

## Trees that “Grow on You”: Naturalist Taxonomy and Eco-poetics of Interrelatedness in Murray Bail’s *Eucalyptus*

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### Abstract

Investigating transcultural encounters between Europe and Australia in Murray Bail’s *Eucalyptus* (1998) through an ecocritical lens, this essay re-evaluates the act of naming trees with regard to the status of the character symbolically called Holland. Critics have underlined how, in colonial contexts, the naturalist taxonomy of the environment partakes of the settlers’ conquest of new colonies: Jamaica Kincaid’s assertion ‘to name is to possess’ crystallises this cultural process of ecological imperialism. While I acknowledge this phenomenon, a re-appraisal of the naming practice in *Eucalyptus* allows us to transcend the legacy of polarised colonial and anthropocentric perspectives. Holland’s status may be interpreted positively in view of Neil Evernden’s concept of ‘individual-in-environment’: if so, the act of naming represents humankind’s constructive attempt at establishing a sense of place within a new territory. Bail’s protagonists exemplify different stages in this process of interrelatedness between the human and non-human realms, one that resists a conventional subject-object relationship. Whereas the ambivalent Holland embodies a factual and existential naturalism, the imaginative approach to the treescape of his daughter Ellen and her storytelling suitor fully emancipates them from the commodifying effect of Holland’s naming competition. Bail’s aesthetics reflects the dissolving boundary between the self and environment: deployed in the suitor’s fable-like stories and Bail’s rich prose, the eco-poetic devices of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism defy the rational laws of Western realism. This eco-poetics of interrelatedness restores the agency of the eucalypts while negating the concept of a traditionally dominant human presence in the environment. In *Eucalyptus*, taxonomy reveals the reciprocal dynamics of a genuine interpenetration: Holland’s ‘bush garden’ becomes a global space that combines European (symbolised by Holland and the stories) and Australian (the eucalypts) identities. Thus, Bail projects a creative site of transcultural dialogue at the level of the terrain through the complementary processes of physical and subjective interrelatedness.

### Introduction

The phenomenon of ‘ecological imperialism’, as coined by Alfred Crosby, has sparked numerous cross-fertilising debates between ecocritical and (post)colonial studies. As Huggan and Tiffin argue, the two fields are ‘notoriously difficult to define’ and to combine. This hurdle is perhaps best overcome by ‘insisting that the proper subject of postcolonialism is colonialism’ (Huggan and Tiffin 2-3). Accordingly, Crosby’s work unveils ‘the historical embeddedness of ecology in the European imperial enterprise’ (3). One of the concrete consequences of this practice impacting past and present postcolonial reality is illustrated by the novelist and gardener Jamaica Kincaid: her famous assertion,

'to name is to possess', points to the pairing of territorial and cultural colonisation by European settlers through their (re) naming of the indigenous flora of the colonies. Implemented by the Eurocentric principle of colony as empty land this 'naming of things is so crucial to possession . . . that it is a murder, an erasing' of local, pre-settlement cultures (Kincaid 122). As a result, Kincaid regrets that she does not know the 'proper' names of many plants indigenous to her birthplace, Antigua (119-20). Western botanical nomenclature has thus deeply estranged those 'of the conquered class and living in a conquered place' from their native surroundings (120), an alienation which Kincaid still experiences today: 'I am not in nature. . . . To me, the world is cracked, unwhole, not pure, accidental' (124). Reversing the process of ecological imperialism is all but easy, she suggests: if cultivating a personal garden allows her to reconnect with the natural world and knowledge, it also defines her as complicit with 'the conquering class' (123). Is there no possibility of compromise; no end to ecological imperialism for today's postcolonial people? Can one escape from this 'overriding ethos of colonization . . . [which] gave purpose to the naturalists' endeavours' during much of the nineteenth century (Browne 320)? And if one can, how can this be achieved?

Significantly, many scholars approach *Eucalyptus* through the lens of ecological imperialism. As in the Caribbean region, Western naturalists were sent to Australia to explore, sample and send native plants back to the mother country (England) where they would be studied, classified, named and finally conserved, usually at Kew Gardens. The cultural repercussions of these botanical practices in the two regions of the British Empire, however, are not fully analogous: the locals' cultural and physical alienation, as explained by Kincaid, was reinforced by the slavery and plantation industry that deeply defined the Caribbean landscape. By contrast, the hostile Australian terrain and the Aborigines' nomadism challenged this European program of working the land. Jessica White's essay in this volume examines more thoroughly the procedures of Western botanists' collaborative work with locals, as well as the cultural implications of such work for Australia as a nation. Despite the contemporary setting of *Eucalyptus*, many critics envision its plotline as re-enacting this process of ecological imperialism initiated in the early colonial days of Australia: an enthusiastic planter of eucalypts, Holland, decides to marry his beautiful daughter Ellen to anyone who can correctly identify each of the five hundred or so species of his collection. Meanwhile, an unnamed storyteller makes Ellen's acquaintance and eventually wins her hand by outpacing Roy Cave, a disarmingly matter-of-fact and socially incompetent contestant. Ecologically-driven essays mostly concentrate on Holland's and the contestants' practice of taxonomy, often associated with man's will (and in this case, it really is 'man') to possess and control the land (Fernández Méndez 302). By extension, Holland's nomenclature challenge reduces Ellen to the same level as an objectified Nature (Rooks 26; Grbich 140-41). In these interpretations, Holland thus comes to embody the colonialist settler who asserts his ruling power over a supposedly disposable territory and its inhabitants (i.e. female and Aboriginal dwellers).

While I acknowledge the undeniable and enduring reality of ecological imperialism experienced by postcolonial Indigenous cultures, my analysis re-evaluates Holland's act of naming—and by extension his status—by relating it to his postcolonial search for a

sense of belonging, and to Bail's depiction of the eucalypts as agential subjects. The author's ambivalent and self-reflexive prose allows for a more nuanced understanding of this protagonist and of taxonomic naturalism at large. Indeed, I shall argue that *Eucalyptus* is informed by an ecopoetics of interrelatedness which restores the agency of the eucalypts while negating the concept of a traditionally dominant human presence in the environment. Explained in the first section of this article, my notion of 'ecopoetics of interrelatedness' combines Neil Evernden's concept of 'individual-in-environment' with Scott Knickerbocker's insights about ecopoetics and figurative language. While Holland develops a factual and existential naturalism (section entitled 'Planting a Bush Garden'), the storyteller's imaginative approach balances the former's overpowering ecocentrism by devising a dialogical web of agencies that includes the narrative force of both human and non-human entities. Examined in the section titled 'Stories Growing from Trees', imaginative naturalism thus strongly resonates with the arguments of material ecocriticism. However, instead of placing Holland and the storyteller in opposition to each other, this essay envisions them as complementary figures in the gradual process of forging a meaningful sense of place within a given environment. The experience of interrelatedness is thus both an organic (embodied) and discursive (narrated) one. The fourth section of this essay, entitled 'Allying the Subjective with the Factual', concentrates on the ecopoetic and metafictional dimensions that affect the novel's micro- and macro-structures: in an attempt to represent this human/non-human interpenetration, *Eucalyptus* defies the rationalist codes of Western realism, and more particularly of ecomimetic nature writing. Finally, as will be shown in 'Europe-Australia Encounters', taxonomy reveals the reciprocal dynamics of cultural interrelatedness: Holland's bush garden becomes a global space that combines European and Australian identities. Thus, Bail projects a creative site of transcultural dialogue at the level of the terrain through the complementary processes of physical and subjective interrelatedness.

