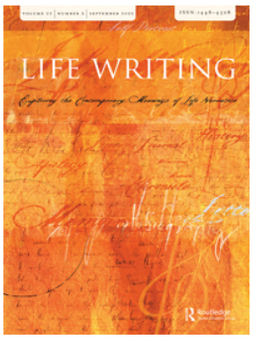

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Writing Climate, Season and Cycle: Autobiographical Composting in Maggie MacKellar's Eco-Autobiography, *Graft*

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ABSTRACT

In Maggie MacKellar's third memoir, *Graft: Motherhood, Family and a Year on the Land* (2023), she is living through a drought on a Merino sheep farm in Tasmania, her children are leaving as they enter adulthood, and her identity (mother, farmer, woman, white settler Australian, human) is under pressure. The planet and the land on which MacKellar lives are also under threat. Life writing that addresses such profound events offers a space to think about what it is to story human life. This article examines textual strategies of eco-autobiography that press on anthropocentric thinking about the natural world in a time of climate crisis, and reconfigure human selfhood 'with and as place and time' (Wright 2024, "Contours D: Weathering the Body." In *Becoming Weather: Weather, Embodiment and Affect*, edited by S. Wright, 84. Taylor & Francis) in a way that reflects ecological 'enmeshment' (via Morton 2012, *The Ecological Thought*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjhzskj). We propose the term 'autobiographical composting' to describe how *Graft* assembles diverse raw materials —existing literary works, reference texts, diary entries, memories— to produce a relational subjectivity that subverts traditional linear understandings of the narrative of life as beginning with birth and ending with death. Through autobiographical composting, *Graft* suggests both 'life' and 'narrative' as cyclical, ecologically enmeshed processes, and so moves the boundaries of life narrative beyond the human.

KEYWORDS

Eco-autobiography; ecobiography; autobiographical composting; climate change

> The world around me is layered in beauty and death and we are part of it. (MacKellar 2023, 174)

> composting is the only activity that allows anyone […] to literally make dead things bring life. Think about that. When else can you defy the usual direction of things and comfortably, habitually, turn dead things back into life?. (Georgiadis 2021, 56)

In a scene from Maggie MacKellar's third memoir, *Graft: Motherhood, Family and a Year on the Land* (2023), MacKellar and her partner 'J' are checking on their Merino ewes that have recently given birth. She writes, 'It's a tightrope checking the ewes. Are we

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doing more harm than good? Will we mismother more lambs this morning than we save ewes?' (43). Driving their loud truck with its 'revving engine' into the vulnerable sheep paddock, MacKellar risks startling the newborn lambs, who might dart off and become separated from their mothers, stuck in fences, or exposed to the ever-lingering birds of prey. This scene represents the core tensions at the heart of the memoir where motherhood, birth and death are so deeply intertwined they, in effect, constitute life for MacKellar. As MacKellar's Merino sheep farm in Tasmania is ravaged by drought, simultaneously, her now grown children are leaving home. She writes, 'I am hollowed by this going. By my children's passage through me and out into the world. With their birth I put on the cloak of motherhood and now it's time to take it off. I feel naked without it, a person I don't recognise' (4). From this mid-life viewpoint the two core elements of MacKellar's identity—mother and sheep farmer—become fractured at the same time. She writes 'I know my role has to change' (54). In this article, we argue that innovative literary techniques in eco-autobiography can illuminate the impacts of disrupted and changing lives/seasons and fill linguistic and representational gaps around birth, birthing, life, and death. Specifically, we propose the term 'autobiographical composting' to describe how *Graft* assembles diverse raw materials—existing literary works, reference texts, diary entries, memories, weather notes, maps—and through a textual-alchemical process of self-storying, these disparate materials produce something new: a deeply relational subjectivity that subverts the traditional linear understanding of the narrative of life as beginning with birth and ending with death. Instead, through autobiographical composting, *Graft* suggests both 'life' and 'narrative' as cyclical, ecologically enmeshed processes, and in doing so moves the boundaries of life narrative beyond the human.

Graft begins with a flashback of MacKellar giving birth to her second child six weeks after her husband's unexpected death, a potent image that reflects the key themes explored throughout the text, where life and death overlap. MacKellar attempts to make sense of these complex experiences by juxtaposing seasons and stages of her life with ecological seasonal change. However, when the pervasive and oppressive threat of drought disrupts seasonal cues, crisis becomes inextricable from her sense of self and, consequently, from the construction of her life narrative. Ecocritical scholar Sarah Dimick (2018, 701) writes, 'If […] seasonality intertwines environmental time and literary form, then climate change may have aesthetic as well as ecological ramifications'. We propose that Maggie MacKellar's *Graft* is an example of how eco-autobiography can demonstrate such aesthetic ramifications caused by the climate crisis.

The memoir is structured around seasons, starting with autumn, which MacKellar considers 'the beginning of the year' because 'it's time for the rams to go out with the ewes and the cycle of life to start again' (30). This time of year, is also when, 'the tension and focus is whether we will get a rain—what is called here 'an autumn break'' (30). When the 'autumn break' never arrives, it becomes clear that seasonality governs everything in MacKellar's life: her work, her mothering, her sense of identity, and her relationships with humans, animals, and Country. Weaving traditional nature writing conventions such as diary writing, field writing, ornithological profiles, and brief glossaries (or 'words that are useful to know') with literary techniques such as the lyric and braiding, *Graft* is an example of how writing and phenology become linked practices in eco-autobiography, which can reflect notions of 'enmeshment' in life narrative, or 'interconnectedness … where human and nonhuman realities converge' (Caracciolo 2021, 1).

