The Dirt Witches' Counter-narrative: A Response to Murray Bail's *Eucalyptus*

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Abstract

Murray Bail's 1998 novel *Eucalyptus* is an exposition of land ownership, plant classification and human-land relations, using a fairy tale structure. Bail uses parodic excess to deftly undermine settler preoccupations and European traditions that have historically been transposed onto the Australian bush. However, upon a second reading twenty-four years after the first, this author detected an absence of decolonial context in the book, relative to the time of publication, and an unintended reinforcement of misogyny that requires fresh interrogation. This author's own work as a member of a Dirt Witch collective presents as a dovetailed creative object—an urban forest artwork 2021—and allows a witchy reading of Bail's 1998 book and more contemporary attempts to redress colonial failures. It also allows an interrogation of the way the novel re-stereotypes Australian women on the land, re-oppresses both land and women and reinforces the very misogyny it was purported to expose.

Keywords: Critical Plant Studies, eco-feminism, sustainable counter-narratives, urban forests.

Resumen

La novela *Eucalyptus* de Murray Bail de 1998 es una exposición de la propiedad de la tierra, la clasificación de las plantas y las relaciones entre los humanos y la tierra, utilizando una estructura de cuento de hadas. Bail usa el exceso paródico para socavar hábilmente las preocupaciones de los colonos y las tradiciones europeas que históricamente se han trasladado al *bush* australiano. Sin embargo, en una segunda lectura veinticuatro años después de la primera, este autor detectó una ausencia de contexto decolonial en el libro, en relación con el momento de la publicación, y un refuerzo involuntario de la misoginia que requiere un nuevo interrogatorio. El propio trabajo de este autor como miembro de un colectivo de *Dirt Witch* se presenta como un objeto creativo encajado, una obra de arte de bosque urbano 2021, y permite una lectura mágica del libro de Bail de 1998 y los intentos más contemporáneos de reparar los fracasos coloniales. También permite cuestionar la forma en que la novela vuelve a estereotipar a las mujeres australianas en la tierra, vuelve a oprimir tanto a la tierra como a las mujeres y refuerza la misma misoginia que pretendía exponer.

Palabras clave: Estudios críticos de plantas, ecofeminismo, contra-narrativas sostenibles, bosques urbanos.

Introduction

I read the 1998 novel *Eucalyptus* by Australian author Murray Bail in the year of its release, while working as a curatorial assistant at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney. Seven years earlier, Bail had written a book on the lauded Australian artist Ian Fairweather (1891-1974), who was a reclusive and obsessive artist. The Fairweather book was well-thumbed by my art gallery colleagues and me, so the emergence of the novel *Eucalyptus* promised literary skill, and a continuation of Bail's interest in difficult, complicated men. *Eucalyptus* follows the character of Holland, a middle-aged man who buys a property, clears most of the extant trees and then introduces hundreds of different Eucalyptus species from all over Australia. Bail's protagonist Holland advertises his daughter's hand in marriage to anyone who can name every single Eucalyptus species on his property. The fairy-tale mode of the novel served as an exaggerated and parodic literary approach which, coupled with the exquisitely detailed dataset of eucalyptus nomenclature, created a dizzying literary spectacle with vegetal aplomb.

This essay, however, reveals my own growth as a reader from 1998-2021, and my despair upon realising I missed a critical element in my reading of the book. Some slight discomfort upon my first reading, grew exponentially upon my second reading, as I eventually identified the reinforcement of misogyny and lack of care/respect for women. Back in 1998, I also missed the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, appropriate acknowledgement of First Nations peoples or even a presence in the novel. Described at the time of publication as a contemporary fairy tale, the novel also reflects imperialist, colonial approaches to the Australian landscape, the exertion of mastery over trees and obscures (erases) the attendant lives and presence of First Nations People (cf. Martin).

