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Kangaroos and Predators in Recent Australian Fiction: A Post-Pastoral Reading

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When dusk falls in regional Australia, it is common to see mobs of kangaroos ranging in paddocks and on golf courses. They lounge about in family groups in the shade of remnant eucalyptus trees and share the pasture of bovines. They seem peaceful and idyllic, with their wide, dark eyes, cute joeys, and unique gait, and they appear to have close family bonds. They are the most visible and commonplace of Australia's unique animals. Despite all the charm of these awe-inspiring creatures and their status as a national icon, Australian writers perpetually kill them off. Recent Australian fiction has featured native animals that gain substantial narrative agency. Stephen Daisley's *Coming Rain* (2015) and Louis Nowra's *Into That Forest* (2012) undertake extended narratives from the perspective of native animals. The dingo and the thylacine, respectively, are given voice in fiction by these works. Domestic, nonnative animals in Australia have also received serious treatment recently by authors such as Eva Hornung and Michelle de Kretser. But Australian stories are less sympathetic toward the kangaroo. One appears struggling in a rabbit trap, doomed and dying in Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015), Tim Winton has one killed on the road, dissected and fed to dogs in *Breath* (2008). There is an inventory of such examples. Serious treatment of the extinct thylacine abounds, but the kangaroo is often represented as roadkill and dog food. The expendable nature of the kangaroo is a widely held view in Australia, so it is little wonder that this attitude is articulated in our fiction; but it is a bitter irony that the creature that defines us to the rest of the world is perpetually under siege, in life and in literature.

Placing the natural world at the center of literary criticism is a contemporary reading strategy that offers new insights into representations of place and identity and particularly useful in contested landscapes such as Australia. This resonates with what Terry Gifford calls a "post-pastoral" reading, and he applies this concept most often to poetry, including that of Judith Wright. He offers an explanation of post-pastoral: "being aware of some of the problematics of the pastoral, of pushing into the complexities of celebration and responsibility, of being a part of nature and yet uneasy with relationships of ownership and exploitation" ("Judith"). He follows with six conditions for identifying a post-pastoral work, all of which apply to this

study. The most relevant of these involve experiencing “awe” at the natural world, leading to humility and using human conscience “as a tool to heal our troubled relationship with our natural home.” Gifford examines Wright’s poetry through this framework and focuses on the relationship between postcolonial themes and nature. His conclusion raises the question, “Why has Australia’s exceptional nature figured only trivially in the rhetoric of nationhood?” (“Judith”). This study raises a companion question in relation to the kangaroo and a range of recent Australian fiction. Issues of colonial legacy still have strong repercussions for the relationship between settler Australia and the natural world. Post-pastoral reading of works produced by Australian authors yields opportunity for unraveling widely held attitudes that rarely attract sustained attention.

The relationship between settler Australia and the kangaroo has had an interesting trajectory. William Dampier’s 1699 exploration of the west coast yielded observations that “the land animals were ‘only a sort of raccoon . . . with very short fore legs,’ and he says they ‘go jumping’ and were good meat, which would show that he met with a small species of kangaroo” (Lee). Dampier’s confusion and wonder was echoed by later explorers on the east coast, including Joseph Banks, who was captivated by the creature. Indeed, the first image of the kangaroo presented in London following Cook’s voyage of “discovery” was the now iconic painting by George Stubbs, *The Kongouro from New Holland*, which was painted in Britain after the return of Banks, who commissioned the work. Banks’s descriptions, rough sketches, and the skin of a dead kangaroo that he procured during the voyage provided the basis for an image that has since served as the model for the iconic kangaroo on the Australian currency and the coat of arms (Gray). There is a dreadful and peculiar irony here, in that a dead kangaroo is the basis of our, and the world’s, key image of Australian national identity. The work has also been the source of a turf war between the National Gallery of Australia and the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, which holds the work and sees it as part of British maritime history (Kennedy).