Phenology is a 'branch of science dealing with the relations between climate and periodic biological phenomena, such as bird migration or plant flowering' (Phenology 2025). Dimick (2018) writes that for nature writers—like Henry David Thoreau—'phenological indicators', such as, 'the blooming of the blue vervain or the call of the king bird' (706) allow a writer to locate themselves temporally within the passage of the year. She also claims that before anthropogenic climate change prompted 'a reinvestigation of annual environmental cycles … phenology was employed as a means of intuiting the clockwork embedded in a landscape' (706). In the absence of seasonal indicators—such as, for example, 'the autumn break'—MacKellar's sense of identity and ability to 'intuit' the clockwork of both a life and landscape becomes unmoored. Using *Graft* as a case study, we explore how techniques of eco-autobiography can demonstrate how 'weather is an active and important agent imbricated in processes of being in place, and of making ourselves with and as place and time' (Wright 2024, 84), particularly in relation to representing life and death cycles, as according to human geography scholar Sara Wright, 'where we are at in our life cycle impacts our experiences of seasons' (84). Writing from the vantage point of 'midlife', which is often associated with crisis, *Graft* as an eco-autobiographical text writes the self through its enmeshment with the natural environment, seasons, cycles, and the current climate crisis.

Climate, season and cycle in eco-autobiography

Notions of climate and seasonality are commonly interpreted as conditions that are external to human bodies and experiences. However, there is scientific evidence that points to human bodies being physiologically impacted by seasonal change as much as the surrounding trees, animals, weather systems, and plants. Wright outlines,

> The very composition of human blood, human tissue, human brains and the human genome change with the seasons … . from the body itself and how it moves through the world … to biochemical bodily processes; to the seasonality of genetic expression … and … the body as "weather system" with its temperatures and pressures not clearly separable from a strictly bounded outside. (83–84)

Therefore, physiologically, biologically, emotionally, and culturally—we *are* seasons. In her article, Wright uses her personal experience of menopause and associated hot flushes to explore how such connections present on an embodied level. She writes, 'It's not just the planet, the weathery contours of my body are also experiencing warming' (Wright 2024, 89). In this example, a warming climate exacerbates symptoms of the changing life cycle where the body overheats from fluctuating hormone levels as it ages. It also coincides with a biological process—menopause—that occurs in the 'middle' of a life cycle. Susanne Schmidt (2018, 505) writes that the term 'midlife crisis' often conjures 'a favourite gendered cliché … the image of an affluent, middle-aged man speeding off in a red Porsche with a woman half his age … but it was first successfully promoted as a feminist concept that applied to men and women equally and described the dissolution of gender roles at the onset of middle age'. Such 'gender roles' include motherhood, and this is reflected in MacKellar's experience, where the biological and the personal crises of 'midlife' coincide with climate crisis. In this way, the biological, personal and phenological become intertwined, blurring lines between self and environment.

The use of weather and seasons as metaphor and narrative device is a centuries old literary tradition—Dimick (2018, 701) writes that the seasons 'are rhythmic configurations, phenological beats and accents that cohere into recognizable temporal patterns'. Eco-autobiography is a genre where these conventions intersect to depict narratives where human life stories are inextricably entangled with the environment. Eco-autobiographies '[chart] human encounters with the specificity of place, its fortunes, conditions, geography, and ecology' (Smith and Watson 2024, 235), in ways that often 'link immersion in nature to expanded human possibility and emotional growth' (Smith and Watson 2024). Smith and Watson (2024, 236) observe that eco-autobiography of the contemporary era is shaped significantly by environmental crisis which has urged a 'radical reorientation to the fragility, precarity, and interconnectedness of the natural world in order to mobilize humanity around the work of eco-survival'. Eco-autobiography is a genre that responds to this reorientation, by recording crisis through a personal lens, and in imagining new shapes and discourses of selfhood that account for such 'fragility, precarity and interconnectedness'.

Further, ecobiography scholar Jessica White (2020, 15) describes the importance of incorporating the environment into notions of the self in autobiography: 'If we cannot have a life without the lives of other inhabitants such as fungi, bacteria, air, or orchids, then it becomes desirable, in creating an autobiography, to include the lives that sustain and shape it: the autos of a biography should include our environment'. Such inclusion is expressed by Thoreau thusly: 'The seasons and the changes are in me, I see not a dead eel or a floating snake, or a gull, but it rounds my life and is like a line or accent in its poem' (1862). Wright's example of a warming climate and a warming body demonstrate how human life cycles can be shaped by environmental change, while Thoreau's example demonstrates how changes in seasons can manifest as a literary 'accent' and a force within the self. Both examples suggest an eco-autobiographical self that is porous—the environment making its way inside the self, and the self part of the external world.