This essay adopts an eco-critical reading of the novel, by drawing on Val Plumwood's discourse on mastery, already in circulation at the time of the novel's publication. It also draws on the history of the garden-as-construct (cf. Kincaid), on what constitutes an original scrub and whether a native garden is an appropriate extant term (cf. Martin 95-113), and on ongoing and often unconscious settler coloniality towards gardens (cf. Bousfeld). At the time of re-reading Bail's novel, I was one of six women—the Dirt Witches—who received a Sydney Laneways Art Project grant from the City of Sydney and built a now-permanent urban forest in a windy concrete city street in Sydney—the Dirt Witches Forest. A connection between the book and the challenges of our urban forest began to take form and suggested that no matter whether it is a heavy re-colonial hand or a light witchy touch, there are endless human challenges to deeply and truly respecting the land and its myriad gardens.

The Dirt Witches Forest is a protest garden full of banksia trees, kangaroo grass and sprawling snake vines. The Dirt Witches Forest was created by six artists and writers and was based on the structure and elements of the endangered Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub (ESBS) which comprises over 50 different Australian kinship species. It functioned as an artwork because, through its scale and its schismatic relation to the concrete street and building in the vicinity, it was an artwork of mimicry, of sympathetic magic and of dispute, in that it is not possible to re-wild places, nor to return to pre-colonial times. Our

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group were interested in a global resurgent curiosity in witchcraft as an aesthetic of care. Witches can best be defined here as "the heretic, the healer, the disobedient wife, the woman who dared to live alone, poisoned the master's food and inspired the slaves to revolt" (Federici 11). Following Isabelle Stengers' advice to break the spell of capitalism, our group drew on our various heritages from Europe, South Africa and Asia to consider witchy connections and the history of witchcraft as one of healing, medicinal care and ritualistic celebration. We also noted the ongoing witch-hunts in Africa where women are still vilified and murdered as accused witches (cf. Meel).

Two years after the forest's inception in January 2021, this essay asks how the Dirt Witches Forest can be culturally critiqued, when it falls under the historical shadow of such novels as *Eucalyptus*. One risk is that the Dirt Witches have inadvertently recolonised the ESBS scrub, despite our best intentions. Another risk is that the ritualism of witchcraft, associated with the Dirt Witches group (recorded incantations, western smoking ceremonies), created new and continuous stigma for women and also that they might clash with the generous Indigenous interaction we were given, although we were assured that a multiplicity of voices is acceptable.[1] This essay draws on *Eucalyptus* by Murray Bail to interrogate the decolonial work the Dirt Witches did with our forest that attempted to avoid the colonial hypocrisies and non-Indigenous hubris of the novel.

Australia sometimes references the land as 'Mother Nature,' a place of maternal safety and generous providence. However, these associations, magnified in and by Australian literature, also have a razor edge of socio-political violence, rendering women inert, as distant providers and as mere background to male action. They also suggest a fetishization of the land as feminine, and by association as vulnerable to abuse, extraction and exploitation. This essay is an inquiry into how art, interpreted as an urban forest, can function as a counter narrative to the culturally influential Australian novel, *Eucalyptus*, that has, despite its literary accomplishments, amplified and aggravated ongoing psychologically and culturally violent interpretations of the land and women.

Within the Australian literary canon, Bail's *Eucalyptus* contributed to the shaping of a country's botanical and story-telling culture. It did this by developing a narrative of rural life on a semi-remote property, situated near an almost-failing country town, where the male protagonist performs his agency through gardening—the planting of hundreds of different Eucalyptus species. Some detail about the book: *Eucalyptus* won the 1999 Miles Franklin Award and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, both of which elevated its literary and popular status. Praised as a modern fairy tale at the time of its publication (cf. McNeer), the book can also be read through an eco-feminist lens, as a story of control, mastery and patriarchal manipulation. In the first chapter of the book, there is this androcentric question: "Once upon a time there was a man–what's wrong with that?" (Bail 3).

Early in the text, Bail describes the national landscape as a place of "isolation" and "exhausted shapeless women" (Bail 2). As eco-feminist theorist Val Plumwood explains, one of the most common forms of denial of women and nature is backgrounding and

[1] Consultation with Brenden Kerin, Redfern Metro Aboriginal Land Council, June 2021.

instrumentalising (cf. Plumwood 21). This refers to the removal of women and the natural world to the distance, as inert but useful, so that male action can be performed. In this instance, the action is Bail's character Holland's compulsive sourcing and planting of multiple Eucalyptus trees as both personal challenge, botanical test and as dowry for his daughter.