Early agriculturalists soon considered kangaroos as competing for pasture with livestock, and kangaroos’ public image descended from a creature of wonder to being deemed a pest. With kangaroos being labeled vermin in their own country, the wild kangaroo population of Australia is now (still) commercially slaughtered for dog food, for their skins, and for the pleasures of gourmet foodies, both domestic and international. In contrast, the emu, also on Australia’s coat of arms, is farmed for skins and gourmet meat and is considerably less populous in the wild. The kangaroo slaughter is “the world’s largest consumptive mammalian wildlife industry” and exterminates, on average, three million kangaroos each year from the wild (Boom). Left alive, these kangaroos impact farms and crops in Australia consider-

ably, and left unslaughtered, they breed rapidly, with no apex predator to naturally control the population.

Those apex predators would have been thylacines in Tasmania and dingos on the mainland, were it not for the longest fence in the world and years of extermination. There is no doubt that settler Australia has made a mess of the ecological balance, more acutely in some areas than others, and seems to be doing a fairly slapdash job of rectifying this situation.

The thylacine (or Tasmanian tiger) was a carnivorous marsupial and the apex predator in Tasmania. It had previously lived across mainland Australia, including in the South West and South Australia. From European settlement in Tasmania in 1803, the thylacine suffered habitat loss and destruction of hunting grounds. Until colonization, it had lived on smaller marsupials; however, with loss of habitat, it turned to eating the settlers' sheep. A bounty was put on the thylacine from 1830, and hunters lived on the payout for killing them. The hunters sold the animals' skins as well. Seventy years later, few were left in the wild, and a handful were captured and sent to zoos across the world, including the London and Bronx zoos. Anecdotes of their behavior show that they were not naturally aggressive and were easily tamed as pets. Settlers considered them akin to the wolves they had eradicated in Europe. As we know, by the end of the 1930s, they were extinct.

Despite this, thylacines are still well and truly alive in Australian literature. Thylacines appear in 260 works listed in the AustLit database of Australian literature, including eighteen novels since 1988. Among these are Julia Leigh's *The Hunter*, Sonia Hartnett's *Stripes of the Sidestep Wolf*, and Louis Nowra's *Into That Forest*, as well as children's fiction, drama, film, short fiction, and poetry. Nostalgia for thylacines has given rise to denial of their extinction and an ongoing search for surviving populations in dark corners of the bush. They are also seriously in the running for experimental deextinction using DNA from museum specimens (Shapiro 17).

Thylacines' importance in Australian literature is apparent. They could well be considered part of Tasmania's extinction discourse and subject to similar subjective treatment as Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Often cited on this topic, Patrick Brantlinger considers extinction a discourse that brings together ideologies of imperialism and colonization, overlaying a sense of inevitability and nostalgia for the loss of the culture and peoples that existed prior to colonial settlement and justified by evolutionary theory (34). Australia, particularly Tasmania, has two key extinction discourses in its literature. Rohan Wilson identifies the death of the so-called Last Tasmanian, Truganini, as a symbolic extinction and expands on it in relation to two novels featuring Tasmanian Aboriginal people. Wilson suggests that extinction tales perpetuate the "grand historical lie of extinction," but they continue to shape the features of modern literature about Tasmania, even though the Aboriginal com-

munity of Tasmania is definitely not extinct (16). The death of the last thylacine in captivity, at the Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart in 1936, some might also consider a symbolic extinction moment, but actual extinction of the thylacine occurred in an unrecorded historical moment we can only imagine. It is apparent when considering the prevalence of the thylacine in literature that it also shapes the features of modern literature about Tasmania and, more broadly, the relationship between settler Australians and the natural world.

Extinction discourses are, in part, symbolic of the wrongs done by colonization, but when considered in light of the nonhuman, they highlight the extent of misunderstanding to which native species were (and still are) subjected. This has broad connotations as we continue to juggle the tensions between preservation of fragile ecosystems and development of resources.

