rather than cultural knowledge of one's body, suggests that the Lacanian mirror stage and ensuing body-schema are somehow deferred or protracted during this period of time.

The film, *Storm Boy*, visually describes a child living and learning from a direct and rich experience of nature, socially isolated from the human community. The opening scenes of the film show a lone boy beach-combing along the remote and wild coastline, bare-footed and bare-legged in shorts and an oversized and tattered adult suit jacket, hauling a rough-made sled on which he piles driftwood. When he finds a radio washed up on the beach his father tells him to throw it away, explaining that the voices on the radio will convince them they want things, and then more things and then it will never stop. This conversation alludes to *Hide-Away*'s motives for their ascetic lifestyle: human communities threaten the purity of his son's childhood with contagious cupidity and emotional heartbreak. Other scenes depict a "well-regulated liberty" and the sense of losing time rather than gaining it: Storm Boy spends his days exploring the waterways, the dunes and the beach. He moves with ease on land and on water. He has the freedom to indulge his inquisitiveness and has developed a sensitive awareness of the environment around him. When the park ranger and the local school teacher intrude on their world, Storm Boy's father makes it clear that he has no intention of sending him to school, declaring that his son is already learning all he needs to know.

Further traits of the Romantic child of nature are evident in the character of Storm Boy. The quintessential child of nature of the Romantic poets' imaginary was typically ungendered, derived "from an identification of the child...with the undifferentiated life force" (Plotz, 5). Storm Boy's physical appearance and manner verge on the effeminate: long-haired and with fine facial features, he is physically agile and lithe while his manner is sensitive and quiet. He also demonstrates Locke's highly-regarded virtue of the child-of-nature in his unfailing kindness towards animals and – it should be added – towards the Indigenous character, Fingerbone. Another key feature of child-of-nature figures is their likening to elemental beings, especially of the air, which identifies them with "vitalistic life processes of movement" (Plotz, 9). The character's name, Storm Boy, makes clear that the child and nature are co-extensive. Fingerbone confers the name on him because "you run

like the wind". Wind is a dominating presence throughout the film as a constant and eerie soundtrack that presses upon the human drama. It is a continuous movement through the landscape and seascape and reaches its full strength in the storm scenes that narratively strengthen the bond between the boy and his pelican. Storm Boy's nickname ties his identity to the Coorong's nature, symbolising the boy as an elemental being assimilated into the landscape.

The child of nature, alongside the film's representation of romanticised Aboriginality, is a literary construction based upon a cultural fantasy of the primitive. My use of the term "primitive" is informed by Marianna Torgovnick whose works, *Gone Primitive* (1990) and *Primitive Passions* (1997), define the discourse of primitivism as being concerned with a desire for origins and pure states that are nearly always enmeshed with the category of nature. For Torgovnick, primitivist desire is the "desire to go back and recover irreducible features of the psyche, body, land, and community – to reinhabit core experiences" (1997: 5). In contrast, dualistic logic seeks to define selfhood on humanistic terms – by insisting on the discontinuities between, on the one hand, the singular, rationality, civilisation and secularity, and on the other, plurality, emotion, the body, animals and nature – and so the "primitive", already relegated to the realm of unknowable Nature, presents the western self with the fascinating possibility of bridging these discontinuities. Hence,

the primitive is the sign and symbol of desires the West has sought to repress – desires for direct correspondences between bodies and things, direct correspondences between experience and language, direct correspondences between individual beings and the collective life force. (8)

Those conceptual discontinuities are represented in western society as a loss – on cultural and personal levels – of a mystical and psychic connection with Nature that involve kinships with animals, and even plants, as well as keen perceptiveness of the supernatural, connections which Plotz reads as the Romantic poets' fears for "socially-endangered

psychological powers” (13). We turn to so-called “primitive others” – who can be any of the groups of sentient beings yoked to the negative category of nature – in the belief that these primitive groups are located in the “childhood” stage of evolutionary humanity.

The communion, or even consummation, between self and nature that typifies desire for the primitive is, in the end, the desire for *jouissance*, what Torgovnick describes as “merging” with the “oceanic”. Freud’s recognition of this desire as being connected to the death-wish and related to the pre-Oedipal or “oceanic” stages of human development further defines the properties of *jouissance* contained within primitive knowledge: he argued for the necessity of repressing primitivist desires since the state of “merging” was regressive and dangerous, a state “in which individuals do not perceive the boundaries of the self and the inevitability of subject-object relations” (Torgovnick, 15).

The conceptual intertwining of child and nature is informed by the western cultural assumption that the child is inherently or innately closer to nature and animals and has access to experiences and knowledge that lie beyond Symbolic representation. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein describes the child-nature relation in the following way:

The ‘child’ and ‘nature’ are most strongly related through their joint construction as the essential, the unconstructed, spontaneous and uncontaminated. Both the ‘child’ and the ‘natural’ have been assigned the status of being prior to, above and beyond man, and therefore man’s language, history and culture. They are held to preserve that which is primeval, original and transcendent (whether good or bad). As such, they represent access to direct or pure experience, unmediated by language or human interpretation. (210)

The discourse of primitivism evident in the use of such terms as the “unconstructed” and “primeval”, and concepts of the child-of-nature’s world as being “unmediated by language”, “prior to, above and beyond...man’s language...and culture”, translate into psychoanalytic terms as a dyadic relationship with the feminine pre-Symbolic. The Coorong as a wilderness functions in the text of the film as the feminine pre-Symbolic realm, a surrogate maternal space in the absence of Storm Boy’s mother. The femininity of the Coorong as a pre-

Symbolic space is further strengthened by the contrast the film constructs between the wilderness and the town of Goolwa, a humanised landscape that functions in the narrative as the Symbolic realm from whence come the unwelcome invasions of teachers, rangers, hoons, duckshooters and recreational fishermen. Each signifies aspects of the masculine Symbolic, from the teacher's insistence that Storm Boy should have a "proper" education to the hoons', duckshooters' and fishermen's exploitative intrusions into the area represented in the film as abuses of the passive and vulnerable natural environment.

By the decades of the New Wave film movement from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, the negative conflation of Aboriginal people with nature, evident in Angas's texts, had been reversed as a positive and revered element of romanticised Aboriginality. Fingerbone's presence in the pre-Symbolic landscape, where he demonstrates a mystical connection with the numinous forces of nature, identifies him as a romanticised representation of the human embodiment of nature. The friendship between Storm Boy and Fingerbone hinges on their shared embedding in nature and the ways in which they represent different incarnations of primitivist desire. Fingerbone confers authenticity on Storm Boy's connection to the place as well as reinforcing continuity between child and nature. He does this first by giving Storm Boy the pelican chicks to look after; secondly, he shares with Storm Boy the Kunai dreaming of how the pelican and the musk duck came to be the father and mother of the Kunai. This dreaming is figured as the source of Fingerbone's mystical connection with pelicans, and with Mr Percival in particular. A telepathic connection – an ability often attributed to the primitive as a form of dyadic communication and non-Symbolic language – between Fingerbone and Mr Percival is demonstrated in a scene where Fingerbone 'sings' a storm up to punish a group of fishermen who have shown disrespect for the waterways. As Fingerbone sings in his native language, a rumble of thunder links together two frames: the first of Fingerbone, the second of Mr Percival perched on the boat, becoming alert and tense as he rises to his feet before taking to the sky. The sequence is suggestive of Mr Percival as a messenger or purveyor of Fingerbone's power to manipulate

the weather. Fingerbone's supernatural-like punishment of the fishermen is contested by the moral platform of the narrative and is reluctantly retracted when he eventually helps to save their lives. The sequence reminds us of an observation by Plumwood that even when the negative value of a subjugated group is reversed into a positive, it rarely translates into a context of empowerment for the subjugated group (1993: 9). The romanticisation of Fingerbone's spirituality guarantees his survival and relevance only within the bounds of the pre-Oedipal and feminine Coorong.