Parodic Elements in *Eucalyptus*

Bail's book exhibits elements of parody. There are provocatively sexist descriptions that some critics consider purposeful, such as Amanda Rooks who suggests the author was aware of, and working with, ecofeminist ideas of hierarchical gender dualisms which perpetuate domination, and oppression (cf. Rooks 24). Rooks maintains that it is clear that Bail is parodying patriarchy. However, this can be seen as dangerous thinking, because it serves to excuse the misogyny it purports to lampoon.

Examples of Bail's excessively parodic terminology include: "vagina-slit of the Cider Gum" into which the gardener "thrusts his arm" (Bail 72). Then there is the moment when Holland gives his daughter, Ellen, a Eucalyptus maidenii, named after one of the directors of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney. Soon after, Ellen discovers that a large rusty nail has been hammered into her tree-gift. The character Ellen is not even allowed (by Bail) to feel imposed upon but only registers "vague surprise at seeing a steel object embedded in the softness of Nature" (Bail 90). Is Ellen unaware of her father's exerted power and control because Bail follows the fairy tale modality of girl-as-innocent? Or is Ellen a helpless fool, in her creator's mind, unaware of the power exerted upon her?

There may be parody-as-excess at work in the novel, but there is little embedded critique at play, such as perhaps a narrator's stage-whisper or another character who could throw reasonable light upon the sexist excess. There is nothing to assure us that Bail's parody is not also a reinforcement of the misogyny at work. Likewise, there is no redemption, no moral consequences for character Holland's sexualised control. An absence of feminist independence or agency makes mockery of the attendant parody because there is no female vindication.

Mastery

Earth-raking and mark-making praxes can be seen in the novel *Eucalyptus*, as Holland rips and cuts, moves and controls his trees. It is very difficult to imagine what the land looks like after Holland's ravages, veiled as improvements, other than as a mess. Holland's marks on the land extend to marking Ellen, who is offered to the first man who can name the many hundreds of Eucalyptus trees on his rural property. She is finally 'saved' by an unnamed and mysterious man in the final pages of the book. This unnamed man appears throughout the book as a story-teller, second fiddle to the narrator.

Control, exclusion and the devaluing of women and nature are the toolkit of the colonial-landscape-mastery model. Bail slips into these mastery mistakes, that were presented and published five years earlier, by fellow Australian Val Plumwood in her

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1993 book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (cf. Plumwood 21). With Plumwood's work in mind, I note how Bail refers to the character Ellen in this way: "She was his daughter. He could do anything he liked with her" (Bail 10). Ellen's predicament connects to eco-feminist notions about absent mothers, as Plumwood notes: 'The mother herself is background and is defined in her relation to her child or its father (Irigaray 1982), just as nature is defined in relation to the human as environment" (22). A mother's nurturing, as background to necessity, is borne out in Bail's text as Ellen's mother is another fairy tale plot absence.

Plumwood warns against rejecting the close association of women with nature, she warns against seeing women-nature associations as the failure of what she refers to as humanism, because to consequently remove women from nature results in further human isolation from nature. It perpetuates a violent and continued progression of exclusion and a devaluing of nature. In describing who undertakes these kinds of exclusion and devaluing, Plumwood refers to the "white, largely male elite" (23). She calls it the master model.

Bail's powerful novel develops the concept of a garden, a garden conceited in its artificial species diversity. But if the garden is the potential crucible for testing how to avoid mastery over plants and trees and if it can deflect re-colonising, then first it may be helpful to synthesise, from Bail's book, what not to do. For instance, in *Eucalytpus* there are constant references to the animality of Holland's daughter Ellen, such as her speckled beauty (speckled, like a pigeon egg; cf. Bail 130) or as an irritated horse (cf. Bail 112). In addition to Bail's fetishizing descriptions and elevation of Ellen as *other*, they are also absent of any individualism. These are standard characterisations of oppression in the story, revealed via ecofeminist-informed interpretations (cf. Warren). Ellen's character is never developed, but kept flat: there is only the response of the town to her speckled beauty. The only intense image of her is with swinging breasts as she squats in a creek to piss—again, an animalistic characterisation of women in order to keep them as irrational, basic and background to important action: "Sometimes Ellen was seen" (Bail 48), but she can never act. Thus the subtle oppression of women is perpetuated.