Efforts to set this situation right through literature are perhaps symptomatic of national guilt regarding colonization. The irretrievable nature of this lost species is difficult to accept, and the mythic status of the creatures is another face of the nostalgic Australian psyche, which looks to the past as an age of lost wonder or a pastoral idyll.

Nostalgia for “the last of their kind,” whether it be the Aboriginal “King” in Lawson’s “The Drover’s Wife” or the thylacine, is a perspective that is viewed from a position of retrospect and “safety.” It is now too late to fix it, so nostalgia rests easy in the knowledge that the perceived threat has been extinguished. The thylacine can certainly be read as a metaphor for Tasmania’s Aboriginal people, who were victims of genocide.

Contemporary Australia is sentimental about the thylacine as a strange, lost creature destroyed by the “ignorance” of the past. To us, they are a thing of wonder, destroyed by misguided and misinformed colonials who are long gone. We wash our hands of blame, relegate the decisions to British administrators and a time before a sophisticated understanding of ecosystems. We forgive them for their lack of understanding, and we reify the thylacine in our stories. This helps us to isolate the barbaric behavior in the past, distance it from the present, and use the creature as a lesson for the future.

Perhaps, then, the thylacine in literature serves part of the post-pastoral purpose by enabling us to feel awe and moving us toward humility. At once, it might use this raising of our human conscience to “heal our troubled relationship with our natural home.” It certainly fulfills another of Gifford’s six conditions, in that it leads us to consider “the implications of recognising that we are part of that creative-destructive process” (“Judith”).

Louis Nowra’s *Into That Forest* takes the narrative perspective of Hannah, who was lost with her friend Becky in the Tasmanian wilderness in the nineteenth centu-

ry. The two children find refuge with a pair of thylacines (Hannah calls them tigers), which they name Dave and Corinna, and they adopt the behaviors of the creatures: tearing open prey with their teeth, cooperating as a hunting party, sleeping in their den, and suckling on the female, Corinna. It is a Romulus and Remus story for Tasmania. Eventually, of course, the girls return to human society, and the tigers meet their fate. When the tiger male, the girls' adopted father, Dave, is trapped and shot by Becky's human father, the novel leads us to experience the grief of extinction as though Dave stands for the entire species.

Mr Carsons pointed his rifle down at Dave who were trying to jump out of the trench, and fired three bullets into him. Exactly three—those three shots were like me being stabbed in me heart three times. I crawled to the side of the trench and looked down. Dave were lying there, his eyes closed, his flanks bleeding. He were dead, that were easy to tell. I found meself saying over and over, *Oh my God*, even when Mr Carsons were taking me back to the verandah where Becky were howling with grief and trying to bite the ropes to free herself. Mr Carsons tried to calm her but she tried to bite her father though she still wore a gag. She was furious with her father as I were. I were in a fury of teeth-gnashing and weeping. Dave had helped save us. He and Corinna had cared for us. We had hunted with them. They were our father and mother. Now Dave were murdered. That's how I thought of it—Becky's father had cold-bloodedly murdered Dave and used me as bait to attract him cos he knew the tigers cared for me. That's why Dave sniffed me out and came for me. (Nowra 111–12)

It drives home the tragedy of their loss by establishing the parent-child relationships between the protagonists and the adoptive thylacine parents and creating an Edenic world that juxtaposes against the barbarism of the settlers. The colonials are merciless hunters who slaughter thylacines to extinction and collect bounty; they are engaged in the gruesome business of skinning them and drying their pelts. Contrasting this with the experience of the two girls highlights the colonial settlers' complete ignorance of the nature of these creatures. There was no awareness of the finite nature of thylacines or the impact their loss would have on their ecosystem. They simply went the way of the dodo, the passenger pigeon, and other nonhuman victims of colonization.

But, if thylacines were not extinct, would we treat them any better? Would we protect them? We might measure that through considering treatment of the kangaroo or the dingo.