The child-bird relationship can be interpreted through two psychoanalytic theories of self-other relations: the Lacanian mirror-stage and the love-objects relation as described by Ruth Parkin-Gounelas. Both modes contain the implication that this relationship needs to be somehow repudiated if Storm Boy is to become a human subject. While Storm Boy's connection with the pelican portrays a deeper intertwinement of man and nature that is construed as positive, the underlying dualist structure remains unchanged and, with it, the assumptions it upholds concerning what constitutes a human subject. Relationships with the realm of the feminine are still read as dyadic and thus identified with the pre-oedipal mother-child relationship that is "an ultimately stifling and unproductive relation ... trapping both participants within a mutually defining structure", a relationship that necessitates severance for human subjectivity to come into being (Grosz: 1990, 47).

Parkin-Gounelas's discussion of Freud's theory of narcissism and object relation draws attention to its similarity with Lacan's mirror-stage, since both are based on the imagery of mirrors and reflections. Beginning with Freud:

The child's love for his mother cannot continue to develop consciously any further; it succumbs to repression. The boy represses his love for his mother: he puts himself in her place, identifies himself with her, and takes his own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses the new objects of his love....What he has in fact done is to slip back to auto-erotism: for the boys whom he now loves as he grows up are after all only substitutive

figures and revivals of himself in childhood – boys whom he loves in the way in which his mother loved *him* when he was a child. He finds the objects of his love along the path of *narcissism*... (PF, 14: 191)

Parkin-Gounelas notes that, like the mirror-stage, narcissism and object choice in this passage by Freud operate like two mirrors reflecting each other back and forth. She goes on to write:

Here, in this dizzying play of reflections and counter-reflections are the seeds of Lacan's famous dictum that our desire 'is the desire of the Other'. Here, too, are the seeds of introjection (the process whereby an object is internalized as a mental representation) and of *projection* (attributing to objects impulses of ones' own split feelings and experiences)...
(32)

The pelican has a long tradition as an iconic symbol of the Coorong in local, national and international media. The boy, co-extensive with the pristine and wilderness, and the bird, a totemic embodiment of the same wilderness, are kindred spirits. The bird functions as a reflection or a double of the child; in particular, Mr Percival reflects Storm Boy's motherless status. With his father's unwillingness to talk about Storm Boy's mother, Storm Boy is required to repress his love for her. Storm Boy raises Mr Percival and his two siblings from chicks and teaches them to fly by running after them and flapping his arms. Later, after Mr Percival has mastered flight and returns when the three birds are set free, there are long sequences in which Storm Boy is on the beach playing a type of game where he flaps his arms in mimicry of the bird's flight and the bird flaps his wings in response. Storm Boy happens upon teaching the pelican a trick of catching the ball and returning it to him, much like a game of fetch with a pet dog. Such instances can be read as Storm Boy exerting mastery over the bird's body and movements as though it were a reflection of himself.

Whether the relationship is predicated on a mirror-stage relation or a love object-relation, Storm Boy cannot leave the Coorong for school and learning or, in other words, enter fully into the Symbolic and become a human subject, while he has Mr Percival as a

specular image of himself. Only with the death (or murder) of the bird is Storm Boy able to leave both the wilderness and Fingerbone. The murder of the bird might be read as symbolic of the murder of his relationship to the feminine which then facilitates Storm Boy's passage into the Symbolic, well indicated in the film by the clothes he wears. From the opening scenes of the film, Storm Boy's oversized clothes are weathered, torn, ragged, evincing all the signs of his rough lifestyle. The morning he leaves for his first official day at school Storm Boy is seen for the first time wearing the conventional clothes for a boy his age. The reading of Storm Boy taking the bird as his specular identification suggests that Storm Boy's childhood is suspended in a threshold space between the two realms, defined by the nature of his relationship with his pet pelican with its echoes of a Lacanian mirror-stage and narcissism. Both types of relationships inhibit the child's development towards human subjectivity, and this inhibitive effect is finally redressed in *Storm Boy* by the ambivalent but ultimately disciplining presence of the father.

The tension between Storm Boy's dyadic freedom and the limitations placed on him by his father reveal that the discourse of the child of nature as essential and primeval is an illusion that conceals the investments of Symbolic desire in its construction. Plotz, like Grosz, describes a dyadic relationship as being predicated on the animistic "plenitude of the life-to-life relationship [which] leaves no room for other life in the universe: Presence and Child are the only inhabitants" (19). Plotz turns to Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget whose theories on childhood intellectual development confirm several Romantic suppositions about the mind and psychology of the child that supposedly enables closeness to nature. Piaget, however, takes an adverse view to the Romantic glorification of the child's psychology. His labelling of these qualities of childhood cognition as defects rather than advantages over the adult subject echo Freud and Lacan's assertion that to enter the Symbolic is the only way to become a human subject. Piaget privileges western ideas of civilisation, progress and rationality as the benchmark of adulthood maturity, endorsing evolutionary discourse when

he writes that a childlike consciousness is of the same order as the “gerontocratic societies designated as primitive,” whereas adult consciousness underpins the civilised society of egalitarian democracy (1977, 78).

For Piaget, Freud and Lacan, the child of nature as a literal and actual state is an impossible reality; rather, it is a narrative construction hinged on adult primitivist desire. The image of Storm Boy’s immersion in the Coorong as a pre-Symbolic world, where he is, with unfettered freedom, in some way ‘true’ to his ultimate nature and experiences *jouissance* with nature, is a fantasy. The child-of-nature is in fact subjected to the control of the father and the Symbolic. As James Chandler has observed, Rousseau’s educational theory camouflages “an elaborate set of controls beneath a surface appearance of freedom and spontaneity...there is an illusion of liberty, but it merely hides the most rigid of limitations” (1998, 96). This is exemplified in the role of Storm Boy’s father, as the agent who has created and maintains Storm Boy’s supposedly edenic childhood. Storm Boy is made to embody his father’s desire for “merging” with the Other and is subordinate to his father’s wish for childhood to be “a pristine and sacrosanct private sphere” (Richardson, 29). The narrative comes to a resolution when Storm Boy’s father acknowledges the actual reality of his son’s life which is one of profound loneliness and isolation, and finally resolves to properly facilitate his son’s entry into the Symbolic. Because of the model of subjectivity endorsed by the film, the total repudiation or murder of the feminine qualities of connection and immersion, symbolised by the “murder” of the bird, is the only resolution or ending available for the narrative.