Holland's colonial mark upon the land is one of incision. He ringbarks trees – the cutting and removal of a circumference of bark, so that the tree above the bark line dies. He propagates the introduced species of Eucalyptus trees in straight lines. He alters and constructs, changes and manages his trees, to his exact and contrived taste. Media theorist Jussi Parikka has written about the history of human incisions in the landscape, as an anthropocentric obscenity of agriculture. Parikka refers to nineteenth-century geologist Antonio Stopponi's *Corso di Geologia* (1873), a text about the earth's surface as unearthed by human technology in a series of incisions, and then covered with the ruins of that same technology.

Bail's character Holland creates a kind of extended bush garden. Holland says, "This attempt to 'humanise' nature by naming its parts has a long and distinguished history" (Bail 36). So, Bail seems aware of the hubris and (again) mastery of the Linnean system of classifying, ordering and naming of plants, and may be using parody to critique such Euro-centric systems (cf. Upchurch). But, is this another instance where he uses a

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parodic tone to relieve himself of authorial responsibility, and instead to re-colonise and re-objectify the trees, as assets, as objects of curious interest? There are no examples in the novel where Bail ascribes independence to trees, as existing without the necessity of human witness, without human consciousness. Had he done so, a sense of redemption would have prevailed—confirming and effectively completing the modernised fairy tale structure, as literary device.

Bail calls Holland's property a "museum of trees" (Bail 45). When Holland demands his daughter's suitor know the names of the hundreds of Eucalyptus trees on his land, Bail is reinforcing a masterful tradition of European knowledge as power, creating oppressions of class, race and gender. Albert Memmi refers to colonial distancing as a form of purposeful separation. This separation is between humans and the land, between native vegetation and constructed or contrived landscapes, as Holland created with his Eucalyptus trees. Holland separates himself from all other men, from the mess of remnant bush, from his daughter—beyond his image of her as fetishized female, of course. Memmi explains that the master defines himself by the exclusion of the other (cf. Memmi 75). The other being women and Indigenous peoples.

Naming, in European cultures, also carries legacies of class, power, imperial dominance, and settler exclusivity. Dan Bousfield wrote: "The language of botany, zoology and history is embedded in structures that refer to natives, immigrants, colonists, hybrids and aliens alongside invasion, immigration, competition, conquest, colonisation and pioneering" (Bousfield 20). Julietta Singh also writes of ways to disrupt mastery over land, people and women, and how to avoid falling back into new forms of linguistic and intellectual violence (cf. Singh 78). She proposes that anti-colonial writers such as Frantz Fanon and Mohandas Ghandi failed because they replaced colonial violence with protest violence and bodily self-governing violence, respectively. Singh's solution is using language to strip away colonial and neo-colonial masteries, by unlearning and then re-learning (cf. Lindon et al.).

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The Dirt Witch Forest

If *Eucalyptus* was a fairy tale, then what can a modern witch do to find redemption in the story? Were we witches, when we created our Banksia forest, able to effectively use artistic language to unlearn and relearn human relations with plants? Witch and fairy stories are not unconnected, in the history of tales, and in the demonising of character types. Is the best answer to these challenges of mastery in gardening, and parallel mastery in story-telling, now for women to retain and reclaim the feminine by embracing the mad, the irrational, the witchy? Plumwood suggests a *reversal model* and that an anti-mastery model affirms women as nurturing and caring, celebrating life-giving powers and an immersion in nature.

Bail's narrator seems to hail and revere a more masculine view, and says, "it is this chaotic diversity that has attracted men to the world of eucalypts" (Bail 35). He also says, "Art is imperfect, unlike nature which is 'casually" perfect" (Bail 131). This is the gardening-art-aesthetic conundrum that leads to the next question of this essay: if

Eucalyptus failed in its attempt to parody the oppression of women and plants, and slid into reinforcement of that oppression, what part does the Dirt Witches Forest play in decolonising plants and mediating violence towards women, Indigenous people and plants? Holland's garden was a contrived human interference with the natural landscape. Holland's garden did not escape colonialist lack of care, did not escape the failure to acknowledge First Nations peoples.