Graft is an eco-autobiography where bodies, climate, seasons, and life narrative converge. Seasonal change shapes both bodies and landscape, but also the form and aesthetics of the text. The stylistic choice to structure a life narrative around seasons is demonstrative of how weather can shape a life narrative. As MacKellar enters the midstage of her life, she is reckoning with new kinds of internal and external weather. As eco-autobiography scholar Melanie Pryor (2017, 392) writes, 'in giving voice to the landscape's mood, memory, solitude, and wildness, place becomes geographic, created and remembered, formed and forming'. In this way, eco-autobiography offers the potential to explore notions of how humans form place and how place forms narrative. While Wright outlines the ways that climate and seasonality can 'form' parts of the body, Dimick reaffirms that such climatic shifts might also manifest in narrative form. She asks: 'How do shifts in seasonality reverberate within literature and the human imaginary? Is it possible that our production of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases impacts narrative form?' (Dimick 2018, 702) Such implications can be identified in eco-autobiographies. In *Graft*, for example, MacKellar's role as a sheep farmer means that she is intrinsically shaping the climate and the Country by enacting on an essential part of this identity role as she breeds and raises an introduced animal species. According to MacKellar, the two breeds of sheep she is raising arrived in Australia in the first five

years of 'settlement' or invasion (34). The text curiously demonstrates a lack of self-awareness of the sheep farmer's complicity in a changing climate—the damage caused by hoofed mammals and the methane produced by ovine flocks contributing to atmospheric conditions that lead to drought, for example. Not to mention the destruction of land, people, and culture carried out by colonisers. Rather, MacKellar demonstrates a sense of pride when she writes, 'it appeases the historian in me that coincidentally we are running the two oldest breeds in Australia', and, in recounting the involvement of Elizabeth Macarthur and Eliza Furlonge in developing the Merino breed, 'that the bloodlines of our Merinos go back to the vision of these two women pleases me' (35). Arguably, the historical timeline that MacKellar refers to here coincides with the beginning of climate collapse in Australia, as white settlers altered the landscape for personal gain and stole land from Indigenous Australians whose regenerative and reciprocal land management processes, and relationships to the land, kept Country healthy for thousands of years. MacKellar traces her life narrative back to this timeline, implicating the colonial past as a presence exerting constitutive force on her identity and the land she occupies —each inextricable from the other. This is also a gesture to MacKellar's past life as an academic historian, a life she left behind in the aftermath of grief and loss.

While shifts in climate impact MacKellar's life—her own actions also change/form the climate. Eco-autobiography illuminates such interconnections as human life is entangled with the nonhuman. To put this even more emphatically, White (2021, 98) explains that 'ecobiography reveals— whether unwittingly or not—the inseparability of the human and their ecosystem and this, in keeping with the tenets of posthumanism, decenters the human in the narrative'. So while MacKellar doesn't explicitly meditate on how she as a sheep farmer contributes to climate crisis, this omission sticks out to an ecologically-minded reader (as it did to both of us), and draws attention to it anyway. Examples like this demonstrate tensions between life and death in *Graft*, as the farm is MacKellar's 'livelihood', but the intrinsic nature of farming an introduced species directly impacts the climate. While the text lacks awareness around the complicity of sheep farmers in the climate crisis, inner conflict is evident as MacKellar grapples with how her actions—deciding which animals live and die—are constantly in tension of balancing one life for another. For example, in one scene, mid-drought, she stumbles across a dead ewe. While this loss of life negatively impacts her own 'livelihood', she invokes the multiplicity of perspectives of drought: what kills one animal, becomes a fruitful harvest for another, such as for scavengers—predominantly the eagles that are ever present, but also Tasmanian Devils, a native species that has been brought back from near extinction. Such tensions of life and death are expressed within the dominant force of climate and seasons as formed/forming. She seems to acknowledge here—although with important blind spots—the embeddedness of the sheep farmer within broader ecologies and cycles of life and death that are both beyond the economic context but deeply shaped by it (through capitalism-driven climate change) and shaping of it (through extreme weather that threatens livestock-as-livelihood).

Weather, in this way, permeates the text, directly impacting how MacKellar is able to live, work and farm. The pervasive and oppressive impacts of drought impact her interactions with the land and the animals, with her children and her partner. Dealing with weather becomes a key influence of MacKellar's self and identity. For example, when MacKellar and her partner travel to the mainland for a change of 'scenery', rather

than the dry plains and the stress of drought on the farm, she encounters heavy rains and green valleys. This shift in weather is reflected in a shift in mood, and they are able to return to the farm with a renewed sense of self. As Wright (2024, 84) writes, 'Experiences and practices of weather are not separate … from the affective and sensory self; they are part of the body and co-constitute a sense of subjectivity and identity. Weather is an active and important agent imbricated in processes of being in place, and of making ourselves with and as place and time', and as Dimick writes, 'A series of springs can be narrated as a single season because 'spring' is a cultural form as well as a physical experience'. Similarly, in *Graft*, for MacKellar, 'drought' is an emotional experience as much as it is a physical experience. She writes, 'Remembering the ending of other droughts … Remembering is an act of savagery, of self-mutilation, and my mind wants to shield me from it but, like childbirth, like death, the mark is always there' (96). Here, the physical and the emotional overlap, where remembering the experience of drought is a form of 'self-mutilation' that marks MacKellar as much as 'childbirth' or 'death', demonstrating how experiences of seasons and extreme weather become as significant to a life story as other cyclical experiences of life and death. Drought is 'life altering' (95), and becomes, its own character entangled with MacKellar's life.