Because of its self-reflexive and fictional nature, *Eucalyptus* is pervaded by epistemological irresolution, or interpretative openness, which ultimately stresses the ambiguity of botanical naturalism. This instability of meaning perhaps offers Anglo-Celtic Australians a way to overcome the legacy of their forebears' colonialist appropriation of the land, which can jeopardise their search for identity and belonging today. The storyteller also serves to dismantle the preconception that White Australians can only interrelate with their surroundings in a utilitarian and egocentric fashion. The ambivalent text of *Eucalyptus* takes into account the historical and cultural heritage of imperialism, whilst also decolonising the scientific or amateur discipline of naturalist taxonomy. Functioning as a corollary to its territorial and human counterparts, this decolonisation unlocks the epistemological frameworks and imaginaries defined by nineteenth-century colonial philosophy so as to move beyond their legacy of restrictive meaning. Approaching postcolonialism from a colonial perspective, as evoked above, risks obscuring some instances of human beings' non-intruding, disinterested ecological gestures. Similarly, the spatiotemporal flexibility of the term 'ecological imperialism' (Huggan and Tiffin 3) may lead to essentialist readings of the practice of botanical science. As of today, reading the botanical nomenclature of the flora of the ex-New Worlds as a colonising gesture continues to imprison ecocritical studies into the dualistic worldview that they actually try to avoid. Bail's *Eucalyptus* precisely illustrates how the

naming practice can potentially resist the binary oppositions of monolithic colonial and anthropocentric viewpoints: the novel emphasises that science can also be performed 'in a spirit of reverence' and 'appreciation' before a wondrous Nature uncontrollable by human beings (Tudge 8-9).

### **1. The Naturalist and Eco poetics of Interrelatedness**

Holland's interest in nomenclature may be interpreted positively in view of Neil Evernden's concept of 'individual-in-environment': if so, the act of naming represents the human subject's constructive attempt at establishing a sense of place within a new territory. Evernden's phrase insists that human beings be regarded as 'component[s] of place, defined by place,' rather than entities distinct from their surrounding 'context' and other life forms (Evernden, 'Ecology' 102). Evernden thus advocates for a 'literal interrelatedness' between 'parts of the ecosystem' that is not based on a subject-object relationship (93, 102). Indeed, this state of interrelatedness implies extending oneself into one's habitat, so that the involvement of the human-in-environment can be compared with animals' territorial instincts (99). Consequently, this specific individual can enjoy a sense of place, i.e. the 'sensation of knowing, . . . of being part of a known place' (100). One practical means to achieve this condition, Evernden suggests, is the act of naming. Using personal or even generic names to refer to parts of a place could hint at the blurring of the boundary between the self and the environment: 'Perhaps the naturalist, with his penchant for learning the names of everything, is establishing a global place, making the world his home, just as the "primitive" hunter did on the territory of his tribe' (101). One might object that Evernden overlooks the cultural ramifications of this practice, namely the intra- and interspecies over territories that some want to appropriate regardless of the prior dwellers' welfare. In other words, the critic does not tackle the possible consequences of the naming act in terms of ecological/biological colonisation. Actually, Evernden deals with the underlying problem: i.e. the conceptual separation between the human and non-human worlds, a notion developed by Western rationalism and anthropocentrism since Descartes. His essay thus focuses on how to amend the lost or problematic sense of belonging experienced by human beings as a species.

Furthermore, artistic production also allows one to reach this sense of interrelatedness at a psychological/psychic level. Here, Evernden's concept is informed by John Dewey's and Northrop Frye's reflections on aesthetics. For Dewey, aesthetic experience resides in the 'interaction between the viewer and the viewed': 'instead of a detachment from environment' manifest in a subject-object relationship, 'we have a subtle diffusion in it' (97). Evernden then concurs with Frye's claim that the use of metaphor and imagination aims to 'recapture, in full consciousness, that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man' (Frye, *Educated* 9). Thus inspired, Evernden posits that the artist's 'landscape portraits' convey 'an understanding of what a place would look like to us *if we "belonged" there*, if it were "our place"' (Evernden, 'Ecology' 99, italics in original). The portrayal of a personalised ('not neutral') world simultaneously signals the artist's state of interrelatedness and helps the beholders acquire this sensation of familiarity, of identification, with that world too. This 'sense of place' thus constitutes a human

aesthetic phenomenon ‘similar in some ways to the experience of territoriality’ (100). In Evernden’s view, animism and the poetic device of the Pathetic Fallacy attempt to bridge the gap between humans and their surroundings: ‘once we engage in the extension of the boundary of the self into the “environment” . . . we imbue it with life and can quite properly regard it as animate – it is animate because we are part of it.’ Thus, the aesthetic humanisation of the non-human world through the use of metaphors ‘is a fallacy only to the ego clencher’: on the contrary, it signifies man’s attempt to connect with a place (101).

Evernden’s provocative conclusion—‘Environmentalism without aesthetics is merely regional planning’ (103)—clearly influenced Scott Knickerbocker’s argument that ‘the most meaningful contact with nature occurs through form.’ His book on ecopoetics, i.e. ‘the foregrounding of poetic artifice as a manifestation of our interrelation with the rest of nature,’ (Knickerbocker 159) proceeds from the premise that both human beings and their language are part of Nature. Opposing some ecocritics’ tendency to react excessively ‘against textuality’ by which man has separated him/herself from the non-human, Knickerbocker insists that ‘the power of language to make nature matter to us depends precisely on the defamiliarizing figurative language and rhetorical devices too often associated with “artificiality”’ (3). Rather than being anthropocentric projections of the human onto the non-human realm, the techniques of anthropomorphism, personification and apostrophe not only reveal man’s attention to other life forms, but most importantly put the latter ‘in the position of interlocutor[s],’ thereby restoring their subject status (6). Thus, Knickerbocker further develops Evernden’s re-evaluation of the Pathetic Fallacy and animism: while Evernden seeks to re-establish the individual’s sense of belonging to his/her setting, Knickerbocker’s re-appraisal concentrates on decommodifying the non-human realm. Yet, I envision both processes as complementary: a non-objectified environment is necessary for and simultaneously results from man’s efforts to interrelate with it.