3. FEMININE ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE COORONG: THE BIRD-WOMEN OF “LACEPEDE”

The novel “Lacepede” was driven and sustained by a potent image: a woman, naked, feathered, is wholly absorbed in the act of preening herself. It is an uncanny image in which a sense of the familiar – the human and the bird separately – is rendered unfamiliar by the physiological and psychological intertwinement of the two. The uncanniness of the image stems in part from the transgression of boundaries in which the other is revealed to be residing in the self, the animal within the human, instinctive knowledge within cultural knowledge, nature’s agency within human agency. In folding the two together – woman and bird – in an image of seamless fusion, rather than seeing the typical representation of an invading nature that disintegrates human subjectivity and language, I wanted to generate an interpretation in which female subjectivity might alter its configuration.

Despite the tautological trap set by psychoanalysis for any writer, artist or thinker seeking to represent sexual difference beyond phallogentric parameters, Deborah Bird Rose, Val Plumwood, Elizabeth Grosz and Bracha L. Ettinger have all crafted approaches for redefining elements of femininity by undoing the hidden assumptions on which those parameters depend. This chapter maps the ideas that formed the genesis of my novel and explores my engagement with the natural environment of the Coorong through aesthetic modes that I attempt to demonstrate as being feminine through a combination of ideas elaborated by the writers mentioned above. “Lacepede” is a contemporary variation of the bird-maiden folk story, situated in a landscape entirely different from the ones in which its various traditions are rooted. The folk narrative is reinterpreted to emphasise the idea of the irreducible otherness of the feminine and of the natural world to mainstream constructions of Western subjectivity. The originality of my reinterpretation stems from the addition of

another domain of irreducible otherness embodied in the figure of the bird-woman: trauma and its enduring presence.

In “Lacepede,” I have used the bird-woman to explore the unrepresentable nature of trauma: firstly as an unknowable realm akin to Lacan’s idea of the Real; and secondly, as an intergenerational inheritance passed down through the familial imprints of psychological, social, linguistic and physiological patterns. The creative work, then, explores a mode of encounter with the irreducible otherness of trauma, nature and femininity as an encounter with a potential feminine sublime. The sublime, as discussed in the previous chapter of the exegesis, is an aesthetic mode deeply rooted in phallogocentric logic and desire whereby the masculine self asserts its mastery over and hyperseparation from the immense undecipherability of feminised nature. Here I will explore the potential of a feminine mode of the sublime as a way of attesting to a relationship to nature that is alternative to the phallogocentric mode of domination with its erasure of the feminine.

3.1 Recuperating the Bird-Woman

Deborah Bird Rose writes about the work of ‘recuperation’ with the belief that, even in the darkest times, the past and the present hold “hidden histories and ...local possibilities that illuminate alternatives to our embeddedness in violence” (2004: 24). For Rose, recuperation is a strategy for the decolonisation of the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies that takes as its central tenet that the impacts of conquest and colonisation on Indigenous peoples and on the natural environments under their traditional custodianship cannot and should not be extricated. The postmodern ethos of recuperative work is evident in a range of objectives that motivate recuperation. Firstly, recuperative work has its basis on a dialogical framework that resists the political necessity to reach resolutions and pre-designed outcomes; secondly, it searches for alternative voices that have been silenced, denied and discredited while allowing for contradicting histories and

narratives to remain side by side; and thirdly, Rose presents the proposition that in recuperative work “there is no former time/space of wholeness to which we might return or which we might resurrect for ourselves. Nor is there a posited future wholeness which may yet save us” (24). Researching for hidden histories and local possibilities within the cultural heritage of Australian non-Indigenous society, the myth of the bird-maiden emerged as a narrative tradition in many northern European cultures which has a strong variant tradition in Anglo-Celtic culture, in the form of the *selkie*, or seal-maiden. I recognised the ways that this narrative might be reworked in a recuperative mode that could, in seeking alternatives to our embeddedness in violence and disconnection, potentially offer points of connectivity with the narratives of Indigenous voices.

The bird-woman imagery of the novel is based upon the common folk story of the animal bride, which has a narrative formula that recurs in cultures throughout the world, its variations influenced by culture, geography and climate. In Scotland and Ireland, the myth of the selkie, or the seal-maiden, has a deep-rooted tradition in the coastal-fishing communities. In northern European countries such as Russia and the Scandinavian region, the animal-bride appears in the form of a swan or goose.

The basic narrative is as follows: a hunter happens upon a group of beautiful women bathing in a pool or spring. He sees on the bank a pile of skins and steals one, remaining hidden all the while. The women emerge from the water and take up their skins, transforming into swans and taking to the sky to return to their other world. One woman cannot find her skin and she is left behind. The hunter comes forward and is able to claim her, for as long as he possesses her bird-skin she essentially belongs to him and cannot return home. She reluctantly becomes his wife and bears his children. She may grow to love her human family but she never stops longing to return to her supernatural home. The children see her weeping and ask why she is so sad, and she tells them she longs to go home but cannot return without her bird-skin. In many versions of the swan-maiden story the children

go looking for it and when they find it they give it to her, somewhat unwittingly. In other versions, the swan-maiden finds her skin by chance. She may or may not feel sad to be leaving her family behind but she does not hesitate to slip into her bird-skin and return to her other world, never to return. In some versions of the swan-maiden story the husband undertakes an arduous journey to reclaim her, bringing about an uncomplicated happy ending.

Critical readings of the bird-wife (and, more extensively, the animal-bride) narrative have often identified the narrative as one that depicts the increasing alienation of humanity from the natural world. Boria Sax, for example, in *The Serpent and the Swan* (1998), suggests that the first part of the story narrating the swan maiden's capture and marriage is the earliest narrative, originating possibly as far back as the Neolithic era. The second section of the narrative, her abandonment of her family, he suggests, is a later addition, and the third section is quite recent. Sax surmises that the first part could be interpreted as venerating the totemistic marriage between humanity (man) and nature (woman). A primitivist projection, this suggestion privileges the idea of early human society being located in a primal and dyadic relationship with the natural world; in psychoanalytic terms, in a time before the *ichspaltung*, the psychic split necessary for the formation of the discrete self and full consciousness. Sax goes on to argue that the varying antiquity of the three sections reflects the history of an increasing alienation of human society from the natural world over the last few millennia. As I will delineate in the following paragraphs, breaking the narrative down into these three sections, according to the chronological stages of the narrative's development, revealed the recuperative potential of the first and second sections and enabled me to identify the ideological factors underlying my deep-seated resistance towards the third section.

In all the variations of the second section of the bird-maiden story, her desertion of family, the bird-wife is never truly possessed by the man who claims ownership of her. The power of her metamorphosis and thus her means of return to her other world, regarded as

inaccessible to men and humanity until the emergence of the third section, resides with her imperishable bird-skin. The bird-skin is something more than just an object: it is supernatural yet physical, it is both flesh and clothing, very much a physical part of her body but not definite and fixed like a limb. When she removes it, the bird becomes a woman with her knowledge of the other world intact. She remains an unknowable foreigner in her husband's human society. The bird-skin, then, is symbolic of the liminal state, of both space and being: when she recovers her bird-skin and puts it back on, she is leaving one world on her way to the other, neither wholly the one being nor the other. Her captivity and submission depends upon the concealment of her bird skin from her and once found she has the power and compulsion to elude and escape.