Therefore, in *Graft*, weather, climate and seasonality are not merely external events, but psychological and physical, demonstrating how in eco-autobiography, climate, seasonality and cycles are intertwined in both what constitutes a sense of self and what constitutes the form of the text. If form, as Caroline Levine (2015, 3) argues, extends beyond the aesthetic, comprising 'all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference', then seasonality serves as more than just aesthetic form in eco-autobiography, but as a means of making sense of life cycles. Structuring the text around climate, seasonality and cycles is one example of formal strategy in *Graft* that demonstrates how the eco-autobiographical self is 'enmeshed' with the environment.

Mesh and midlife

Life narrative scholar Anna Poletti (2020, 8), in her deep consideration of the materiality of self mediation, *Stories of the Self,* comments that 'specific forms of media materialize ideas about what a life is, and how and why it might matter'. As Poletti suggests is the case for all mediated life stories, in *Graft*, the life that is storied and the form the memoir takes are inextricably connected. Through the integration and enmeshment of a variety of unconventional forms, *Graft* weaves a subjectivity defined by its enmeshment with place, nature, climate, animals, other people, and other texts. MacKellar uses the eco-autobiographical form to braid nature writing conventions with literary techniques, such as personal essay writing, the use of the lyric, and drawing from a variety of sources including extracts from other nature writing, such as that by Terry Tempest Williams and Barry Lopez, while also including traditional place names and maps in the work to demonstrate how such interconnections present in life narrative. Through such formal strategies including the structuring of narrative around seasons and cycles, and through the employment of techniques that draw from nature writing conventions, such as ornithological reflections or field notes, glossaries, and diary entries, *Graft* illuminates the ecocritical concept of 'enmeshment' through form.

Eco-autobiography is 'a largely unexplored form of autobiographical text' (Pryor 2017, 392) that leading autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define as a narrative that 'interweaves personal experience with the story of the fortunes, conditions, geography and ecology of a region' (2010, 268). The term first appeared in an article by Perreten to identify and analyse a type of life narrative that enables nature or landscape writers to discover 'a new self in nature' (2003, 1). The defining features of an eco-autobiographical text, as outlined by Perreten (2003, 2), include a 'symbiotic relationship between the environment and the self', an 'autobiographical voice shaped by the natural setting', a 'close interaction between author and setting', and an autobiographical narrative where the natural setting provides the 'layers of experience' (2003, 3) that constitute a life story. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Phillip A. Snyder (1996, 203) offered the original term, *ecobiography* as a form of life writing that represents 'a dynamic network' that makes up the 'self's ecosystem'. This ecosystem, they write, 'encompasses Nature', but it also 'includes [spirituality], family, friends, literature, history, and archeological artefacts as its constituent parts', elements that are connected to the 'indeterminate, loose-bordered, dialogic entity called the Self' (203). This ecological conceptualisation of the self departs from traditional Humanist notions of selfhood that are normative in autobiography as a genre (Smith and Watson 2024, 18, 54).

Scholars—Stacy Alaimo (2010), Jane Bennett (2010), Timothy Morton (2012) and Donna Haraway (2015)—working in the interdisciplinary field of ecocriticism might describe this 'dynamic network' as a kind of enmeshment—the notion of a deeply interconnected and fluid relationship between humans and non-humans, and one that suggests the boundaries between self and other are more porous than we might think. To encapsulate this theory of interconnectedness, Alaimo (2010) offers their theory of 'trans-corporeality', Bennett (2010) uses the term 'vibrant matter', and Haraway (2015) conceives of 'sympoiesos' or a 'making-with' environments. Morton (2012) lands on the term 'mesh' over other terms such as 'web' or 'network', to represent 'the interconnectedness of all living and nonliving things' (7) due to its expansiveness and open-endedness, which we argue, reflects the exigencies and aims of eco-autobiographical writing. Morton writes: 'All life forms are the mesh, and so are all dead ones, as are their habitats, which are also made up of living and nonliving beings' (2012, 29). He expands on the term, articulating the reason mesh is so useful for representing ecological interconnection:

> "Mesh" can mean the holes in a network and threading between them. It suggests both hardness and delicacy. [Mesh] has uses in biology, mathematics, and engineering and in weaving and computing—think stockings and graphic design, metals and fabrics. It has antecedents in *mask* and *mass,* suggesting both density and deception. By extension, "mesh" can mean "a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare." (19) (Morton 2012, 28)

Thus, the concept of 'mesh' can provide a framework to scholars of eco-autobiography that reflects these entanglements between the self and environments.

To represent the 'mesh' and connections between all forms of existence—dinosaurs and cars, water and humans, for example—Morton (2012) suggests the practice of what he calls the 'ecological thought' or a 'thinking of interconnectedness'. According to Morton (2012), the ecological thought, like memory, doesn't just occur 'in the mind'. It's a practice and a process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are

connected with other beings—'animal, vegetable, or mineral' (7). Morton's (2012) framework for thinking of interconnectedness provides a potential pathway for subverting imagined hierarchies that have placed the human above all others. Morton (2012, 29, our emphasis) writes:

> Every single life form is literally *familiar*: we're genetically descended from them. Darwin imagines an endlessly branching tree. In contrast, mesh doesn't suggest a clear starting point, and those "clusters" of "subordinate groups" are far from linear … Each point of the mesh is both the centre and edge of a system of points, so there is no absolute centre or edge.