Were we, The Dirt Witches, able to avoid similar constructed contrivances? As Susan Martin says in "Writing a Native Garden? Environmental Language and post-Mabo Literature in Australia," maybe Holland's garden was not a garden. Instead, Martin wonders whether Bail's *Eucalyptus* experiment was "disorganised" and "all native" and "too much like a forest" (Martin 95). In her diagnosis of the novel, Martin notes the propensity of non-Indigenous people to become consumed with bush ethos that appropriates Indigenous belonging. As Martin says, Indigenous knowledge was at first unrecognized or discounted but then acknowledged and incorporated but also misappropriated in efforts to repair records of dispossession of people and destruction of place. She also describes Holland's eucalyptus plantings as "gardenesque," a term coined by J. C. Loudon, who saw artificial planting as democratising for different classes, suggesting that access is key to the perfect notion of a garden as artificial vegetation. His ideology about garden symmetry and mimicry may have been contingent on the reading his journal *The Gardener's Magazine* and may also have reflected a social and political tussle for garden or public-land control (cf. Loudon 701-2). Either way the "gardenesque" concept adopted symmetry and order.

The sometimes scratchy and unresolved relationships between gardens versus forests or scrubs, between "gardenesque" symmetry or copying versus native scrubs, was interrogated by the Dirt Witches for our 2021 forest. Our forest was a scrub, not a forest, but it referenced the global trend of planting micro-forests to create dense vegetal spaces and biodiverse spaces in cities (referencing the urban gardener Akira Miyawaki (cf. Nargi). The forest was created by planting Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub, structured in a frame of old Sydney sandstone and located in a windswept concrete-jungle street in the business district of Sydney.

Whilst in the end we chose the Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub (ESBS), as a contiguous and endangered group of plants that are part of a particular ecology, we also researched what remnant bush would have been there, deep underneath Barlow St Haymarket in Sydney, where the Banksia Forest was grown. A group of phyto-archaeologists have done extensive research into the foundations of old buildings in Sydney to discover, via soil and pollen analysis, what plants once grew. Because there was a lack of municipal rubbish collection from terrace houses during early settlement in Australia 1800-1850, it's possible to find interesting evidence of organic matter from old rubbish pits and foundation fossils. In Haymarket, close to where we grew the forest, there were casuarina and eucalyptus trees, saltbush, native grasses and daisy bush. Nearby there were Chinese bush or Cassinia arcuate and Swamp symphionema (cf. MacPhail). This information is a means of considering the relationship of original plantings, and also of the tendency (whilst avoiding the desire) to re-wild the location or

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restore the land to its original form. With increasing discussions among the Dirt Witches, we resolved that re-wilding a site is problematic because the original bush is no longer there to be seen or checked and therefore difficult to imagine.

The Dirt Witches decided to work with the ESBS. The reasons are as follows: it is endangered and as activists we wanted to draw attention to its plight; we could visit several locations of remnant ESBS and see how it grew in real time; it functions as a scrub with a set number of plants, groundcover and trees that are symbiotic and coexistent – therefore it exists in vegetal kinship; our forest was about four kilometres from the closest extant ESBS scrub and we liked the idea of creating a connection (even a copy) or dynamic between our forest and the remnant original bush.

A final reason we chose the ESBS was that there are extant custodians of the ESBS who we could talk to and ask for botanical cultural advice. They were the Indigigrow Nursery experts at La Perouse, the Centennial Park ESBS gardeners, the North Head Sanctuary Foundation (ESBS group), the Moriah College Eastern Suburbs Banksia Scrub Caretaker Nicole Lewis and Sydney Land Council's Brendan Kerin. These practitioners and botanists gave us outstanding knowledge and advice about which 50-odd plants and trees were particular to this sandy soil, windswept bush that groans with old Man Banksia trees.

It was the Redfern Land Council's Brendan Kerin who told us that Indigenous people back-burned the groundcover, using fire stick farming that aims to reduce the fire fuel load on the ground, and even kept the low branches of the Banksia to a minimum to avoid big bushfires. Kerin, who came to the forest in July 2021 to do an Acknowledgement to Country, explained to the Dirt Witches that Indigenous people have high calf muscles (long ankles) so that the low-lying ESBS groundcover wouldn't scratch their legs too much.[2] Although he was joking, it is true that Australian Indigenous people successfully managed the scrub in most of the areas, by keeping the fuel on the ground to a minimum by controlled burning, and kept the larger trees from getting too large and overshadowing the mid-level and groundcover plants.