Using Evernden’s reflections on naturalist taxonomy as a starting point to my analysis, I argue that Bail’s three protagonists—Holland, Ellen and the storyteller—embody different versions of such a naturalist who works towards ‘making the world his [/her] home.’ Through their respective technique of naming and lived experience of the treescape, these characters extend themselves into their surroundings each in their own way. Achieving such interrelatedness inherently re-animates the treescape, and thus blurs the ontological partition between the human and non-human worlds. At this point, my notion of ‘ecopoetics of interrelatedness’ combines the two critics’ insights delineated above: the aesthetic anthropomorphism of the eucalypts and the mild zoomorphism (or ‘naturalisation’) of the protagonists in *Eucalyptus* precisely transcribe human beings’ endeavour to be part of their dwelling place. My analyses point out how these defamiliarising devices used by Bail conflate the descriptive lexical fields respectively attributed to the living and (supposedly) non-living realms (i.e. in the manner of the Pathetic Fallacy). As a result, many readers identify Bail’s book as a fairy tale. Yet, scholars dealing with this peculiar atmosphere (usually associated with the storyteller’s fable-like tales) fail to clearly link their interpretation of these humanised trees to the protagonists’ search for a sense of place within their surroundings (e.g. McNeer’s and,

Jacobs's works). They decode Bail's use of fairy tale only as a subversive departure from the colonial realist narratives, which devise a stereotypical and/or national Australian landscape (e.g. Cabarcos Traseira 192-193). However, neither do Bail's novel nor this article subscribe to the 'Nature without culture' fallacy. As suggested above, Evernden's theory of interrelatedness developed in his essay is somewhat limited in that respect: what happens when the cultural context and its various forms again influence the individual's physical and linguistic experience of the environment? *Eucalyptus* displays this awareness of the inevitable interplay between environment and culture through its ambiguous and metafictional/self-reflexive prose (see 'Allying the Subjective with the Factual' and 'Europe-Australia Encounters'). Accordingly, the following analysis does not completely exonerate Holland but strives to do justice to this character's ambivalence.

## 2. Planting a Bush Garden: Holland's Existential Naturalism

Owning a vast estate in a small town west of Sidney, Holland proves as ambivalent as his 'bush garden' of eucalypts, which he has created and managed for a decade or so.<sup>1</sup> His near-obsessive passion for these trees and his naturalist taxonomy of them partake less of the settlers' conquest of new colonies than of the individual's endeavour to forge his/herself a sense of place: 'A long time passed before Holland could accept the idea (rather than the fact) that the land he was standing on' and everything on it 'was his. . . . In a rush of keenness Holland decided he wanted to know everything, beginning with the names of things' (*Eucalyptus* 16-17). Rather than a legal entitlement, Holland needs a personal sense of interrelatedness with his newly-bought property. His passion is thus comparable to the 'penchant' of Evernden's naturalist: like the latter, Holland strives to re-embed himself into his natural surroundings. The extradiegetic narrator alludes to such a re-interpretation, explaining that for the Victorian botanist J.D. Hooker 'the naming and classifying of things lay at the heart of understanding the world; at least it offered that illusion' (70). Holland thus seems to pursue a factual, yet existential kind of naturalism. At the same time, the ironic closing remark of this excerpt plays on the very ambiguity and perhaps impossibility of such a purpose: human beings are perhaps 'natural aliens' in themselves (Evernden, *Natural* 122-24). Nevertheless, another passage counters the common preconception that views botanical taxonomy as man's controlling attitude towards Nature: 'the scientific naming of trees doesn't follow a pattern. In some respects it has an attractive, amateur randomness just like the distribution of the trees' (*Eucalyptus* 98).

Holland's attitude, however, oscillates between that of a 'flexible' naturalist (an amateur) and that of a rigid, list-loving maniac. On the one hand, his long observation of trees taught him to respect 'natural speed' (52). Unlike the highly 'methodical' (79) and 'machine-like' (168) contestant named Roy Cave, Holland 'never bothered with the technicalities' (69) and is shocked by Cave's lack of interest 'in examining the tree closely' (87). On the other hand, although he 'began planting the trees . . . casually, [with] no apparent design' (34), Holland's obsessive expertise subsequently led him to plant them in 'scientific formation.' Nevertheless, the latter is not completely homogeneous, since Holland alternates between different species for no obvious reason

(40). His obsession with names and lists, however, ‘occup[ies]’ his ‘vital space’ (67). As a result of Holland’s ambivalence, his hybrid estate is described sometimes as ‘an outdoor museum of trees’ (45), a ‘park-like arrangement of trees’ (253), sometimes as left in ‘apparent randomness’ (79). By resisting plantation (59) and the human-made ‘straight line’ (i.e. paddock), this randomness signals that ‘Still the landscape intrudes,’ albeit ‘not for much longer’ (94).

Finally, Holland’s elaboration of a naming contest to elect Ellen’s future husband explicitly discloses his ambivalent personality. I argue that Holland’s decision does not betray cruelty towards Ellen: it rather bespeaks a desperate move to alleviate the socio-cultural pressure put down on him by the inhabitants’ gossip and men’s growing interest in the young woman (31-32; 51-54). However, this arranged marriage which ties Ellen to the trees appeases Holland’s fear of her possible elopement and gives utilitarian (though not economic) value to his bush garden. Indeed, a local woman’s question ‘And what use are all your trees now. . . ?’ (54) triggers Holland’s existential need to give a sense to years of planting eucalypts (55). This marriage, and by extension the naming challenge, thus reveals his persisting impulse at controlling his social and non-human worlds, as many scholars inspired by ecofeminism rightly point out (e.g. Fernandez Mendez, Rooks). Nevertheless, I contend that this urge is motivated more by uncertainty and the need for ontological justification than by authoritarian domination. Further, Holland’s surprise at the extensive knowledge of trees shown by a New Zealander contestant adds a postcolonial dimension to his existential pursuit: ‘And he doesn’t even live here. . . . [It was] a real mystery to him. Eucalypts were native to Australia and nowhere else’ (64). Such reaction suggests that in her father’s view the ideal husband for Ellen should precisely be a man-in-environment: Holland assimilates one’s knowledge of the trees to a successful embeddedness into the place which this person inhabits.

To sum up, the paternal figure in *Eucalyptus* hardly qualifies as the traditional, nineteenth-century naturalist who picks up specimens of plants during his explorations, and puts them in jars to study them later on, until he has acquired an extensive private collection or has contributed to those of institutional botanic gardens. Holland is essentially a planter, and more importantly, a field-based planter of trees indigenous to Australia. Because of his ambiguous personality delineated above, this character departs from ‘the commodity culture of imperialistic economic botany’ (Collett 2). While some might view him as perpetuating the universalising function of this ‘objective and scientific discourse’ (2), Holland may also be decoded as a contemporary postcolonial subject that inherits the pre-existing knowledge of taxonomic botany and its potentially colonial legacy. Indeed, to discover his new land he uses all the tools that he can find (*Eucalyptus* 17, 39-40), rather than imposing names on it. Moreover, his compulsive collecting does not really serve a consciously self-gratifying purpose, such as establishing a new Guinness record. It is precisely when the reader attempts to determine Holland’s relation to nomenclature and collecting that Bail skilfully depicts how this naturalist passion for trees and the naming competition dissolve the conceptual boundary between the eucalypts and the protagonists. The experience of such fusion, however, varies between that of a life-enriching interrelatedness for Holland, and that of an alienating amalgamation for Ellen (see ‘Stories Growing from Trees’).