In this way, Morton's concept of the 'mesh' can challenge traditional, hierarchical models of existence. And this is reflected in what we are noticing in contemporary eco-autobiographical writing—such as canonical texts like Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) and contemporary release's like Elizabeth Rush' *The Quickening* (2023). Meshiness is a quality we suggest is emerging as a key aspect of eco-autobiography in this time of climate crisis. As such, meshiness as a textual quality offers a framework to explore how the self is enmeshed within a vast, non-linear network of 'familiar' relationships beyond the human, marking out the eco-autobiographical self as one constituted by deep relationality and kinship with the nonhuman.

The 'life' that is the subject of a life narrative then, includes inanimate objects, weather systems, diverse species, and bodies of water. In *Graft*, drought itself becomes a subject of the life story: 'Drought is catastrophic, life-altering, all-consuming. Hungry animals and cracked bare earth, empty creek beds, dry dams and dirty, stagnant shrinking puddles' (95). Drought is more than external or circumstantial, drought is enmeshed with everything else—a symptom and a sign of crisis on a planetary and a personal level. An important aspect of how *Graft* represents and enacts enmeshment is through a textual phenomenon we are calling 'autobiographical composting'.

Reimagining birth and death through autobiographical composting

Ecocritical scholars Jennifer Hamilton and Astrida Neimanis propose 'feminist composting' as a scholarly practice that 'explicitly values and deliberately repurposes extant matters—namely feminism—in the search for different kinds of worlds' (2018, 505). For Hamilton and Neimanis, composting is about tracing a history of their field that acknowledges the feminist raw materials comprising the heap of theory from which the rich compost of environmental humanities has emerged. Ideas, theories, practices, and methodologies are the 'matter' in this metaphor. Hamilton and Neimanis insist that 'composting's intellectual products cannot be detached from the material labors that produce them' (505). In taking this kind of thinking to the 'matter' of life writing, we propose that composting offers a novel lens through which to consider how a human life might be represented and read in a way that transforms ideas about birth, life, and death. In a way that might represent a 'permeable' self enmeshed in a broader ecology. In a way that might represent a human as part of material and narrative cycles in which building up, breaking down, and dispersal are normative stages.

We are interested in how the principles of composting as a practice informed by an ecological ethos encourages an alternative view of birth, life and death, something we —inspired by Hamilton and Neimanis—are thinking of as autobiographical composting.

MacKellar's memoir's preoccupation with such key moments as *part of a life cycle* make it an ideal text to consider through this lens of autobiographical composting as an ecocritical approach to human life as represented in life writing. In one of the first sections of the book MacKellar repeats a line from an eco-autobiographical essay by Terry Tempest Williams. The line is, 'If I can learn to love death, I can begin to find refuge in change' (5). MacKellar suggests this is a 'cursed phrase', but by including it in an emphatical place within the text—the final lines of the first section—she nonetheless suggests an inevitable and important connection between death and change. Furthermore, she hints at the uneasy affect with which death is approached: it is perhaps not possible to love death because it brings such painful change. Contemporary Western culture is inclined to fear death, to see it as an end to life, as life's antithesis or opposite. It is an anthropocentric view of life story that positions birth at the beginning of a linear narrative and death at its end, with 'life' constituted by everything that happens in between. But this is only one way to conceive of death, one that is contested by the principles of composting.

Composting as a process of recycling organic matter like food scraps and garden waste is part of a cycle where birth, death, decay, and transformation are equally vital to the stuff of 'life'. Australian composting educator Kate Flood (2023, 12), in her book *The Compost Coach*, describes composting as 'a transformational process' rooted in biological decomposition. She explains, 'anything that was alive decomposes eventually', and that 'composting happens every single day in nature without human intervention. Pull back the leaves on a forest floor, and you'll find the most fabulous decomposing organic matter, heaving with worms and life' (12). Here, Flood frames decomposition —a product of death—as literally full of life.

She encourages her readers to view backyard composting as a way to create the ideal conditions for this natural process to occur, transforming discarded materials from food-making and gardening into a new resource that can then go back into the garden soil to feed the next crop of vegetables, fruits and flowers. Composting is thus part of a cycle of which humans are also a part: planting the garden, eating the food, creating the waste that feeds the compost that feeds the garden and so on. A more scientific, although less comprehensible to a lay reader, definition of composting can be found in Chongrak Polprasert and Thammarat Koottatep (2017, 105–106). They begin a definition of composting thusly:

> a solid-phase biological decomposition of organics residues that occurs in aerobic conditions by exploiting substrate self-heating as a consequence of microbial oxidative reactions. The process leads to the production of compost, a humus-like, dark, crumbly material that can be used as fertilizer to reintegrate organic matter in agricultural soils. (Vallini et al. 2002)

What this means is that composting begins with solid organic material, which is placed in an oxygen rich (aerobic) environment that facilitates microbes to interact with the matter —and with each other—to break down or 'decompose' the original matter. In the process, this creates heat that further assists the decomposition process. Through the interplay of various elements and forms of life, the matter then becomes something else: a dense and dark material—humus—that enriches soil with nutrients and microbial life, facilitates the circulation of plant food, and enables the soil to *hold water*. The

language of composting draws our attention to the enmeshment of life and death in a way that is productive for considering how eco-autobiography in a time of climate crisis is using life writing to suggest ways of narrating that are reflective of humans as part of an ecological mesh.