Much analysis of the animal-bride narrative focuses on the intersecting themes of gender, human-nature relations and the issue of power. In this symbolic marriage between man and Nature, Nature, as the animal-bride, is fettered, domesticated and subservient until she re-possesses the object which enables her transformation and return to her wild state. In many narratives, the transformation and subsequent abandonment is a consequence of man's abuse of nature (through abuse of the woman) and her resources, or the transgression of taboos established to maintain a mutual balance between human culture and nature. The Cambridgeshire version of "The Seventh Swan," as retold in Rosalind Kervin's *English Fairy Tales and Legends*, explicitly addresses the transgressing of taboos related to the separation of human and nature. The hunter breaks the first taboo of attempting to hunt a swan for food. The villagers in this narrative consider the swan to be sacred and uphold the prohibition on hunting and eating swans despite the starvation that has afflicted the village. The swan, injured by the hunter, transforms into a young maiden. The hunter abducts her as his swan-bride and attempts to force himself on her over several subsequent nights, thus breaking a second taboo. The bride's six sisters return for her and the hunter is punished by a vicious physical attack from the seven swans that drives him into the fens where he drowns. In less turbulent versions the marriage is still a troubled one, full of uneasy

tensions, with a clear sense of ambivalence and reluctance on the part of the animal-bride: she is a bride by capture and is, fundamentally, being held against her instinctive will. The premise of rape in the marriage is left unspoken, except in rare examples such as the one cited above, but emerges from a more subversive reading of the myth. While most versions describe the animal-bride as becoming devoted in her married life, happily submissive and much in love with her husband and children, this depiction of docile femininity and motherhood is belied when she abandons them. The bird-wife rarely hesitates to leave and feels only a passing sadness that she will not see her husband and children again. The bird-wife's abandonment also symbolises the ultimate impossibility for man to possess and control the natural world.

The third section, being of more recent origin, reflects human desire to reconnect with or, perhaps, re-establish dominance over nature. In my research and thinking, I came to a decision to reject the third section and its various cultural versions of the bird-maiden's otherworld for two reasons. Firstly, in my understanding of this myth, to represent the otherworld in terms of castles and princesses in faraway lands, as is the general pattern of the third section, is to impose phallogentric cultural imagery over what I consider to be an ultimately unrepresentable realm of the feminine beyond the bounds of the Symbolic. For the creative work, I turned to the Lacanian concept of the Real to interpret the bird-maiden's otherworld as a realm of the unconscious: of unarticulable desire and of traumatic memories that cannot be confronted. Instead of following through with the third section of the narrative, I altered the resolution to suggest an alternative direction for this difficult relationship whereby the premise of captivity is overturned. Bojan, rather than driving Helen to abandon him, makes the decision to return to her, in a symbolic gesture, the means of her transformation and reconnection to her maternal origins. This alternative ending resists the discourse of environmental redemption or salvation that is most readily available when regarding the bird-maiden folk story as a story about the marriage of man and nature. Healing, in this narrative, is represented as partial, incomplete and unstable. Ultimately, I

wanted Bojan's choice to be understood as an alternative to domination, where his actions attest to a different relationship with Helen's otherness, a choice to sustain his desire rather than strive to fulfil it.

3.2. Creative Morphologies

The Imaginary anatomy and the intertwined aesthetic of the uncanny and the sublime are two different ways in which to interpret the morphology of the bird-woman which contains a conceptual contrast with the ways in which these modes were used, respectively, in *Storm Boy* and in Angas's Text. In *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz examines the dualisms which assert that subjectivity and authoritative knowledge on the one hand are entirely separate from the corporeal existence of the subjects on the other. The category of the body, being a variation on the dominated category of nature, has thus been subjugated to the same patterns of appropriation, colonisation and productions of 'knowledge' about the body. Grosz writes that

[t]he body has thus far remained colonized through the discursive practices of the natural sciences, particularly the discourses of biology and medicine. It has generally remained mired in presumptions regarding its naturalness, its fundamentally biological and precultural status, its immunity to cultural, social, and historical factors, its brute status as given, unchangeable, inert, and passive, manipulable under scientifically regulated conditions.

(1994: x)

Grosz goes beyond the sex-gender/nature-nurture distinctions that often characterise Anglo-feminist thinking to show that the sexualised body is more than a blank materiality onto which a series of interrelated representations – determined by the historical, social and cultural desires of a patriarchal order – are imposed while the physical reality of the body remains basically unchanged. Rather, these inscriptions actively create the body into a materially determinate type and thus create specific 'corporealities', in other words, an arena of subjective experience (x). This leads to a diversity of experiences of the *lived body* that

differ in their specificity from one culture to another and change over time, being “interwoven with and constitutive of systems of meaning, signification, and representation” (18). This observation reveals a repressed relationship between conceptually opposed categories that has been rendered invisible through the discursive assertion that there exists an unbridgeable gap between these categories.

What Grosz is arguing is that it is not the mind’s independence of the dumb and brutish body on which subjectivity and the transparency of knowledge hinges, but that subjectivity and the particularising of sexual difference comes from the specific configurations of bodies which are more aptly described as morphologies – the inextricable enmeshment of the physical and the cultural that determine the psychical experiences of subjectivity and identity (1995: 2-3). Grosz connects this strategy of particularising subjectivity through the individual enmeshment of the body and culture with the idea of the imaginary anatomy/body-schema, an area in Lacan’s thinking which was left underdeveloped and which Grosz recognises as being open to a range of different exploratory directions, some promisingly subversive.

In the novel the morphological fusion of woman and bird defines the three generations of women who form the central triad of characters in the novel: Eliina, Fae and Helen. The characters who are familiar with birds – Bojan and Tam, in particular – recognise characteristics in the women that belong to the white egret, the most prominent being the eyes: yellow, sharp and alien, set uncannily within a human face (Love: 56, 59, 82, 94, 108). Helen, in aftermath moments of domestic violence, is able to catch the blink of the nictating membrane, a second translucent eyelid present in bird species that cleans and protects the eye during flight or when the bird swims underwater (152, 164). The three women experience avian physiological sensations and changes precipitated by the seasons and weather events such as *zugunruhe*, the avian instinctual urge to migrate (94). Eliina, able to decipher the avian intelligence which ripples through the landscape, communicates with the

birds using their repertoire of songs, whistles, calls and cries (130). The metamorphosis from woman to egret deepens as each of the three women approach death – whether sudden and unexpected, or premeditated.