Awareness of post-pastoral conditions might reinforce the extinction of the thy-

lacine as a lesson about treatment of the natural environment and the creatures around us. However, with the colonial settlers having rid themselves of the apex predator on Tasmania, the apex predator on the mainland became another target for vilification. The range of the dingo has reduced considerably since colonization, assisted in the first place by the building of the longest fence in the world, a 5,531-kilometer stretch of wire mesh, to keep the dingoes out of the southeastern corner of the country (Newsome, Dickman, and Ritchie). This fence was built in the nineteenth century but is maintained and repaired now for the same purpose. From 2008, the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species listed the dingo as "Vulnerable" and "Decreasing," upgrading it from its previous assessment as "Low Risk." "In Australia, pure dingoes are common in northern, northwestern and central regions, rare in southern and north-eastern regions, and probably extinct in the south-eastern and south-western regions" (Corbett). Of these dingoes, many have bred with domestic dogs, and according to L. K. Corbett, research in the 1980s found that only 17 percent of dingoes were purebred at that time; and it is likely to be considerably less now. Despite this, there is still a "Wild Dog Destruction Board" in New South Wales, which includes the dingo in its definition of "wild dog."

Deborah Bird Rose examines the significance of the dingo and the impact of its loss to the Australian environment and culture in her work *Under the Sign of Nature: Wild Dog Dreaming: Love and Extinction*. She relates the rapid rate of mammal extinctions in Australia directly to the "persecution of dingoes" (67). This, in turn, undermines the balance in the food chain, which results in a snowball effect through native species: "There is now good evidence that where dingo populations are intact, they work to sustain a balance of species that is visible in the long term. There is a strong correlation between healthy dingo populations and biodiversity as indicated by the flourishing presence of native species" (67). She goes on to suggest that there is apathy in the Australian population and a lack of interest in preserving the species, concluding that "indifference may seem passive, but in the context of suffering it is best understood as the refusal of relationship, the refusal of an ethical call. . . . One form of refusal is justification: it is the assertion that the suffering is deserved; it seeks to bring suffering back into the realm of rationality or conventional theodicy. It is an active reinscription of a boundary of exclusion" (98).

The settler population of Australia has a long-established aversion to relationship with the dingo and the thylacine because of their predation of farmed animals. The very act of a dingo or a thylacine stalking and hunting sheep or chickens should be considered in context with destruction of their natural prey and environs and the ease of picking off a creature that is already held in the confines of a pen or paddock. That is no excuse in the Australian settler psyche. As we now know, having dealt with the thylacine problem and having the dingo population in decline,

domestic animals are still under threat from foxes, feral cats, and wild domestic dogs. There is less apathy about the feral animal problem in Australia than there is about the preservation of the dingo. Lobby groups exist that push for funding to rid the landscape of feral cats, cane toads, and other vermin, but dingos rarely gain any attention. They are also still haunted by the negative press of the Chamberlain case in 1980 and widely considered a creature that poses a threat. The dingo is not considered trustworthy.

An extended narrative from the perspective of a female dingo is woven through the recent novel *Coming Rain* by Stephen Daisley, alternating with the story of two itinerant shearers, Lew and Painter. The novel is set mainly in the Western Australian Wheatbelt's eastern fringes, a landscape that has been ruthlessly cleared for broad-acre grain crops. "Satellite images show a sharp line marking the end (or beginning) of the country cleared for farming in south western Australia. It is the most visible clearance line on the planet and demarcates an area the size of Scotland from which, in the space of two generations, the native vegetation was almost entirely stripped" (Hughes-d'Aeth 45). The dingo of the novel, which is under siege from a dingo shooter, Abraham Smith, has been grazed by Smith's bullet already and is carrying pups, sired by a dog-dingo cross. The dingo's narrative features her trekking through the remnant bush, avoiding human contact, cars, and fire and in constant search for water. These short narrative pieces develop the figure of the dingo in the landscape and provide insights into her perspective, without sentimentality or anthropomorphism. It is a tale of survival amid adversity: "Seeking the cover of scrub land, fringes and hollows, she ran. Mouth wide open, tongue wet and balanced, her body adjusting to the earth as she passed through the country, she was what she had become, a pregnant dingo bitch running" (Daisley 79). The dingo passages of the novel make the entire work just as much the dingo's story as it is the humans' story. The two narratives reflect and impact on each other; they are intricately twined together. It is a statement about our relationship to the natural world and is very poignant in such a ravaged landscape as the Wheatbelt. As a reader following the narrative of the dingo, though, the novel comes with an inevitability that eventually the human protagonists and the dingo will cross paths and that it will not end well for the dingo.