Australian gardener and beloved television personality Costa Georgiadis presents composting—when taken up as a practice—as explicitly environmentalist. He writes, 'composting is a ticket to change. It is a chance to tackle the waste cycle head on and say, "Hey, I am no longer going to participate in the creation of problems"' (2021, 56). The 'problems' Georgiadis refers to are material—in the very real sense of human waste contributing to environmental destruction and climate crisis—but also cultural and a problem of narrative. A pervasive story of Western capitalism encourages subjects to understand themselves as separate from their food and the web of production and consumption in which they are, in fact, enmeshed. Narrative, Georgiadis is keenly aware, is an important part of how humans understand themselves as either connected within, or apart from, their environment. He writes:

> Compost really is the glue behind the food narrative that we need to edit, nurture and grow locally by using massive windows of opportunity to show us the way - but it'll happen only when we choose to lift the curtains and let fresh ideas blow in like a southerly change. (58)

We suggest here that eco-autobiography is one such 'window of opportunity' intervening in—or at least departing from—narratives that have encouraged humanity to be detached from ecosystem.

Importantly, Georgiadis, too, emphasises the intervention composting makes in human ideas of birth and death: 'composting is the only activity that allows anyone - and everyone! - to literally make dead things bring life. Think about that. When else can you defy the usual direction of things and comfortably, habitually, turn dead things back into life?' (56). In terms of life narrative, we are thinking about the utility of autobiographical composting as a formally experimental quality in *Graft* that brings various textual and narrative 'matter' together and in doing so challenges the relationships between birth, life and death in ways that encourage ecocritical thinking. This is an explicit preoccupation of the text. In one section that suggests meanings attached to the memoir's title, MacKellar gives several definitions of the word 'graft', linking the 'fixing in place' of something, the joining of two things together, the concepts of very hard work and illicit gain, and ultimately MacKellar's view of herself as a sheep farmer during lambing season: 'The […] dictionary doesn't include sheep in its examples of the word "graft", but that's what I do. Grafting: the act of joining together two things to make them one—a motherless lamb to a lambless mother' (146). This excerpt reveals that enmeshment, birth, life and death are a central project of this memoir. There are two components to MacKellar's autobiographical composting. Firstly, the reuse and integration of existing textual materials, such as diary entries, ornithological descriptions, dictionary definitions, and quotes from literary and nonfiction works. Secondly, the text's structuring of the life narrative not as a linear (birth, then life, then death), but as a cyclical: the book is divided into sections titled autumn, winter, spring, and summer, and the life narrated through this frame is shaped by this natural cycle. Within the cycle, birth, death and life are represented as

intertwined, feeding into one another in surprising ways. Both of these elements appear connected to MacKellar's ideas of herself as in midlife and in crisis. Now being in midlife, MacKellar has lived through some important cycles critical to 'life'—motherhood, birth, deaths of loved ones, seasons, grief, weather cycles, cycles of friendships—and so their 'ongoingness' is visible to her. Haraway (2015, 160) points to 'ongoingness' as crucially at stake in the climate crisis, the imperilment of which threatens to interrupt or derail the cycles on which life depends. This concept of ongoingness and cycle is at the heart of autobiographical composting and its utility for storying the climate crisis. Through a literary envisaging of the 'life' of 'life writing' as enmeshed and ongoing cycle, rather than only what occurs to an individual between birth and death, autobiographical composting can suggest ecocritical ways of engaging with life narration.

As we have observed, the memoir plays with form. It opens with an illustration of a map (of MacKellar's homestead). On the following page, a quote from Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*. On the next page, a single paragraph titled 'Wiradjuri country/Central New South Wales', and written in first person present tense. The next page begins a first person, past tense passage with no title—this section adheres to traditional memoir conventions of narrating an event from the author's past and begins 'This story starts twenty years ago with the birth of my son' (3). After two of these memoir sections and another first person present tense section labelled with a place name is a one-page passage of right-aligned text that reads as a diary entry and begins 'Today, we found a ewe cast' (21). In the passage MacKellar narrates the messy process of pulling a stuck lamb from the ewe in labour, and reflects on the fact that both lamb and ewe would have died if MacKellar had not found and assisted them: 'These are sheep, I tell myself. Yet my body responds to the crisis of birth and death. Each small emergency, the relentless progression of them, takes a toll. If I am weak, or too tired, or not observant enough, or careless, or incompetent, then they die' (21). Then, a nearly empty page featuring only the heading 'autumn' in large lettering (23). Overleaf there is a black-and-white illustration of a small bird holding a worm in its beak, and on the page facing the illustration is what appears to be an accompanying ornithological description—or perhaps an entry from a bird watching guide—titled 'SCARLET ROBIN, *Petroica boodang*, 12-14cm' (25). The entry/description, though, is formatted like a poem with line breaks that alternately use enjambment or take structural cues from the original punctuation of the ornithological text. On page 30, there is a very short section titled 'Words that are useful to know', which is formatted similarly to a dictionary and features MacKellar's definitions of the words 'dry', (in the sense of not wet) 'dry', (in the sense of a sheep that is not pregnant) and 'fine' (in the sense of weather) (30). These various textual forms are repeated throughout the memoir. The final section is a list of works cited with an autobiographical framing cue: 'This book stands on a library. Here are the foundation stones that appear in the text:' (251). The reuse and recycling of existing literary matter here is a specifically eco-autobiographical way to 'do' intertextuality, and in *Graft*, it is one in which form is crucially constitutive of subject. We look closely now at two composting materials used in *Graft*—field notes and bird matter—and a composting technique she uses: that of 'wild association' (Dicinoski 2017).