The ambiguity of the boundary between human and animal is not clarified in the narrative. Similarly, the intensification of bodily changes towards an avian form in the proximity of death is not something the narrative attempts to explain or signal clearly. The women begin to grow feathers and develop a gland known as a powder-down patch, present in the birds of the *Ardeidae* family (herons, egrets and bitterns). This mat of short feathers breaks down into a fine talc-like powder which the birds use with their heads and bills to wipe over their feathers, making them especially soft and silky. In keeping with this magic-realist element of the novel, the women do not react with shock or surprise at the changes to their bodies; rather, these distinctive avian rituals they begin to perform arise like an instinctive second knowledge of themselves. The women's encounters with death – Eliina's suicide, Fae's death in the fire, and Helen's survival of her grandfather's attempt on her life – bring their avian selves into full realisation through a mode of the feminine sublime, which will be discussed in a moment.

The Lacanian idea of the Imaginary anatomy and its implications for this idea of a being who is half-bird and half-woman, is of particular relevance here. In the chapter on *Storm Boy*, the child's "bird-self" and his relationship with the feminine Coorong is ultimately repudiated, informed, as the narrative is, by the ideology that to become a human subject one must enter fully into the Symbolic, entailing the repression of the mother and maternal-feminine realm which includes the Coorong and the pelican. In the novel, Helen's idea of herself as half-bird emerges from the environment of her family, most directly from the family folklore of selkies and egret-maidens which are told to her as a child by her grandfather. The idea is also conveyed through a form of inheritance of the repressed material of family histories, traumas, stories and desires that have been sublimated into the unique dynamics of the family. Whether or not Helen is physiologically half-bird is not at

stake in this narrative, for the idea of the Imaginary anatomy is concerned with how we know and experience our bodies and corporeality. It is “an effect of the internalization of the specular image, and reflects social and familial beliefs about the body more than it does the body’s organic nature” (Grosz 1995, 86), an idea that I have woven into the theme of the intergenerational inheritance of trauma.

There is a refusal in the narrative to resolve this Imaginary anatomy for Helen, and also for Vivi whose metamorphosis involves the desertification of her body, both a solacing and traumatic domain of transformation as she recovers the repressed memories of her young sister’s death. The motif of the Imaginary anatomy has been used in the narrative to forge a strong sense of connectivity between female bodies and natural environments and to explore an alternative idea of subjectivity where the self is “a centre of organisation, constantly drawing on and influencing the surroundings, whose skin and behaviour are soft zones containing the world rather than excluding it” (Shepard: 1971, 24-5). As explained in the introductory chapter, just as forms of connectivity are conduits for conducting relationships and alternative forms of knowledge, they are also conduits for damage when the ecology that is the partner in these forms of connectivity comes into crisis. Thus, the political impetus of my thinking values the sustaining of the Imaginary anatomy that encompasses specular identifications with animals and the landscapes of wetlands and deserts as an ethical engagement with the safeguarding of natural environments that reframes the issue of conservation as one which concerns as much the conservation of human culture, subjectivity and spirituality as it does the materiality of the environment itself.

3.3 The Enigmatic Loss: the ‘Birdline’

The bird-woman’s animal-self is a metaphor for the unknowable nature of traumatic experiences: trauma’s haunting and destructive power comes from the way it dissolves the boundaries between self and other, human and animal, culture and nature, sanity and madness, returning us to a primal psychic state that is beyond/anterior to/resistant to

representation, language, signification and memory and is hence, retrospectively, a missed encounter with the Real. The bird-maiden embodies the transformative power of trauma and the way in which that unrepresentable domain, a parallel of the bird-maiden's otherworldly homeland, is momentarily accessed through a violent breach upon consciousness precipitated by a traumatic experience. Both places cannot be signified any further than as the realm of the Lacanian Real, "a terrain of unmapped alterity", and, in the case of trauma, a psychic place and time so traumatic that it must never be confronted, not even in dreams (Belsey 2005: 4, 49). Instead, trauma is indirectly approached and indirectly approaches, sublimated into displaced meaning, but never directly confronted.

The traumatic connection between woman and bird hinges on the idea that the inaccessibility of trauma is parallel to the unknowability of the sentient life of birds. The choice of the bird, as opposed to any other animal, was inspired by their being a defining presence and element in the Coorong landscape and ecology, and for certain perceptive abilities and knowledge they possess which continue to mystify science. Examples of this are well-known and innumerable: from the pelicans' inexplicable knowledge gleaned from thousands of kilometres away that Lake Eyre is in flood, triggering their response to migrate to the lake to breed, to the migratory wader birds extraordinary capacity for memory and instincts in order to survive the epic journey from the Arctic to the Coorong every year.

The two-fold inheritance of trauma and the imaginary anatomy of the bird woman is symbolised in the concept of the 'birdline', a word Vivi coins to describe the unusual mystery of the three generations of women (Love: 77). It is a play on the concept of 'bloodline' and denotes the deep interiority of desire and the imaginary anatomy as well as the flesh-and-blood continuity of the generations. Judith Butler's foreword to Bracha L. Ettinger's *The Matrixial Borderspace* was never far from my mind while I wrote "Lacepede". In particular I was interested in the way in which trauma and the desire it constitutes can be passed down through the generations in sublimated forms that haunt the descendants with a profound sense of loss:

We are speaking not only of the loss of childhood, or the loss of a maternal connection that the child must undergo, but also of an enigmatic loss that is communicated from the mother to the child, from the parents to the child, from the adult world to the child, who is given this loss to handle when the child cannot handle it, when it is too large for the child, when it is too large for the adult, when the loss is trauma, and cannot be handled by anyone, anywhere, where the loss signifies what we cannot master. (Butler 2006, viii).

...

What is the agency of the one who registers the imprints from the other? This is not the agency of the ego, and neither is it the agency of one who is presumed to know. It is a registering and a transmutation that takes place in a largely, though not fully, preverbal sphere, an autistic relay of loss and desire received from elsewhere, and only and always ambiguously made one's own. (xi).

The desire that is constituted through the alienating power of trauma is not explicated in the narrative and is unrepresentable but for the term 'birdline', which is further echoed by the Estonian mythical *linnutee*, 'the bird's way', which symbolises, firstly, the bird's migratory path to the northern hemisphere, and secondly, the mythical register of this path as the way 'home' to the otherworld. The birdline and the *linnutee* encapsulate the inheritance of a darkness sublimated and passed down, which is registered on a deep and unconscious level in the lives of Fae and Helen, as somehow the source of Fae's discontent and fatal ennui and Helen's difficult attraction to Galway.

3.4 The Matrixial Uncanny and the Feminine Sublime

The bird-woman's morphology directly expresses the animalian, natural, instinctive and unhomey other, and in doing so, embodies a multiplicity of terrains: the terrain of trauma; the terrain of feminine alterity; and the terrain of feminised nature which is held captive as the wife of man and humanity. However, as my research continued to explore the concept of nature in its complexity and multifariousness, the process of writing the novel was persistently haunted by the question of what kind of nature the bird-women of Lacedede

actually embodied. Were they direct embodiments of the Coorong, or did their embodiment pertain to the natural domain of birds alone, or was their embodiment related to a more abstract concept? I was aware of an essentialist perspective that might insist that the bird-woman ought then to be a Ngarrindjeri woman. By portraying a mythical/magic-realist being who embodies the conflation of the Coorong and white femininity, I was troubled by my own self-reflexive criticism that Ngarrindjeri femininity was being denied in this landscape where the connectivity between the two has been so extensively documented and for which I feel deep respect.