The dingo also operates as a metaphor for the Aboriginal people of the region. This is reinforced in *Coming Rain* by the narrative of the dingo's intimate knowledge of the landscape and reliance on that knowledge for survival. Daisley's dingo hunter Smith and pastoralist Drysdale play a key role in the deaths of local people as well as the dingo. As Smith pursues the dingo, he draws connections between them:

Old man Abraham Smith watched.

Children, he thought, sometimes children somersault when a heavy calibre takes them. They like scattering birds. He wiped his face with one hand. Seen a lubra [a heavily loaded and racist term for an Aboriginal woman] do the same thing, shot through the head yet run like that bitch there, covered the hundred yards before she dropped, did a performance at the end. (Daisley 122–23)

Considering this aspect of the novel in light of the post-pastoral, the sixth condition becomes important to consider: “How should we address the issue that the exploitation of our planet emerges from the same mind-set as our exploitation of each other?” (Gifford, “Judith”). *Coming Rain* draws us to sympathize with Lew, who is eventually responsible for shooting the dingo. He takes her three hybrid pups, stealing her children. Here, the novel is enacting the horrors of Australia’s forced removal of Aboriginal children and reiterating the patriarchal control of white settlers over the Indigenous population. Lew appears to reject inherited modes of masculinity by contrast to Painter, Smith, and Drysdale, but through shooting the dingo and stealing her pups, he participates in them to please his love interest, Clara Drysdale, and make amends for the behavior of her father. This ending of the dingo narrative provides a shock, which undermines trust in the figure of Lew, who represents the more “evolved” masculinity of contemporary Australia. Lew demonstrates that his “mind-set” is only marginally more conscious than his predecessors’ was.

Much like Nowra’s narrative of the thylacines, the dingo narrative in *Coming Rain* represents the animal as a sympathetic figure and provides insights into the world of these creatures in their natural landscape, putting the nonhuman figures at the center of the narrative. No such extended ecocentric rendering of the kangaroo has been undertaken by writers of adult Australian fiction.

Daisley’s treatment of kangaroos in the *Coming Rain* begins with “a great thump” against the side of Painter and Lew’s truck and a familiar roadside story. “Another thump and three more crossed ahead of them. The perfect curve of their backs, tails in counterbalance. He braked but it was too late. The truck collided with another in mid-flight. It came up onto the bonnet, smashing into the already cracked windscreen, shattering it. Disappeared” (Daisley 41). Painter retrieves the live joey and swings it up “in a circle to smash its head against a roadside gum” (42), but the act is halted by Lew, who keeps the “beautiful little bloody thing” (42) to later woo Clara Drysdale. Clara puts a straw hat on its head and keeps it in a cloth pouch. This act complies with the stereotype of the cute joey, a playful figure in children’s fiction such as *Dot and the Kangaroo*.

The mother, however, is not treated with such reverence:

He was dragging the body of the mother by the tail. He pulled it into the road where it was lit by the truck's headlight, dropped the carcass and walked to the back of the truck and returned with a butchers knife.

"I'll take her tail," he said, "she's fresh enough." Bent over the carcass and used the knife to cut the tail from her body. "For soup. Beautiful. Look."