In Holland's case, although the 'chaotic diversity' of the eucalypts ignites the individual's willingness to enforce 'order' on 'nature's unruly endlessness,' this inclination is actually an 'attempt to "humanise" nature by naming its parts' (36). In light of Evernden's concept of individual-in-environment such process simultaneously re-animates the landscape and fosters man's re-integration into it. Most importantly, the humanisation of Nature and 'naturalisation' of human beings are aesthetically rendered in print. Bail thus devises an eco poetics of interrelatedness that lessens the dominant human presence in the natural world and gives agency back to the eucalypts. Unable to explain what triggered his enterprise, Holland is presented as overwhelmed, almost controlled, by the eucalypts: instead of an egotistical undertaking, planting becomes 'an end in itself,' whilst the trees simultaneously 'grow on you [Holland].' Rather than an alienating 'naturalisation', this last comment highlights Holland's life-enriching interrelation with his trees, which 'gave [him] an interest' in life (78). Indeed, his 'affinity with eucalypts was both vague and natural' (38); he feels that the land 'has crept into his body . . . and settled, always there . . . a gift, a natural advantage' (137). Holland's room which 'present[s] a silent untidy harmony similar to a hillside of fallen trees'—a sign of 'his scattered self; a sort of random, long-established individuality'—imitates his bush garden of eucalypts (215). The implications of the very name 'Holland'—denoting a swampy and often flooded region of the Netherlands—evoke this physical control of the eucalypts over him: recalling the draining skills of these trees, the latter seem to help stabilise Holland's identity, and guide his life. From a cultural point of view, this character thus carries the potential of self-renewal. His embeddedness into the terrain hints at the timid construction of an authentic, postcolonial identity that does not imitate the (supposedly) European model. The early denomination of the Australian continent, New Holland, might be seen as crystallising this process.

Holland's feeling of interrelatedness precisely distinguishes him from Cave, who envisions the world of trees as 'psychology-free' (162). Time and again Holland realises Cave's trivialisation of the eucalypts (69, 87, 172). Cave experiences to a greater extent the problematic sense of belonging characteristic of postcolonial societies. Interestingly, he compares this plight to the 'shallow roots' of the eucalypts: 'They [the trees] haven't taken to this place . . . we haven't been here long enough, we don't go in deep . . . My ancestors arrived, yes, and we've continued and grown, but that's about it' (139). Despite his awareness, Cave fails to accommodate himself into the country like Holland: the latter's altruistic interest in the non-human world proves the key to the *beginning* of one's reconciliation with it. Finally, Holland's physical description interweaves the lexical fields of natural and human realms: he has a 'muddy smile' (49). This aesthetic technique extends to the extradiegetic narrator's general reflections on the influence of trees on human beings. However, these passages can also be construed as transcribing Holland's ongoing fusion with his surroundings. The 'elongated' form of some people's shadow is thus defined as 'pine-like' (16). The botanist Hooker was ennobled, i.e. like a tree he 'was given a descriptive prefix, denoting a higher classification' (70). Local women use the term 'tall timber' to 'render male flesh abstract' (74). This conflation of allegedly antithetical lexical fields not only blurs the ontological partition between human and non-human realms, but also progressively challenges the codes of the realist mode. Bail's



ecopoetics of interrelatedness climaxes in the storyteller's naming practice through fable-like tales, an approach which uncovers more explicitly the material and narratological agency of the trees.

### 3. Stories Growing from Trees: Ellen and the Storyteller's Imaginative Naturalism

The preceding paragraph deliberately stressed that Holland's existential naturalism represents the beginning of a renewed conversation between humans and other life forms. Indeed, Holland's intent remains incomplete because of his uncreative nomenclature and of his inability to understand his own planting project. In other words, he fails to fully transcend the cultural and epistemic heritage of the Anglo-Celtic colonial past, which prevents him from becoming a new Holland. By contrast, Ellen's unnamed suitor and his stories re-open up the imaginaries of such a finite world in favour of a web-like worldview and cognitive knowledge. This is achieved thanks to the unresolved and fabulous aspects of these tales, and to the foregrounding in these stories of the narrative agency of the trees themselves. Indeed, Ellen and the storyteller prefer a more imaginative kind of naturalism: this contestant indirectly identifies a species of eucalyptus by recounting a fable-like story inspired by the Latin or common name of the tree (153, 231). This technique not only restores the agency of the eucalypts as animate beings, but also allows for a re-appraisal of the naming practice. Enacting an ecopoetic 'conversion into human terms' of Holland's eucalypts (138), these tales revolve around the latter (e.g. 107,110,115,144) or cast them as influential protagonists alongside their human counterparts (235,226-27). This 'conversion' does not mean imposing a man-made vision unconnected to the trees: rather, the tales espouse the latter as they '*grew* [emphasis added] from the names of the eucalypts' (153). Conversely, in the storyteller's mouth these names function as magical generators of stories 'contained' in the eucalyptus: 'Ellen had been told to watch out for the unexpected behind the ordinary . . . every object in the world has its own history. . . . It can be triggered . . . by a name' (112-13). This story/tree association is sometimes purely linguistic (175-82; 231; 232): for instance, the *eucalyptus foecunda* (i.e. literally 'fruitful', or figuratively 'imaginative') inspires the story of a hunchbacked Italian in Melbourne who specialises in fruit sculptures and 'carves' the woman that he loves to attract her attention (125-29). The trees are intrinsically linked to or 'made of' fairy tales: the pretender 'took from the slender tree with the pinkish-grey trunk another story' (142). Their active participation in the storytelling even humanises them: 'barnacled with legends' the *eucalyptus camaldulensis* 'actually worm[s] [its] way greenly into the mind' (113). Even in real life, the 'weeping habit' of these trees 'has permeated and reappeared in the long faces of our people' and influenced 'our everyday stories, and when and how they are told, even the myths and legends, . . . just as surely the Norwegians have been formed by snow and ice' (248-49).

While these passages echo Evernden's notion of a reciprocal interrelatedness between humans and their environment, they also highlight how the storyteller lets the trees (re)emerge as a collection of 'storied matter' (Iovino and Oppermann 1). Indeed, the naming technique of Ellen's pretender recalls the trend of material ecocriticism in its theoretical claim that 'the world's material phenomena are knots in a vast network of

agencies, which can be “read” and interpreted as forming narratives, stories’ (1). The storyteller’s approach to the eucalypts helps create this dialogical web of agencies that includes the narrative agency of the eucalypts alongside that of the human voice (2). Implied by the fable-like nature of the man’s tales, the re-animation of the non-human life forms as agential subjects partakes of Bail’s eco-poetics of interrelatedness, one that I contend is informed by Evernden’s argument for the erasure of a subject-object relationship between all actors of the ecosystem. Furthermore, the strong interpenetration of stories/legends and the natural world suggested in the excerpts above does not constitute an anthropocentric/morphist strategy of projecting the human mind onto the environment in a negative sense: firstly, the trees remain the main subject or at least source of the suitor’s tales, and their existence and name(s) (i.e. both their material and discursive realities) participate in the construction of these stories. Secondly, this conversational interpenetration recalls Frye’s definition of poetic aesthetics as involving a human search for belonging: the use of metaphor and imagination aims to ‘recapture, in full consciousness that original lost sense of identity with our surroundings, where there is nothing outside the mind of man, or something identical with the mind of man’ (Frye, *Educated* 9). By alluding to a ‘porosity of biosphere and semiosphere,’ or an all-inclusive outside/inside mesh, Frye’s view interestingly bears resemblances to David Abram’s ‘ecophenomenological vision of natural life as a congealing of imaginative and biological processes, as the “state of mind” of a storied world, in which humans and non-humans are “carnally immersed”’ (Abram 270-72; qtd. in Iovino and Oppermann 5).