The Dirt Witches Forest grew quickly in the first few months. We put in two native stingless beehives, with water close by. The ground cover plants such as the native geranium, flourished. The shrubs such as the Leptospermum, Correa and Prickly Moses metastasized and the trees swayed and climbed higher, although one poor tree had to be hacked back and eventually died. The Hardenbergia, Lomandra and Dianella were soon luscious. We went to perform our care, mostly rubbish removal and weeding.

The Dirt Witches Forest became a site of six pairs of human witchy hands and about 30 species, plus bees. To avoid any chances of detachment and abstraction, Plumwood describes an ecological self that has mutual selfhood where the self makes connections with others (cf. Plumwood 185). The Dirt Witches grew closer to each other as humans; and remain so. We continue to work together and make decisions together, as a group. This sometimes meant no decisions were made at all. We performed some witchy

[2] Consultation with Brenden Kerin, Redfern Metro Aboriginal Land Council, June 2021.

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ceremonies–wrote spells and incanted them, as performative gestures to past witchcraft, rather than to instigate any action.

Our multiple voices followed a decolonising reflexivity, that included First Nations consultation; a certainty that the forest was an artwork (constructed, conceptual and synthetic) not a re-wilding; an acknowledgement of First Nations cultural knowledge and prior understanding of effective sustainable scrublands; acknowledgement of absence and erasure of Indigenous plant knowledge in Australian plant institutions; better understanding of our own colonial pitfalls.

This decolonising strategy, to some extent inspired by the limitations of the novel *Eucalyptus*, takes into account the shortfalls of botanical naming and means that we are on the lookout for new systems of nomenclature and classification in the future. An example of improved naming systems is the kinship ecology system of Indigenous classification being undertaken by the Ocean Blue Project, based in Oregon and involving tribal members from the Choctaw Nation. Among other things, this environmental group works to cluster wildlife into 7-10 species that rely on each other to survive: the Cascadia Field Guide. Rather than using western taxonomy, this system of naming refers to kinship clusters which includes insects, plants and birds. The ESBS scrub works exactly in this way. It is synergistic and self-reliant, its species work together effectively and it relies on the small wattle birds, the stingless bees and lizards for the entire ecosystem to work. In essence, the ESBS is a kinship cluster.[3]

In terms of an ethics of care, there were challenges because this forest was not extant. The Dirt Witches grew it. So in a sense it was, and is, artificial. We made sure it wasn't overwatered or had been poisoned by local litter. We endlessly picked up the used syringes that had been tossed into it. Our ethics of care was enacted with multiple voices, and multiple witchy versions, but I'm not sure we can promise we weren't still instrumentalising the forest, for us, as an artwork. After all, we constructed the forest within a rectangular sandstone block frame. We chose the plants. We occasionally cut things back and trimmed a tree, checked on the bees and made sure they had water.

None of these activities is ethically perverse but it still functions as a performatively masterful activity. Jamaica Kincaid has written deeply about being master of her own garden, and of her ecological sovereignty. Julietta Singh has written about Kincaid's richly political garden writing and notes that Kincaid's gardening practice pitches her as an ethical subject, a subject that emerges from her experience of colonisation and into a new emerging master. Referring to Jamaica Kincaid's *My Garden (Book):* (1999), Singh writes: "Like those histories it elicits, the garden escapes and refuses the will of the gardener who desires mastery over it" (Singh 149).

Kincaid's book was kindly given to me back in 2018 when I met scholar Catriona Sandilands in Sydney. At a workshop, the day after her lecture, she handed me the book and said I must read it. Read it, I did. And it has, over time, made me reflexively anxious about what I was doing in my own garden and later, what we were doing in our Dirt Witches Forest.