Consequently, I have come to approach the question of what idea of “nature” and what kind of femininity the bird-woman embodies through the concept of “entanglement”, a term used by Gelder and Jacobs and by D.B. Rose to explain the ways in which we are situated psychologically, corporeally, and culturally within these landscapes for which the legitimacy of our sense of belonging is deeply unstable in a modern postcolonial world. The term emphasises that despite this instability, by having lived in these landscapes and forged deep and meaningful associations, “entanglement” becomes the positive and creative ground for ethical engagement and action between cultures and, it should be added, between species (Rose, 2004: 22). Gelder and Jacobs explain that the haunting effects of entanglement is of a particular kind that “gives expression to a sense of (dis)possession for both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people alike” (42); in other words, entanglement is an experience in which belonging and dis-possession are simultaneously felt, and hence, uncanny for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal subjectivities.

The morphology of the bird-woman embodies and explores the intertwinement of the uncanny and the sublime which, contrasting at a conceptual level with the writings of Angas, is explored in a mode that can be defined as feminine in the creative work. In the second chapter, the uncanny and the sublime were defined in relation to the place and role of the pre-oedipal territory as the underlying source of uncanny experiences and the difficult

materiality that leads to the mental attunement that is revered as sublime, thus showing how the former is the obverse of the later: the uncanny belongs to the repressed and surmounted terrain that gives rise to masculine sublimity. I would like to extend this idea by suggesting that the terrain of trauma is experientially similar to that of the pre-oedipal; it is a terrain where the integrity of the phallogocentric model of singular subjectivity is threatened, and even damaged, and hence is subjected to the same processes of repression and sublimation, constituting desire through a structure of loss and alienation. Thus, in the creative work, past trauma has a power similar to the repressed pre-oedipal, if they are not in fact deeply related terrains, to call up uncanny experiences that evoke a place and time of disintegration and ‘falling to pieces’ as well as pathways to alternative domains of sublime experience.

In the novel, I have aimed to create a sense of the uncanny that has been identified elsewhere by Giblett as the fascinating uncanny as opposed to the horrifying uncanny. Ettinger also distinguishes between two kinds of uncanny that can be aligned with Giblett’s distinction:

I think that we must clearly separate these two kinds of archaic phantasy complexes [castration complex and maternal womb/intrauterine complex], both of which appear in Freud’s [“The Uncanny”]. Both of them, when they threaten to approach the subject in the Real, trigger a similar sentiment of awe and strangeness that lies at the source of the same class of “uncanny” or *Unheimlich* anxiety. ... While castration phantasy is frightening at the point of the emergence of the original experience before its repression, the matrixial phantasy (from *matrice*, for womb) is not frightening at the point of its original emergence, but becomes frightening when the experience is repressed. (2006: 47)

Where Freud argued that the differentiation between these two kinds of phantasies was inconsequential as far as uncanny effects were concerned, Ettinger insists on this differentiation as a potential and promising area in which to explore the possibility that sexual “difference comes before, it exists and leaves psychic traces before repression” (70). Returning to Giblett’s more readily accessible differentiation, the uncanny provides a

potentially productive and creative engagement with wetland ecologies – and female sexuality – if it can be disassociated from the misogynistic overtones inherent in the horrifying uncanny which perceives wetlands, and female bodies, as places to be avoided, conquered or destroyed. In the mode of the fascinating uncanny, the “sights, sounds and smells, even their tastes and textures [are] appreciated and conserved” (13).

In my earlier concern about what kind of nature was being embodied in the morphology of the bird-woman, I approached the conflation of femininity and nature by focusing on the terrain of the wetland as mythic and archaic feminine terrain is symbolised by the egret, a wetland bird. This archaic terrain is enmeshed with the actual environments of two separate wetlands that have become part of the psychological landscape of the three generations of women: the Coorong of the present and the Emajõe Suursoo of Eliina’s homeland in Estonia which has a continuing shadowing presence in the lives of her descendants. The feminine and maternal associations of the suursoo are alluded to in the Estonian place names ‘Emajõe’ and the ‘Emajõgi’, the latter being the river which feeds the suursoo. Emajõgi translates into English as ‘Mother River’ while Emajõe Suursoo translates as the ‘great swamp/marsh of the Emajõgi’. The ‘Ema-’ of both names is the Estonian for ‘mother’ and also the name by which Fae knows Eliina. As the ecosystem which symbolises the liminal par excellence, the wetland is the terrain of metamorphosis: it is the most dynamic and mutable of all ecosystems, the intermediary between past and future, life and death, water and land.

Imagery of a liquid and fluid nature predominate in the setting of “Lacepede”: time and temporality are connected to tidal forces (Love, 8); memories move and feel like water or are kept repressed under the surface of the lagoon (13-4); bodies are marshlands and quaking mires (7). The landscapes of “Lacepede” cannot be clearly distinguished into water and land, past and present – surfaces become night skies (20), shacks disappear into the liquidity of heat mirages (18), dead loved ones appear at the turn of the tide (8), ancestors still camp on the shorelines, the sounds and rhythms of their domestic lives uncannily

familiar to Galway (124-5). Ultimately, Lacedpede is a place that constantly evokes a sense of the uncanny: the repression of feminine sexuality, trauma and desire is never far below the surface, which is nowhere more vividly represented for me as the writer of this work than in the gradual feathering of the bird-woman's skin.

The idea of the feminine sublime is a subversive reinterpretation of the masculine mode, its seminal articulation put forward in works such as Barbara Claire Freeman's *The Feminine Sublime: Gender and Excess in Women's Fiction* (1995) and Patricia Yaeger's essay "Toward a Female Sublime" (1989). While Yaeger suggests that the qualities of strength, mastery and empowerment are what feminist/feminine agendas would do well to embrace through an appropriation of the sublime mode, Freeman relaxes the defining parameters of the feminine sublime by regarding the feminine as a more logical proposition whereby a mode that establishes a different relation to excess and thus produces a different experiential/aesthetic outcome can be defined as feminine and yet no less sublime. Both Yaeger and Freeman emphasise that there are a multiplicity of modes that can be identified as the feminine sublime, rather than a definitive and singular mode such as that which defines the masculine sublime. The plurality of the feminine sublime stems from the potentially unlimited number of ways in which a critical engagement with the conceptual foundations of the sublime mode can lead to the reconceptualization of a relationship with excess which is not conceived of only "as a frightening (and feminine) other [which] provides the occasion for a confrontation that enables the (masculine) self to confirm, or enhance, its own existence" (Freeman: 25). Rather than rigorously adhering to the psycho-analytic model of sublimation and working through its implications for feminine subjectivity, Freeman expands the feminine sublime into a domain that is concerned with "the construction and destruction of borders (be they aesthetic, political, or psychic), the permutations of identity formation and deformation, and the question of how such limits may or may not be represented" (6).