The storyteller and his practice of imaginative naturalism raise another important question, which is not unrelated to the problem of anthropomorphism/centrism: ‘Does Nature require a human scribe to represent itself, to mediate or translate its identity?’ (Kirby 86; qtd. in Oppermann 26). As Oppermann reports, Kirby answers in the negative, stressing that ‘we are, as human scribes, part of the collective expressions’ (Kirby 83; Oppermann 26). This organic and semiotic ‘intra-relation’ is suggested in *Eucalyptus* by the deep integration of Ellen’s pretender into the terrain: ‘he was now spending so much time with her, in and out of trees . . . To Ellen he felt like a perpetual warm wind’ (*Eucalyptus* 187), ‘he decided to leave, *branching off* in that way of his’ (188, italics in original). His unexpected visits also contribute to this diffusion into the environment: ‘Wherever she went, he appeared, near a tree’ (140); ‘his voice had come in from nothing, no warning’ (254). In view of the argument of material ecocriticism, Evernden’s theory could perhaps be developed one step further: in addition to living as ‘individuals-in-place’, human beings perhaps need to reconsider themselves as ‘individuals-as-environment’, i.e. as only one type of creature amongst others, entangled with other life forms.<sup>2</sup>

In *Eucalyptus*, the inclusion of human agency into the ‘tree-narratives’, instead of its simplistic rejection, constitutes one of the major differences between the storyteller and Holland. Although existential naturalism involves the receding of a dominant human presence so as to privilege the intrinsic value of the trees, this approach may also prove insufficient or even an alienating experience for human beings. Holland’s fascination for the eucalypts is such that he loses his own voice and lets the trees ‘grow on [him]’ in an overpowering fashion, as mentioned above. In other words, because he does not

incorporate himself as a discursive human presence (by means of human language and imagination) in his relation to the trees, Holland's existential naturalism pushed to the extreme excludes him from a truly dialogical 'confederation of agencies' (Iovino and Oppermann 4) forged by human and non-human actors. By contrast, the storyteller completes the network of interrelatedness by including human beings as participating interlocutors too. As a result, his technique of imaginative naturalism emancipates Ellen from the commodifying effect of Holland's naming competition, through which her father was dragging her down with him.

As it is not self-defined, Ellen's 'naturalisation' or status of individual-in-environment proves highly alienating. She experiences the fusion of her life and self with her father's collection as reinforcing her objectification, which began when she became old enough to marry (63). The naming contest—or the 'reciting [of] facts'—replaces the social practice of courtship that preserves women's power of decision (62). Just as Mr Cave is 'consuming all before him,' his rapid progress also means that 'before long he would be consuming her' (96). The competition thus assimilates her to a trophy tree, i.e. a self-gratifying reward for the suitors. Because the eucalypts literally insure men's eventual access to her, Ellen nurtures a 'hatred of trees' (239), and views them as dull, indistinct (42, 121) and 'unsympathetic' (92). She even feels surveyed or overseen by them: 'the fat gums appeared as an entourage of sturdy older women' (48).

Interestingly, the liberating role of the unnamed suitor by means of stories suggests Bail's subtle rewriting of the myth of Daphne who transformed into a laurel tree to escape Apollo's incessant advances. *Eucalyptus* inverts Ovid's original metamorphosis: embodied by the Apollo-like figure of the storyteller, human art (and especially language) helps Ellen regain a subject status that is *as agential as the eucalypts*'. By stressing the potent character of the trees and their everyday interrelation with human protagonists, the tales recast Holland's eucalypts as living interlocutors, who offer Ellen an access to the rest of humanity (166). Consequently, she no longer perceives this bush garden as a prison but as a connection to the outside world: instead of a colonising gesture, the act of naming combined with imagination constitutes for the stranger and Ellen a more satisfactory means of relating to their (uninviting) surroundings. Indeed, narrating the eucalypts through human language, and by extension Ellen's transformation back into a human Daphne, does not re-instate an anthropocentric detachment from the environment, on the contrary: 'These old arrangements of words' that begin each fairy tale 'caused Ellen to smile secretly and return to the trees' (229). This passage also distinguishes imaginative naturalism from a purely Romantic representation of the landscape: while the foregrounding of human imagination transcends any objectification of the eucalypts, the material reality of the trees is not entirely subsumed by the prism of human subjectivity. As evoked above, their physical presence actively participates in the storyteller's involvement into the environment and in his narrating technique.

Further distinguishing the suitor from Holland, imaginative naturalism serves to re-introduce epistemic ambivalence into finite and purely rational visions of botanical nomenclature and reality at large. Because of their abrupt ending, the pretender's stories suspend the listener's rational reasoning: their magical or strange aspects are left

unresolved. Ellen can never decide whether the suitor recounts factual or imagined incidents (99,130,186). These events cannot be deciphered for their symbolic / utility value, which Holland strongly advised Ellen to look for: 'Why is he telling it? What does he want?' (53) This reveals Holland's narrow-mindedness and imprisonment into a finite world. He does not take into account the possible illusionary objective of a factual and existential naturalism ('the naming and classifying of things lay at the heart of understanding the world; at least it offered that illusion' (70)). This kind of naturalism thus fails to develop its eco-poetic potential to the full. The storyteller goes one step further by insisting on the necessary acceptance of 'mystery' as part of reality (198). Thus, incorporating ambivalence extends not only the fictional reality of the stranger's tales, but also Ellen's limited perception of the world: this 'unresolved state . . . too can be seen as something of a mystery' (198). This lack of a comprehensive gaze alludes to the possibility for failure of the eco-poetic project due to human beings' limited cognitive skills and necessarily subjective, individualised perception of the world (Skinner, 'Eco-poetics' 106; cf. Rigby, 'Earth'). On the other hand, acknowledging failure is also what precisely makes imaginative naturalism an eco-poetic endeavour: these unresolved, mysterious stories perhaps re-enact the rich diversity and agency of the eucalyptus trees. These two features may at first appear unfathomable to untrained human listeners. The suitor's naming technique only initiates Ellen into such training, without providing any stable interpretation, for 'the task of understanding is one for each to face alone, without translators' (Evernden, *Natural* 102).