He held up the dripping tail. (Daisley 43)

Some way on in the novel, the tail has "sweetened" in the back of the truck for a day, and a detailed account of the butchering of it ensues. Painter cuts the skinned tail into eight pieces, sparing the tip for "good luck," saying it is "like the parson's nose on a chook. Some call this the governor's cock" (Daisley 67-68).

The treatment of the kangaroo in this novel is not uncommon in contemporary Australian fiction, in which kangaroos rarely appear as living beings. There is a utilitarian approach to the death of the mother, not wanting her to "go to waste" or her joey to die slowly of exposure and starvation. Despite Lew rescuing the joey, there is no sentimentality about the death of the adult kangaroo at all. It simply happens. There is a mix of respect and disdain for the creature, an ambivalent position on its value. Its death and the destiny of its offspring foreshadow the grim end of the dingo, and its role in the narrative is similar: to uphold dominion of the male figures over the natural world.

A similar incident occurs in Tim Winton's *Breath* (2008) when Pikelet, the narrator, comes across the surf guru Sando, who has hit a kangaroo with his VW Kombi ute. The creature is not dead, and the novel portrays the scene of Sando finishing it off with the jack handle from the car, pounded a couple of times into the animal's head. Sando's response to this act is, again, very matter-of-fact: "This is what happens. And it isn't lovely" (Winton 60).

Sando drags the "roadkill" into the tray of his ute and takes it home to butcher it. He is prepared for this, with a meat hook hanging from a tree, and he skins and guts the kangaroo. Pikelet observes this with some emotional discomfort, "shrinking from him a little," but accepts the flour bag of meat to take home to his parents, who "wouldn't eat roo meat in a million years" (Winton 61). He "hoiks" the meat into the bushes on the ride home (61), and again the characters' response to this event is ambivalent—a mix of respect and disdain. In the figure of Sando, his masculinity and power are reinforced through this act, and it highlights the British migrant family of Pikelet as less immersed in the landscape, with a more tenuous link to nature.

Both novels are set in regional Western Australia, where it is not uncommon to see western grey kangaroos in the evening and at dawn, feeding in paddocks.

“Watch out for roos” is a common catch-cry to country visitors before they hit the road. Kangaroos frequently bound into traffic, and on any given day, there are usually several being mashed into the blue metal of highways, surrounded by crows and in various states of dismemberment and decomposition. Most travelers are desensitized to the sight and smell of dead kangaroos on the roadside, even with the gore and horror they present. Although this sight is ubiquitous, it carries symbolic weight in the texts that depict these deaths in detail, such as those by Daisley and Winton. Authors also call on the dead kangaroo in ways not linked to masculinity and power, often using them to add atmosphere rather than to symbolize any deeper post-pastoral purpose.

Sarah Drummond’s *The Sound* (2016), tracing the survival of the Breaksea Island sealers in 1826 prior to west-coast settlement in King George Sound, Albany, involves slaughter of much wildlife for survival, including possums, mutton bird chicks, cockatoos, and numerous creatures of the sea. Kangaroos feature in the novel as carcasses, shot and bleeding to death (129) and fashioned into a bag: “its shoulder strap was the animal’s hind legs” (86). In this work, the kangaroo is part of the survival story of the sealers and Aboriginal community and, as such, is less abject than in Winton’s or Daisley’s novels because it is set within a colonial historical context.

Another recent Western Australian novel that involves a dead kangaroo is Simone Lazaroo’s *The Lost River: Four Albums* (2014). This time, circling crows alert the central character to the location of a corpse, and thinking it is her missing lover, she is relieved to find it is “only” a dead kangaroo (14). Here, the kangaroo draws out the panic and emotion of the central character.