The narrative engagement with the feminine sublime in my creative work was inspired by Bracha Ettinger's *Eurydice* series: a series of artworks in which the primary technique of interrupting the photocopying process generates haunting images of the Holocaust that appear caught in a suspended moment in which they seem to both appear and disappear. Through the myth of Eurydice, Ettinger, a second-generation descendant of Holocaust survivors, explores the nature of loss and trauma and its intergenerational inheritance in the context of the Shoah. Her artwork and the critical engagement relating to it by Butler and Griselda Pollock were deeply informative in my own thinking on these themes and on the nature and imagery of hauntings. I recognised in Butler's description of what Ettinger's *Eurydice* series achieves in the realm of art and the visual representation of unimaginable loss and trauma a mode of the feminine sublime:

Somewhere, something was lost, but no story can be told about it, no memory can retrieve it, for the memory itself is fractured, partial, fading into oblivion....this is a loss that does not stop happening, this is a past that does not stop being the past, that insists itself on the present, fading and appearing at once....A domain of appearance emerges, and is excessively tonal; it is intense, compacted, it wastes no space, it fills its space, but not always with the same density; it insists upon intensity, breadth, and even beauty. (2006: viii)

Ettinger's artwork achieves the feminine sublime by finding a way to signify the unrepresentable in a mode that resists the discourse of recollection and recovery and of the mastery of transcendence. It manages to signify irrevocability and the incomprehensibility of what was lost without containing or particularising meaning.

"Lacepede" concludes with the image of birds flocking in the sky, readying for the migration back to the northern hemisphere, recollecting the motifs throughout the narrative of the birdline, the linnutee and the return home to feminine origins. Though a collective and rippling sheet of feathers and motion, it is not an image of unity or wholeness; rather, it is an image of incompleteness and shifting mutability. From a distance, it has the granular appearance and the tonality and porousness that echo Ettinger's *Eurydice*, which she used to

signify the fragmenting, self-dispersive power of trauma and the irrevocability of loss. It is an image of bodies linked with one another at a psychic level that is prior to individuation; it combines, on the one hand, the motifs of belonging and returns to origins, and on the other, disrupts the holistic and harmonious associations of such motifs with the facts of extreme endurance, starvation and dangerous crossings. This is the site of Helen's self-dispersal, her union with the ultimate alterity of trauma, femininity and nature.

4. CONCLUSION

Perceiving the image of the Coorong sea mouth as evocative of female sexuality lent a visceral edge to the idea of the estuary as a “traumascape”. In framing the argument that the ecological damage sustained by the Coorong, Lower Lakes and sea mouth, the denigration of female bodies and the negation of the feminine in western culture, language and subjectivity are all products of a single process of devaluing the feminine, the sea mouth came to signify not just itself as a specific place but as a metaphysical site of female sexuality that is repeatedly defined through violence. I have located some of the beginnings of this shared legacy of trauma within the model of western subjectivity as understood by psychoanalysis. Constituted by loss, desire and the Symbolic realm, which negates and sublimates the feminine into a realm of demarcated otherness where there can be no independent meaning or self-definition, subjectivity is just as constrained by the Symbolic Other in the modes available for experiencing aesthetic engagements with the natural world as it is by the circumscriptions of symbolic language which determine what one can and cannot express about oneself. I sought to demonstrate this in two texts which were shaped through masculine engagements with the Coorong by identifying how these texts portray and resolve the blurring of boundaries between the human and the natural world.

While Angas expresses an exuberant admiration for particular details of the strange Antipodean landscapes, the blurring of boundaries epitomised by the Ngarrindjeri is feared, at times abhorred, and guarded against at all cost. Angas’s language evinces all the hallmarks of colonial and patriarchal discourses that naturalise and consolidate masculine dominance on the basis of the European white male’s rational capacity to maintain the boundaries between self and other, man and nature, civilisation and barbarism, and life and death. What was increasingly revealed in a close reading of Angas’s journals was his use of the intertwined aesthetic modes of the uncanny and the sublime in order to make sense of the deeply unfamiliar and sometimes frightening landscapes of the Coorong. Where the

uncanny, in Angas's experience, signified the return of the repressed feminine, his sublime moment on the shoreline of the utterly remote 90 mile beach enabled him to confront and master the difficult materiality of feminine excess and transcend all that he found disturbing and treacherous in the nature of the Coorong. An echo of this can be seen in Angas's landscape and ethnographic paintings from the Lower Lakes and Coorong.

While outside the scope of this study, an analysis of Angas's visual depictions of the Lower Lakes and Coorong could yield an interesting and complementary reading to my psychoanalytic interpretation of the literary expressions of his subjective engagement. A central focus for this future research might be the unique and individual ways in which the aesthetics of the uncanny and the sublime shed light on the interrelationship between Angas's artworks and his writing. This focus might then be broadened to produce a deeper understanding of his perspective and subjective experience of this environment within the context of the imperial, colonial and aesthetic discourses of his time.

This exegesis looks to Henri Safran's *Storm Boy* to explore a primary example of the visual impact the Coorong landscape has made within the genre of film, in turn focusing less on artistic aesthetics and more on the discursive structures encoded into the tightly composed fictional narrative. In *Storm Boy*, the blurring of the human/nature duality is initially cast in positive terms through the discourse of the primitive which expresses the desire to reinhabit core experiences of connection and closeness with Nature. Both Angas's writings and *Storm Boy* express, through their different modes of engagement with the natural world, the same existential desire: for access to the unknowable world of Nature that constitutes the realm beyond the Symbolic and language. Angas's desire, implicit and repressed throughout his writing, is complicated by the frightening presence of the Ngarrindjeri who symbolise both the human embodiment of Nature as well as the desired access to Nature by which Angas comes to account for their savage and rank humanity. In *Storm Boy*, the figure of the Aborigine is a romanticised representation of the primitive, reflecting a different interpretation of primitivist desire that is no less ambivalent than that of Angas. The scope

of this exegesis necessitated a primary focus on the child-of-nature at the expense of a more detailed exploration of the representation of Fingerbone as a trope of primitivist desire. Even so, Fingerbone is a richly detailed character in the film with a complex moral and ideological function in the narrative, possibly embodying, as opposed to the ‘horrificing’ uncanny of Angas’s writing, Giblett’s idea of the ‘fascinating’ uncanny as discussed in the third chapter. In a different study, a focus on Fingerbone might facilitate an analysis of the ways in which the Aborigine – romanticised and characterised an indisputably ‘good’ character whose people have been profoundly misunderstood by white man’s society – is still regarded by the ideological parameters of the film as an untenable model of merging with nature for non-Indigenous masculine subjectivity. The child-of-nature trope, in this case, offers a socially acceptable alternative for white culture because it is free of such disconcerting elements of primitivism as ‘black’ sexuality, psycho-spiritual harm and the primitive’s brutal brand of morality. All of these elements are alluded to in Fingerbone’s personal history and account for the ambivalent desire that he elicits.

The intertwining of human and nature in the film’s child-of-nature trope, construed as positive and potentially restorative for a spiritually impoverished society, is ultimately repudiated by a social order that requires the male child to enter fully into the Symbolic if he is to become a human subject. The Imaginary anatomy in which Storm Boy introjects specular identifications with the pelican and with elements of the landscape – such as the wind – encapsulates his immersion in the feminine which, within the logic of the film, also means the boy cannot be masculine and human. Thus, Storm Boy is freed from the feminine realm by the death of his pelican and he is then able to leave the pre-oedipal and feminine terrain of the Coorong for human community and schooling, and thus by extension, enters fully into the Symbolic to become a human subject.