Indeed, the crucial contribution of the storyteller's imaginative kind of naturalism consists in re-inserting wonder, i.e. 'the absence of interpretation' (Evernden, *Natural* 139), into the reading frameworks that view botanical taxonomy as a rational and culturally-loaded discipline only. This return to a state of epistemological irresolution functions at the internal level of the plot, as well as at that of the readership. Firstly, Holland's ecocentric study of his trees restores the subject status or importance of the non-human life forms to the point that it becomes potentially detrimental to human beings' agential role into the man/environment relation. Although Holland vaguely senses his loss of control over his self so that the trees can dominate his bush garden, *Eucalyptus* also alludes to the self-alienating impact of an exclusively ecocentric attention. At some point, Holland simply forgets himself. The original agenda of his existential naturalism needs to accommodate human narrative as well, so as to balance ecocentric and anthropocentric approaches. In this sense, I envision the figures of Holland and the unnamed suitor as complementary ones: the botanical knowledge of the former proves necessary to the elaboration of wonderful tree-stories, and the more balanced network of human/non-human agencies of the storyteller expands the scope of taxonomic science. In brief, the suitor shows that one's interrelatedness with Nature is more than an embodied experience, because 'it is [also] as narrative animals that we experience our physical environment' (Bellarsi np.).

Secondly, re-introducing wonder helps Holland and the reader move beyond the cultural constraints inherited from the colonial past. As Evernden explains, 'this is not to suggest that culture may be indefinitely restrained, for we require a cultural resolution.' However, 'wonder suspends cultural imperatives' and beliefs just enough so as to let alternative

meanings emerge (*Natural* 141). Although the discipline of naturalist taxonomy does involve a process of identification and classification of life forms (Judd 13), Bail's novel reminds us that interpreting this practice as a colonising gesture in (post)colonial Australia should not completely obliterate other possible uses of this science. *Eucalyptus* leaves all options open: besides its authoritarian and colonialist overtones, Holland's scientific study of his bush garden can also constitute observations and descriptions of 'what is,' thereby operating a timid return to the material reality of the trees. Nevertheless, as the next section shows, Bail's text always displays an awareness of the constant subjectivity/objectivity (or culture/nature) interplay. By playing on epistemological instability, Bail proposes the reader and Anglo-Celtic Australians a way to transcend the legacy of colonialism, which can potentially determine or doom their search for identity and belonging, as exemplified by Holland and Ellen. The author unlocks our imaginative and reading frameworks, whilst simultaneously not forgetting this historical and cultural heritage. It is perhaps then, I would argue, that one can glimpse the possibility of achieving a postcolonial sense of belonging, or an enriching status of individual-in-environment. The following section investigates this double movement illustrated by the interaction between Holland (existential naturalism) and Ellen's pretender (imaginative naturalism) that influences the overall structure of the book.

#### **4. Allying the Subjective with the Factual: Toward Self-Reflexive Nature Writing**

In addition to ambiguous protagonists and elements of the plot, Bail's use of ambivalence crucially affects the very narrating voice of *Eucalyptus*. The author seems to resort to an unidentified, omniscient and even self-reflexive narrator, thereby endowing the novel with a metafictional flavour. This voice actually enmeshes the two different approaches to botanical naturalism practised respectively by Holland and the storyteller so that it is never clear to the reader whether a given passage renders a character's views and attitudes or the narrator's critical reflections on the latter. The first option does not clearly distinguish between Holland, the suitor and Ellen either. Bail's ambivalent prose thus pushes to the extreme his ecopoetic agenda of interrelatedness: his fusion of the existential and imaginative naturalisms within the macro-structure of *Eucalyptus* shows the complementarity of these two approaches to the treescape.

The text thus at times mirrors Holland's methodical mind and obsessive passion for eucalypts: it includes or imitates descriptive botanical vignettes (165, 204), and enumerates Holland's neighbours as if they were trees sprouting out in adjacent properties (26). Yet, the factual descriptions of these vignettes are often interspersed with somewhat ironic comments (59, 165, 248-49), digressions that recall the pretender's flexible approach. If these reports voice Holland's objective approach to naturalist taxonomy, the presence of such self-reflexive comments shows his awareness of the interplay between Nature and culture. Conversely, if the vignettes transcribe the perspective of Ellen's suitor, the factual details indicate his reliance on the material reality of the trees and his extensive botanical knowledge.

Manifest in these hybrid botanical descriptions is the aesthetic anthropomorphism of Holland's trees. They are regularly endowed with characteristics and actions considered

as typically human in a rational Western worldview: because they grow 'standing apart' and do not provide a large shade, they are defined as 'egotistical' (16). Difficult to cultivate, eucalypts are 'hypochondriacs, demanding esoteric manures' (44), "'proud'" or even display 'civil disobedience' (59). Some are 'modest' (102) or '*angry-looking*' (130, italics in original) and others have a "'weeping habit" (a technical term); [sic] that is, leaves drooping in a shimmer of "real melancholy"' (248). The narrator clearly toys with the reader's possible dismissal of such humanisation by emphasising that the latter is even inherent in scientific language. Elsewhere, the animation of the landscape is such that the trees 'knocked out' or 'finished' previous contestants of the naming challenge (61). In this book, eucalypts are thus presented as potent subjects able to compete with their fellow human characters. On the one hand, such re-activation clashes with the conception of naturalist taxonomy as providing only realist (ecomimetic) representations of non-human entities as silent and inert objects. On the other hand, the anthropomorphism of the eucalypts complements the mild zoomorphism of Holland and the storyteller. Both devices partake of Bail's eco-poetics of interrelatedness: in light of Evernden's individual-in-environment, the 'diffusion' of the 'viewer' and the 'viewed' into one another necessarily works both ways.

In addition to the eco-poetic techniques of the humanisation of the land and the 'naturalisation' of man, the self-reflexive narration of *Eucalyptus* reinforces this fluidity between the human world (and language) and the environment at the level of its macro-structure. The novel itself reflects on the concept of eco-poetics:

Superimposed on landscape is art. And what a hectic, apparently essential endeavour it is!

Art is imperfect, unlike nature[,] which is casually "perfect". To try to repeat or even convey by hand some corner of nature is forever doomed. And yet the strange power of art lies in our recognition of this attempt.

The artist, yes, humanises the wonder of nature by doing a faulty version of it; and so nature—landscape, the figure—is brought closer to us . . . (137).

The narrator concludes: 'a given landscape such as Holland's continues to cry out for conversion into human terms' (138).