In Glenda Guest’s 2009 novel *Siddon Rock*, the kangaroo is among an inventory of dead wildlife disintegrating in the landscape, used to create atmosphere:

A giant red kangaroo lay against the fence beside the track. A little further on there was another, with two emus and a wombat all in a heap, then more, and more. The fence held them back, the piles of dead animals with pelt and flesh diminishing into strips and scraps that would blow across the flat paddocks and roll into fur-balls, to catch on the strand of barbed wire. (6)

Charlotte Wood considers the horror of roadkill in *The Children* (2007), in which Australian animals are sacrificed to passing traffic and disdainfully compared to contaminated “cushions”: “She brings her gaze back from the paddocks to the whizzing bitumen before them. Occasionally the dark lump of a dead animal emerges up ahead—wallaby, or wombat—like fleabitten cushions squashed there on

the roadside” (29). Wood kills a kangaroo (and a lot of rabbits) in *The Natural Way of Things* (2015). The central character, Yolanda, snares a “large grey kangaroo” in a rabbit trap and finds it still alive:

It stops struggling and stares straight at them. Ears vertical, twitching, quivering. The thick, muscular trunk of its tail presses into the dirt, supporting its great weight. The girls stand, unmoving, not speaking. Vainly, the kangaroo shifts and scuffles again. Then it lowers its head and lengthens its mighty neck, black eyes fixed on them, and lets out three long, hoarse snarls. Its snout fattens, nostrils flared. (260)

Fearful of the sharp claws on the animal’s “delicate forefeet,” they sit beside it, indecisive of how to release it, and instead bring it water and leave the creature to die slowly. The kangaroo continues to try and escape the trap, which mirrors the girls’ experience in detention. Their observations mix horror, fear, and disgust with remorse and appreciation of the animal’s beauty, creating a complex emotional response in the characters. In this example, the kangaroo raises the question, “What are the implications of recognising that we are part of that creative-destructive process?” (Gifford, “Judith”), as Yolanda battles coming to terms with herself as a killer.

The novels surveyed here are all relatively recent, but the image of the kangaroo is linked to death through earlier works from twentieth-century Australian authors as well. The iconic poem “Native-Born” (1940) by Eve Langley presents a detailed account of a dead kangaroo:

I found a kangaroo. Tall, dewy, dead,
So like a woman, she lay silent there.
Her ivory hands, black-nailed, crossed on her breast,
Her skin of sun and moon hues, fallen cold.
Her brown eyes lay like rivers come to rest
And death had made her black mouth harsh and old. (lines 3–8)

Allusions in the poem lead the reader to draw links between the kangaroo and women, generally. More particularly, an underlying nostalgia and mourning the lack of “native song,” merged with the image of her “black mouth,” disturbingly link the kangaroo to Aboriginal women. Much like Daisley’s treatment of the dingo, this raises the post-pastoral condition of exploitation.

Randolph Stow’s 1958 novel *To the Islands* features a number of dead kangaroos and wallabies, mixing sentimental descriptions of the soft, dark eyes of the marsupials with their being shot and eaten by Heriot and his companion, Justin: “Pity

and love stirred in the old man for the delicate ears of the dead kangaroo, the deep soft eyes. He touched the fine fur, ran his fingers through it, and felt a tick under his hand. 'What is there that isn't preyed upon?' he said" (186). Then in the night, sleepless Heriot says to his Aboriginal friend Justin, "Promise me. Don't let me prey on you" (186). This scene is loaded with connotation. Further on, a similar blend of beauty and death occurs when Justin shoots a wallaby.

On a shelf of rock a wallaby sat, so soft in its grey fur that it might have been a toy, so innocent, with its big foolish ears and dark eyes, that nothing in all its life could have threatened it, thought Heriot, feeling with his eyes the tranquil heart beating in the side and the claws gripping stone. "Oh, my beauty," he said softly, "my handsome one." And the wallaby, turning its head towards him, started. And Justin fired. The perfect creature leaped and fell back, and died quivering on the flat rock. (210)

The later writer Tom Flood's 1990 novel *Oceana Fine* is rife with "roo shooters" and carcasses. At one stage, the roo shooter Tinmouth dances around a bonfire wearing a kangaroo skin, simultaneously mocking a kangaroo and Aboriginal dance, at which his young Aboriginal companion, Chris, looks on in horror and refuses to participate. For grotesque drunken entertainment, Tinmouth orders Chris to fire bullets at the kangaroo skin he is wearing. The scene ends with Chris blowing the head off a live joey that stumbles into the clearing (179–83). The kangaroo is the victim and disturbingly compared to Aboriginal Australians.