If one considers the literary and historical works produced about the Coorong over time, Angas’s published journals and art works along with the film *Storm Boy* have strong ecological credentials. Colin Thiele, for example, writes that Angas expressed “one of the

most sensitive responses” that captured “the spirit of the Coorong” (1972: 34). Thiele’s *Storm Boy* narrative offers a conservative and didactic message about the value of protecting pristine environments, portraying the child and the Aboriginal man as carrying the burden of environmental redemption. By analysing the ways in which these works are deeply masculine engagements with the Coorong and Lower Lakes and thus bound by the laws of the Symbolic to negate and sublimate the feminine – that is: the natural, the maternal, the Aboriginal – into a realm of demarcated otherness that masculine subjectivity cannot relate to in non-oppositional or non-hierarchical ways, my study makes problematic those eco-ideological credentials.

In response to this problematisation, future research might include a study of the discourses surrounding environmentalism that inform not just the *Storm Boy* film but also the wealth of local literature produced since which articulates various environmental stances regarding the conservation and future of the Coorong. Much of this local literature refers to or connects with the film as a touchstone of environmental wisdom pertaining particularly to the Coorong. Important works that might be included in such a study are the two books Colin Thiele wrote subsequent to the children’s novel *Storm Boy*, both of which celebrate through poetic prose the unique flora, fauna and geology of the region, its dark colonial history and the environmental ethos of the Ngarrindjeri. In the epilogue to his first publication, *Coorong* (1972), Thiele expressed a deep distrust of ideas about ‘development’ and of making the wilderness ‘accessible’; he made clear his fear that the pristine integrity of this wetland ecosystem might be overwhelmingly compromised by tourism and recreation (54). Another important work to consider is Alistair Wood’s *Poor Man River* (2007), mentioned at the beginning of this exegesis. Wood’s more contemporary work, a memoir, like Thiele’s text, attempts to transform a deeply meaningful experience of a natural environment through a correspondingly meaningful experience through language. If such works are to be heralded as championing the pristine nature of the Coorong, their ecological credentials ought to be examined to identify not just the hidden assumptions that discursively

undermine the writers' sincere attempts at meaningfully connecting with the natural world, but also to identify what positive in-roads these texts might actually have achieved.

The focus of such future research might be aimed at identifying the short-comings of environmentalist discourses from which these and other works draw their conceptual strengths, and to identify, particularly, the hidden assumptions inherent in these discourses, there because of the conceptual limitations of Symbolic language. Analogous to theoretical and creative work focused on ways in which to think and speak 'in the feminine', an attempt to generate a discourse in western Symbolic language that can convey a reconceptualised relationship between humans and nature can be just as fraught with the hidden dangers of attempting to dismantle a logic that polarises the world into presence and absence. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile research both in itself and for the potentially powerful creative output it can generate.

The grand ambition of this research project was a redressing of the concept of nature in the form of a symbolic overhaul and reconceptualisation which would have meaningful implications for dismantling inter-related structures of domination, and for resolving the problematic rationale of a logic that justifies the unsustainable exploitation of nature while disabling our capacity, particularly as a society, to respond effectively to the unprecedented environmental crises which have developed as a consequence. My research into French feminist philosophy and its entanglement with the tautological traps of psychoanalytic theory revealed the extraordinary complexity, and at times the impossibility, of realising any ambition to find a language and mode sexually specific to feminine subjectivity.

Nevertheless, Bracha Ettinger's insistence on the importance of the smaller creative and symbiogenic gestures as a way of infusing and enriching the symbolic universe (in which ideas about femininity are already rigidly constructed) with imagery that suggests alternative ideas provided this project with the way towards a more specific focus.

The morphology of the bird-woman engaged with both the idea of the Imaginary anatomy and the intertwinement of the uncanny and the sublime, and through this I sought to demonstrate my reconceptualisation of these modes as being at least a partial representation of, or a gesture towards, the feminine. Unlike *Storm Boy*, the motif of the Imaginary anatomy for Helen and the other female characters in “Lacepede” is not resolved through the repudiation of specular identifications with nature in order to establish a mode of subjectivity that is singular, discrete and impervious to the external environment. Closely related to the Imaginary anatomy, the mode of the uncanny was important in this narrative, present in the recurring imagery of things liquid and fluid, evoking the archaic wetland that is the reservoir of memory and desire associated with feminine and maternal origins. More specifically, the uncanny is present in the encroaching metamorphosis of the female body into a bird, where the feathering of the skin signifies the return of repressed feminine history and trauma. Like the Imaginary anatomy, the uncanny is not resolved in the narrative of “Lacepede” but culminates in the feminine sublime in which female subjectivity moves into a terrain of excess and the unlimited, not the hostile and desolate domain of the masculine sublime, but a domain in which the desire to “lose oneself” leads to the site of self-dispersal as, simultaneously, a site of liberation from the Symbolic. The Imaginary anatomy and the feminine uncanny are reframed as modes that facilitate a profound sense of connectivity between female bodies and natural environments in order to explore an alternative idea of subjectivity where boundaries are zones of liminality and permeability, in which the external world and the other can be contained without being diminished. The political impetus of my thinking recognises that the idea of specular identifications with animals and natural places as inhibitive of mature subjectivity and therefore requiring repudiation is axiomatic of phallogocentric logic. Alternatively, I sought to demonstrate that maintaining some level of specular identification provides a mode of ethical engagement in which the safeguarding of natural environments does not concern the issue of material environmental conservation

alone but also, contained within it, the conservation of human culture, subjectivity and spirituality.

During the course of this project I was mindful of a recurring idea that the research journey of the exegesis in some ways reflected that of Angas's journey into the Coorong. On levels geographical, physical and symbolic, Mason's Hut was the last outpost of western language before Angas crossed over into the strange uncanny feminine realm of the Coorong where he was frequently left without the words to adequately describe it. My research was constantly preoccupied with those boundaries that circumscribe the realm of language and thus the worlds within and without, especially in relation to representing the feminine as something alternative to an empty negated space of otherness. Like Angas, finding the language to write both the creative work and the exegesis was consistently difficult and plagued by the inadequacies of readily available meaning. However, the momentum for this project was sustained by a deep love for the Coorong and a desire to somehow translate or recreate the physical, emotional and intellectual impact that this place has in the world of real time and corporeality into an equivalent experience with both poetic and critical language. My lifelong preoccupation with this place has stemmed particularly from the Coorong's haunting aesthetics which, with their power to intrigue and disturb, bring about the desire to articulate the strange and indeterminate meanings encompassed in this unique landscape. As Oerlemans wrote in *Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature*, this kind of writing is motivated by a desire to reconnect subjectivity with the elemental (20). But the very nature of desire is to elude fulfilment, and as I strove to touch upon the elemental with language, the elemental continued to reveal itself as not in the place I thought to find it. Perhaps a decision in keeping with a feminine poetic, choosing to sustain this desire rather than attempting to fulfil it, means this journey continues ever deeper into stranger country.

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