Although dealing with painting, this metafictional passage clearly evokes Knickerbocker's definition of eco-poetics, i.e. 'the foregrounding of poetic artifice as a manifestation of our interrelation with the rest of nature' (Knickerbocker 159). Moreover, Bail's emphasis on man's 'imperfect' depiction of the environment recalls Evernden's claim that the landscape artist 'makes the world personal . . . not neutral.' As 'the significance of a place is a personal thing' (Evernden, 'Ecology' 100-01), human subjectivity accounts for the artist's flawed mimesis of Nature, at the same time that it is the only way to close the conceptual gap between the human and non-human realms. *Eucalyptus* precisely attempts this 'conversion into human terms' by proposing and ultimately combining two possible approaches to naming one's surrounding vegetation. Ironically enough, while they ponder the mutual interaction between fiction and Nature, the metafictional/self-reflexive moments (e.g. 137-38) of Bail's book precisely constitute

the artist's non-mimetic depiction of the environment. After claiming that 'A paragraph is not so different from a paddock – similar shape, similar function' (33), the narrator exposes the different types of paddock / paragraph in a convoluted and sarcastic manner. This structure thus contradicts the ordering function of the paddocks / paragraphs (34). Nevertheless, the insistence on metafiction in *Eucalyptus* reminds us of the embeddedness of human language into Nature: 'So trees produced oxygen in the form of words' (207); 'A forest is language' (264). These two quotes also signal that the environment possesses a language of its own. They thus point to the fluid interpenetration of human and non-human semiospheres, which implies that the environment be regarded as a subject entity. This combination of metafictional and eco-poetic reflections involves a departure from traditional Western realism and its 'uncritical mimesis' (Skinner, 'Ecopoetics' 106): the restored subject status of the eucalypts begins to distort the rational laws of this mode.

Therefore, one might perhaps consider Bail's book as 'embodying a literary practice of response,' i.e. a kind of writing that 'call[s] us to attend' to the stories that the 'earth and sky' have to tell (Rigby, 'Writing' np). In such 'literature of response', mimesis is no longer the main issue, as its mode varies 'in accordance with a range of cultural, social, situational and generic contingencies' (Rigby, 'Writing' np). What kind of response is *Eucalyptus*? How are we to understand this piece of writing? It shows that the act of naming, be it orally (the contestants to Ellen's hand) or textually (the book itself), and every approach to that discipline call for a hybrid knowledge of the Earth, one which takes into account both its material and imaginative components. *Eucalyptus* is thus a conflation of both a horticultural book (cataloguing eucalyptus names and descriptions) and a fairy-tale-like novel (i.e. a human artefact constructed by biased and imaginative spectators / actors). Indeed, Bail's work qualifies as fictionalised or self-reflexive nature writing: Bail explodes the boundaries of the two genres of ecomimetic nature writing and of fiction (construed as detached from the material world surrounding it) so as to bring them into a tense, unresolved dialogue.

As in a horticultural reference book, each chapter of the novel is entitled after a different species of eucalypt. Nevertheless, the unpredictability of the environment also shapes the textual structure: for instance, the title 'Obliqua' of the first chapter never mentions this species, but rather refers to the narrator's indirect—because self-reflexive—way of beginning the novel (Cabarcos Traseira 198). The 'Approximans' species gives its name to chapters 16 and 37, an irregularity that illustrates that Nature is 'casually perfect' (*Eucalyptus* 137-38). This influence reveals the ecocentric perspective of the whole narrative, including Holland's and the storyteller's parts. Crucially, the storyline is not recounted by a first-person narrator, which would denote an anthropocentric presentation of reality (256). This particular structure of the chapters, however, also shows that 'scientific naming' (i.e. chapter headings) does not order but adopts the wide and chance 'distribution of the trees' (98). As another example of this, the suitor's stories reported in chapters 12 and 35 display no obvious link between their plot and the eucalyptus name. Yet, Ellen reflects: 'if many of the stories were based on the flimsiest foundations, or even a complete misreading of a name, it hardly mattered' (153). This emphasises the subjective aspect of human language and imagination, which necessarily intervene in

man's approach to Nature and (artistic) rendition of it. Furthermore, the plot arrangement espouses the pretender's imaginative naturalism: the narrator adopts a fable-like framing to introduce the protagonists ('Once upon a time there was a man . . . His name was Holland,' 5). Because of her name and 'legendary' beauty, Ellen shows affinities with the mythological Helen of Troy / Sparta (33). Finally, the equivocal ending stresses the infinite character of this fairy tale-like narrative: as Ellen and the stranger are reunited in this chapter entitled 'Confluens,' the man 'felt his story beginning all over again' (264). Moments before, he had revealed that he had technically won the contest, for he had created and delivered personally to Holland the aluminium labels for the eucalypts before Mr Cave's arrival (46, 261-63). Holland eventually renounced to install these nameplates, again defining his estate more as a bush garden than a traditional botanical one (46). Despite the happy reunion between Ellen and the storyteller, the latter's last thought (264) conveys a sense of narrative openness, instead of closure, which counters the supposedly finite vision and purpose of botanical nomenclature. This irresolution / resolution mixture epitomises Bail's pervading advocacy for an epistemic ambivalence and 'absence of interpretation'—or wonder—: 'To achieve a sense of wonder is to be continually surprised. It is tantamount to suspending all assumptions. It is to start over again' (Evernden, *Natural* 141).

Similarly, it is worthwhile to turn back to the programmatic (or conclusive?) first pages of *Eucalyptus*. Right from the start, Bail's novel criticises the restrictiveness of the national readings of a given environment: in a metafictional fashion, the narrator refuses to 'begin with [*eucalyptus*] *desertorum*,' as s/he mockingly reflects on the stereotypical 'hard-luck' narratives inspired by the presumed symbol of Australia, i.e. the bush. This species 'harks back' but 'to a stale version of the national landscape and . . . character.' Discarding such clichéd images of Australian country and fiction, the narrator explores the diversity of these trees, manifest in their varied physical shapes and the 'sheer linguistic strangeness' of their botanical and common names, which sometimes evoke gendered associations (4-5). Critics too often miss the ultimate goal of this programmatic opening which the narrator (in jest?) struggles to articulate: 'all that's needed, aside from a beginning itself, is a eucalypt independent of, yet one which . . . it doesn't really matter' (5). This half-sentence could read as follows: a eucalypt independent of exhaustive systems of meaning or imaginaries (i.e. nationalistic or cultural symbolism and/or classification), yet one which retains some signification to each individual (i.e. one which man can still relate to). In other words, the narrator argues for a less anthropocentric perception of Nature and for a re-evaluation of the intrinsic value of the natural world, whilst still pleading for the latter's interrelatedness with the human realm. The narrator's half-sentence underpins each character's negotiation with his/her surroundings. In this process, the book highlights how 'naming can also be crucial in the recognition of diversity and disclosure of interconnections' (Rigby, 'Writing' np).