[3] Ocean Blue Project. https://oceanblueproject.org/literary-field-guide-indigenous-classification/

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The difficulties were made clear in Kincaid's book. In her garden book, she says of her visit to the Chelsea Flower Show: "Almost ashamed of the revulsion and hostility they have for foreign people, the English make up for it by loving and embracing foreign plants wholesale" (Kincaid 104). This sentence made me reflect on the surge of interest in 1980s Australia in native plants, at exactly the time the general public was becoming more aware in public discourse about the violence and damage done to Australian First Nations people. This was a period leading up to the 1988 Bicentennial which was a celebration of 200 years of the white colony, and within that period, heated debate had begun to pulse. This was ten years before Bail wrote *Eucalyptus*.

This next sentence from Kincaid is one that came to mind when I re-read Bail's book and it also acted as a warning bell when the Dirt Witches began to plant our Banksia Forest: "It seems so clear to me that a group of people who have had such a horrible historical association with growing things would try to make any relationship to it dignified (agriculture) and useful" (Kincaid 140). While Kincaid is referring to the colonial changes to human-plant relations in Antigua, her childhood home, due to colonisers concepts of slave agriculture, it resonates beyond her geography, and into Australia's.

Julietta Singh notes that Kincaid's book is evidence of the way mastery concepts endure, that master/slave relations remain and that the garden is a site of mastery. Singh also notes that Kincaid's book reminds her that mastery is extant in both political and mundane life (cf. Singh 151). Singh also reminds her readers that violence and continued oppression of women and plants are perpetuated in mundane ways. In fact, perhaps it is the mundane activities of literary characters, such as Bail's Holland, that provide the worst kind of continued violence. In Rob Nixon's analysis of slow violence, they discuss those kinds of activist actions that are "able to articulate the discourse of violent land loss to a deeper narrative of territorial theft, as perpetrated first by British colonialists and later by their neocolonial legatees" (Nixon 132). Following Nixon's points, the Dirt Witches followed a witchy version of eco-activism–ecocritical thinking. Specifically we were preoccupied with an ethics of place, rather than perpetuating new displacements.

Singh reminds me, in spirit and via her book on mastery, that the Dirt Witches are mostly white women who all have a degree of affluence and political privilege and that "even within the ease of relative affluence, discomfort can persist and proliferate" (Singh 151). Kincaid in turn, shows how bourgeois discomfort works and leads to colonial dispossession of stories and theft of culture. Attempts to create awareness of plant conservation are forever clouded by the fact that Australia was never ceded by Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people to the white colonial invaders. Juliette Singh, who so brilliantly lays bare the ongoing colonial violence and masteries at play globally, also talks about her own mother's garden. Singh saw her mother's garden as magically flourishing and bountiful. However she also explains: "But if her garden–in all its glory–was a space of refuge for my mother, it was also one into which the discomforts of the home spilled out into the earth" (153). I think the only risk with Singh's memories of the garden and psychic extension of family relations is that, again, it presents the garden as artistic image. Gardening is a cultural act. For the Dirt Witches, it was an artistic act, a re-presentation of and by the human. By coincidence, Singh was a tree-planter in northern Canada during

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her university summers, which she describes as brutal work. For her, tree-planting was her first experience of communal life.

For the Dirt Witches, our forest was not our first experience of communal life, but was our first garden-protest. Our conversations about what we were doing/attempting, at times, became heated. Our group was tight and loyal but not without discord. Our group struggled with language around our aestheticizing the banksia scrub. The canon of contemporary art works hard to resist aestheticizing nature and any reminders of those relapses are problematic. We admit to the contradictions and hypocrisies. We want to use them, for discussion and feedback. Crimes of dispossession against plants and people continue to be committed.

Should women, then, reclaim the witch-woman as an eco-feminist celebration of non-masterful relations? Feminist activism and witchcraft is on the rise due to its subversive potential (cf. Daskalaski). If women's resistance movements require social reproduction, a thesis proffered by Federici, then how did the Dirt Witches create productivity without being exploited or economically delimited? Well, we budgeted our labour. We were paid for our witchy work—our labour was not free. Murray Bail, in *Eucalyptus*, describes a local town by mentioning a woman. Bail describes the woman like this: she "could have been a witch" (Bail 57). The narrator's tone is disdainful, suggesting women as potentially crazy, or as-untrustworthy-as-witches. To decolonise the novel, it might be time to see an inherent suggestion in Bail's narratorial tone: there is power in the male fear of witches.

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