Field notes

Graft incorporates flashes from what the text suggests is MacKellar's diary (MacKellar references her dearly held practice of diary-writing throughout the memoir). These extracts are visually and formally separate—indented, right aligned, and in italics—to indicate a different state and separate perspective. These italicised extracts are also set in the 'field' itself, often detailing brief and graphic scenes where MacKellar and her partner interact with their flock. The immediacy of such field writing leads it to have a distinctly temporal character—one that is fleeting and visceral. Such methods have been employed by writers such as Thoreau in his production of *Walden* (1854). In his journal, Thoreau played down the event, writing only a few short phrases for the day, for example, 'Elder-berries. Waxwork yellowing' (429), and then, at a later time, reflected on these immediate, short and sharp notes to craft a narrative. This represents what anthropologist Nigel Rapport describes as the meeting of a dual self—the field notetaker, and the writer who later interprets and works these notes into a narrative. Here, place, not only time, are crucial to the identities of these two selves. While MacKellar's field writing extracts are more technically constructed than Thoreau's, the presentation of these extracts 'as' field writing imbues these textual breaks with a more graphic and immersive tone. As field notes are created on site, or in the field, and then reflected upon and analysed in another location—such as a writer's desk—they reflect two experiences of self, and can therefore be employed as a methodology to blend the self into the environment in autobiographical writing. Rapport writes: 'Field notes are imbued with the conventional reality, the norms of note-taking, of two forms of life; fieldnotes possess and impart to their writer a dual conventionality, local as well as academic' (1991, 11).

The 'local' self might be the self that writes in the field, and the 'academic' self the one who makes sense of and forms a narrative out of such notes. MacKellar refers to herself as an 'academic' before she became a sheep farmer and mother, and the application of these multiple forms throughout the text demonstrate how these seemingly disparate parts of herself converge in the eco-autobiography to demonstrate enmeshment between self and environing world.

> In style as well as content fieldnotes bear witness to, amount to, the experiences of another self, that of the field writer; here is the anthropologist writing according to the conventions of registering information, taking note, of the field. (Rapport 1991, 11)

These extracts often detail encounters with life and death, bringing both the text and the reader into the field itself, demonstrating how form in eco-autobiography can also illuminate enmeshment between reader and writer. In one such extract, MacKellar writes, 'The air is sharp with the tang of birth and death' (92). In each of these extracts, this is where MacKellar becomes most viscerally entangled with birth and death: 'In the quiet J pulls the mangled carcass of the half-born lamb from the ewe and we load her onto the ute' (92). The use of the field writing form allows MacKellar to ground the writing in the body through descriptions of the smell, feel, and sensory experience of life and death in these scenes, while the 'academic' or the 'writer' self is more reflective and literary, looking for meaning beyond occurrence. By integrating the material of MacKellar's field notes into the compost pile of the text, *Graft* uses form to demonstrate how the multiplicity of the human experience broadly, and the subjectivity it represents specifically, are enmeshed with the environing world.

Bird matter

While the aforementioned field writing extracts allow MacKellar to ruminate on life and death, the short ornithological profiles of birds give her a space to connect human and natural cycles through birds as symbols of, and metaphors for, change. These profiles blend scientific information—latin name, size and wingspan—with subjective interpretations and observations written by MacKellar herself. For example, according to MacKellar, the White-Bellied Sea Eagle has a short white tail and dark body that, 'gives it the look of a huge butterfly. From underneath you may see white and blackish triangles. Cruel hook of beak, tear of talon' (135). This use of assonance—such as 'hook of beak'—and alliteration —'tear of talon'—invite these profiles to be read as short lyric poems.

Blue Humanities scholar Steve Mentz notes that, 'poetry represents one of the best tools we have for communicating across different scales simultaneously. A holding-together of multiple registers of thinking and interpretation within a single poetic image represents how poets forge meaning' (Mentz 2024, 13). Such 'scales', in *Graft* include the scale of a life and the various deaths MacKellar is witness to, and the employment of the lyric in these entries represents MacKellar's attempts to 'communicate' across the different stages of the life cycle in a way that communicates scale. These profiles are not stand-alone but link, or compost, into the memoir, resembling how MacKellar draws from a range of textual techniques to make sense of this stage of her life. These fragments blend into the narrative, and perhaps we can think of lyricism as one of the literary enzymes that works to process such matter into the rich compost of eco-autobiography. Cardell and Robertson (2017, 5) describe how 'the [lyric] form mimics the haphazard and associative processes of mind, memory and subjectivity'. The metaphor of birds throughout *Graft* resembles a physical and material connection—or association—between MacKellar's internal and external world, as sightings of birds trigger memories and thought processes. Birds appear, in this way, a deliberate choice of metaphor, as they are often associated with mothering stages—the term *clucky* has two definitions: '(of a hen): that clucks or makes a clucking sound; broody or brooding' and 'of a person (esp. a woman): having a strong desire to have a baby' (Clucky 2025). The term 'empty-nest' is also a term associated with midlife crisis. Most bird species will abandon a nest after its chicks have flown away to build a new nest and avoid the spread of parasites, such as mites or lice. The nest itself will decompose, become compost, or fragments of the nest will be repurposed by other birds. In her seminal book of essays *Mothers and Children* (1914), writer Dorothy Canfield first introduced the term 'empty-nest' as a description for the stage of life when adult children leave the family home. In the 1970s, this syndrome was linked to feelings such as depression, grief and despair. Psychiatrist Judd Marmor (1994), for example, describes 'midlife' as a separation loss involving the giving up of the fantasy hopes of youth and a confrontation with personal mortality. We acknowledge here that *Graft* is invested in motherhood in a way that reproduces maternalist imaginaries in which motherhood is central to women's lives. These engagements with birds—and the focus of sheep birthing lambs—reveals this discursive element to MacKellar's inscription of an eco-autobiographical self. The integration of ornithological profiles in the text draws on bird life cycles to serve as metaphors that reflect enmeshment between processes in nature and processes in the human life cycle, including moments of crisis, grief, loss, mortality, decomposition and renewal.