In Eva Sallis's novel *Hiam* (1998), the title character undertakes a road trip that is, at once, an escape from home and a journey into madness. As Hiam travels, she encounters kangaroos dead by the roadside:

There was a dead kangaroo on the steel-grey gravel, much larger than she had ever imagined them to be. Its fur was reddish, matted and bloody, the ground stained all around it. Its deformed looking hands were clasped together, strange legs stretched out away from its body in a disturbingly human repose. The enormous corpse filled her vision. (7)

The horror of these dead animals amplifies her emotional state and dislocation as she continues on the road, highly anxious that she will hit a kangaroo with her own car. Inevitably, her continued driving leads to this: "She killed. Her undesired and uneaten prey, rabbits by night and birds by day, fell side to side and died where they lay. She killed with the collusion of the car and the road but remained a spectator. Kangaroos, eagles, black cows, calves and bulls all lay rotting on either side in

the hazy heat of the day" (45). The road becomes a metaphor for the future, and the kangaroos are in conflict with that future, as threat to her safety. On seeing a smashed car by the road, she concludes, "A kangaroo had killed it. Kangaroos were enormous, dead and alive, and some of them were red like the soil. It was clear that if she hit a kangaroo it would die. But this was no simple hierarchical universe—a simple system for the random killing of animals. The road could take her life at any moment, by kangaroo" (46). For Sallis, the kangaroo becomes symbolic of the incomprehensible nature of the Australian landscape to her Arab migrant protagonist. It is apparent through the narrative that living kangaroos are a threat, and the novel is littered with dead ones, complying with the approach to the kangaroo as a figure in other Australian novels.

The image of the dead kangaroo has become a symbol in its own right, quite apart from its live fellows. Journalists draw on this image in relation to Aboriginal deaths in custody, as was recently the case with Julieka Dhu, who was reported to have been "dragged like a dead kangaroo" (Love). This image is obviously abhorrent, tragic, and very volatile. As the fiction presented details, dead kangaroos are ubiquitous in Australia and almost taken for granted as a side effect of driving on country roads. They are victims, albeit not entirely defenseless ones, but in the face of firearms, the fighting prowess of this large and muscular creature is nullified. Roo shooters do so from the safe confines of the back of a ute, usually with the aid of spotlights.

The kangaroo is an exceptional creature, one that the rest of the world looks to us to preserve and, maybe, revere. Post-pastoral is a reading strategy that places nature at the center of literary criticism and enables us to interrogate the relationship between our often-troubled history and these unique creatures. It is an appropriate reading strategy in a world where nature is so often under siege, yet we depend so wholly on it for our existence and well-being and even for our stories. Australian fiction is, so often, deeply entangled with nature, as the novels examined here attest.

The fact that Australian authors are participating in representation of the kangaroo as victim, an animal so emblematic of Australia, is deeply disturbing. This may be unwitting participation in an established mode of depiction of the kangaroo that is deeply ingrained in the work of our writers, but compared to the more respectful and refined and indeed serious treatment afforded to apex predators as subjects in Australian fiction—the dingo, the extinct thylacine—this is a point of contention that needs some address. Even more disturbing is the way in which these Australian animals are so often conflated with death and extinction in relation to Aboriginal Australians. This is perhaps unsurprising given the often violent processes of colonization and the impact that this has had (and is still having) on the Australian landscape and all who inhabit it. The complexities of colonization

are inherent in Australian literature, and the treatment of kangaroos, both in fiction and in reality, is evidence of this.

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