## **5. Europe-Australia Encounters: Reciprocal Implantations**

Finally, Bail's blurring of the boundaries through the naming act opens the way to transcultural dialogues. Holland's bush garden and the stories that it generates evokes a hybrid combination between Europe and Australia. Although one may construe Holland's



use of taxonomy as re-enacting the European settlers' ecological conquest of Australia, a closer study of his relation to the trees also uncovers a reverse movement at work: instead of a unilateral imposition of Europe onto the Australian landscape, the indigenous tree takes hold of Holland. In addition to unsettling the human/non-human divide, the suitor's tales also intertwine Old and New Worlds. Set alternatively in European, Australian or other regions of the planet, these stories inspired by botanical nomenclature bespeak the cultural interrelationships and restlessness of a globalised world: Ellen thus learns about European immigrants or travellers to Australia (107-10, 157, 142-45, chapters 35 and 12) and about Australians (sometimes of European extraction) travelling the world (113-15, 208-11). In 'sedentary' tales, the interaction between Europe and Australia can be found in the (linguistic) correlation of the eucalyptus Latinised label or an aspect of that species with the incident recounted in the story (153-56, 141). For instance, the River Peppermint, which 'has more botanical names applied to it than any other eucalypt,' inspires the stranger with the story of a woman in Vaucluse (both an Australian and French locality) 'who had been married and divorced so many times she had trouble remembering her current name' (207). The existence of various denominations for each eucalyptus—deriving from Latin, Ancient Greek, English and even Aboriginal terms<sup>3</sup>—denotes the mutually-informing chains of interactions between the (former) colonies and mother-countries. The organic and cultural identity of a eucalyptus can be defined as a fluid web, since that tree usually has two or more names ascribed to it. This world of interconnections explodes the geographic remoteness of Australia ('Stories with foreign settings came closer to home' (207)), which in part nurtured the colonial settlers' sense of cultural and environmental alienation and sometimes provokes postcolonial subjects' loss of roots. The stranger's tales give Ellen a glimpse of Europe and the rest of the world, which previously appeared to her as unknown, remote lands. Thus, Holland's storied bush garden constitutes a hybrid space blending the local and the global. Because it involves biological and cultural processes of interrelatedness, being an individual-in-environment in Bail's novel means feeling part of your immediate surroundings (Holland's estate) and of a wider, organic and cultural collective (composed of other life forms and countries). Thus, *Eucalyptus* illustrates how the eco-poetic project of 'house making' (Skinner, 'Editor' 7) relies on a poetics that is both 'cross-species' and 'cross-cultural' ('Ecopoetics' 106).

### **Conclusion (*Eucalyptus Confluens*)**

My opening reflections on ecological imperialism were motivated by the predominantly postcolonial lens adopted by most—though not all—scholarly responses to *Eucalyptus*. This essay sought to offer an alternative view on Holland and his Australian bush garden as a way to complement previous scholarship. If ecological imperialism negatively impacts today's postcolonial reality, does this mean that we should no longer be concerned with this phenomenon and its legacy? This suggests a mixed response: on the one hand, we as human beings must fight its contemporary ramifications (such as environmental racism) while not forgetting this significant component of the colonial enterprise. On the other hand, this preserved memory should not lead to cultural determinism, which affects not only Aboriginal but also non-Indigenous communities. Bail's novel testifies to the latter's difficulty in forging their own identity and securing a

sense of belonging to a land shaped by their forebears' literal and linguistic appropriation. *Eucalyptus* can be regarded as an Australian response to the postcolonial impasse in which Kincaid finds herself, i.e. the binary opposition between 'conquered people' and 'conquerors' inherited from rigid colonial mindsets. Accordingly, this essay attempted to show that Holland's ambiguous attitude can be analysed both from colonial and postcolonial perspectives. Re-appraising Holland's ambivalence to the full allows us to reposition him in conversation with the storyteller: participating in the postcolonial quest for belonging, this character also provides a first step towards the re-animation of the environment. In *Eucalyptus*, naturalist taxonomy—or the naming practice—reveals the reciprocal dynamics of a genuine interpenetration that is both organic and cultural. Bail's aesthetics simultaneously reflects and allows for a process of interrelatedness between the eucalypts and the human protagonists: by conflating human and non-human linguistic registers, the agency of the trees is restored in material and narratological terms. Moreover, the novel stresses that the individual-in-environment state needs to ally one's embodied and narrative (imaginative) experience of Nature. Ellen's suitor thus adds the human subjective voice to the factual, ecological, knowledge of the terrain. Adapting the figure of Apollo, the storyteller lets the trees 'sing' through him: in imaginative naturalism, the botanical or common names do not stabilise the identity of each eucalyptus into neat categories, but let the diverse stories of or 'contained' in the trees unfold. In doing so, Ellen's pretender constantly evolves between local and global environments/imaginaries. Mirroring these fluid interpenetrations, this protagonist and the narrator suggest that the act of naming combined with imagination opens up a world of infinite possibilities. Thus, like Kincaid's essay, *Eucalyptus* belongs to a literary tradition taking into account the triangular dynamics between colonisation, environment and language. However, this novel shows that this triptych does not always conform to a paradigm of cultural imprisonment.

Indeed, just as Bail's last tree species—*eucalyptus confluens*—insists on the idea of conflation instead of conclusion, ambivalence reigns supreme in the author's universe: if clinging to well-defined paddocks secures Holland, Ellen feels imprisoned in such localities. On the other hand, opening up the fences to the supposed Other may prove more disorienting than enriching to some people. As exemplified by Bail's protagonists, the postcolonial subject always oscillates between Kincaid's fractured world and a fluid one made up of web-like entanglements. Recalling this tense negotiation, *Eucalyptus* thus remarkably embodies the 'fixed irregularity' of these trees (35).

From the perspective of a joint focus on postcolonial and ecocritical studies, recalling the former colonial context of a region, while striving to transcend it, might prove challenging. Postcolonialism and ecocriticism can both benefit, however, from this mutually enriching dialogue. The thematic and generic ambiguity of *Eucalyptus* might just call for the renewal of these two fields of enquiry. From an environmental point of view, the novel prompts us to consider the issue of sustainability both in Australia and in the world at large: the fertile hybridity of Holland's treescape—a regrouping of different species that defies cultivation complexities—perhaps offers some hope of renewal. Being no longer seen as barren, the bush may after all hold some promise for the future. The contrary is also true, as the eucalypt is a notoriously invasive plant that can dry up the

soil. The role of the human planter/gardener is decidedly an ambivalent one: environmental sustainability calls for an informed ecological practice, which sometimes implies an active monitoring of some plants. This practice is all the more important when dealing with globalised 'exotic' species. Old and New Worlds are forever entangled through space and time: the knowledge of other terrains and ecological specificities is necessary for plant species to grow and develop, wherever they may have been transplanted.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye used the phrase 'bush garden' to characterise the Canadian landscape and identity (See Frye. *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*. Toronto: Anansi, 1995 [1971]). I find the phrase aptly encapsulates the strong hybridity or ambivalence of Holland's estate and character.

<sup>2</sup> Like Evernden's original concept, the notion of 'man-as-environment' remains an ambivalent one, as it is potentially subject to cultural appropriation for oppressive (racist, sexist, etc.) purposes. Ellen's case is one example of this phenomenon. My previous essay articulates how Evernden's notion might be distorted in intolerant contexts: see Maufort, 'Man-as-Environment' (2014).

<sup>3</sup> A parallel can be drawn between the figure of the storyteller and Aborigines. The stranger's identification of the trees by means of tales is 'reminiscent of Aboriginal oral storytelling traditions' (Cabarcos Traseira 198). Indeed, this man's knowledge of the eucalypts is based on a 'relational intimacy' with the natural world, an approach that is typical of Indigenous cultures (Saguaro 47).

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