Enmeshment through 'wild associations'

Employing essayistic techniques such as the lyric, braiding, fragmented extracts from diaries, field notes, glossaries and the visual element of maps enmesh internal and external in *Graft*. As her children leave home and the drought threatens, MacKellar, writing from the middle of an internal and external crisis asks, 'Is this what I am not understanding? There are two layers to my displacement? … what am I if not a mother?' (87), and 'in this fluid in-between space … I see the familiar cloak of my mothering needs to be laid down for a lighter garment' (88). A page later, observing the eagles as they force their chicks to leave the nest, she writes 'the cycle of their parenting is fast' (89). Here, the memoir's two narrative threads —observations of the external world and reflections on the internal world—intersect, and it becomes blurred where one ends and the other begins. In these reflections, MacKellar realises that the cycle of her mothering has come to a natural conclusion, which allows her to exchange the heaviness of this role with a 'lighter' one. These are the two layers to her displacement—the grief associated with the separation loss, and the opportunities that this new identity presents to her for freedom and renewal. As MacKellar juxtaposes her own loss of her sense of motherhood with the eagles who are aggressively encouraging their chicks out of the nest, she relies on narrative braiding and 'wild associations' (Dicinoski 2017) to draw threads of meaning between her identity crisis and the cycle of the eagles, techniques often employed in the construction of the lyric essay. Michelle Dicinoski (2017, 3) suggests that, 'In shifting so easily between fragments and topics, the structural association of the lyric essay often adds an element of surprise—a "wildness"'. The text shifts—between 'fragments and topics', and between various formal and narrative matter —creating a sense of wildness to the work, while also demonstrating the specific way that eco-autobiography is able to textually represent interconnectedness and mesh.

Composting the past

Before we conclude, we want to draw attention to where *Graft* sits in relation to MacKellar's body of work to suggest that MacKellar also practices autobiographical composting through telling and retelling across her multiple memoirs. Published in 2010, *When it Rains* is MacKellar's first memoir, and can be categorised as a grief memoir. It tells the story of how MacKellar coped with losing both her husband and her mother in quick succession right as she was becoming a mother herself. In *When it Rains* MacKellar abandons her life as a city-dwelling academic and moves to her family farm in regional New South Wales (not the same the farm she writes about in *Graft*). The story meditates on loss, but it is also a homecoming narrative, and a story of pastoral self-remaking. After grief shatters her, MacKellar remakes herself and her life in this regional location.

In 2014 MacKellar published *How to Get There*, which narrates her navigation of a new romantic relationship and subsequent move from her farm in NSW to a merino sheep farm in Tasmania. The book is described in promotional materials as 'a story about *making a life* in a remarkable setting' (Penguin Books Australia 2025, our emphasis). In *How to Get There*, MacKellar narrates the experience of being in a new place, and meditates on finding love after enduring grief.

Ten years later she publishes *Graft*, taking a fresh lens on subjects she has put to print in her preceding memoirs: grief, love, self, place, and nature. Prior to her life as a

memoirist, she published a single volume of academic writing: *Core of My Heart, My Country: Women's Sense of Place and the Land in Australia and Canada* (2004). In it she traces the biographies of women settlers. The publisher describes it as 'a lyrical combination of history, memoir and contemplation' (Melbourne University Press 2019). In taking an overview of MacKellar's oeuvre (which also includes a digital newsletter that we do not have space to examine here), the chemistry of her compost heap becomes visible: through the technology of life writing she processes the raw matter of place, land, womanhood, the past, grief, love, pain, beauty, and watchfulness. Some of this material has cycled through the heap many times. Such is the nature of grief and selfhood: they are not stable, but rather shift and change shape over time.

Conclusion

Through autobiographical composting, wild association, and enmeshment with places and beings beyond MacKellar herself, MacKellar's memoir becomes a landscape of its own, one that is both textual and *textural*, where biological, psychological and material processes become entangled. Polprasert and Koottatep (2017, 106 our emphasis) note that even though 'modern day composting is often associated with sophisticated sets of machineries with many types of plant configurations it is primarily a *biological process*' and as Wright outlines, 'bodies themselves are the "countryside" for bacteria, insects and others' (2024, 84). In eco-autobiography, the text becomes countryside, where the body and the environment become enmeshed. As MacKellar writes, 'I run my hands through the grass as if it were the hair on my head. I dig my fingers into the dirt as if the soil were the crust of my skin. My thoughts are traced by ants. Birds fly out my ears' (1). Eco-autobiography, drawing on innovative literary techniques, reflects permeability of life narratives where the lines between humans and environments become blurred.

Through such formal strategies including the structuring of narrative around seasons and cycles, and through the employment of techniques that draw from nature writing conventions, such as ornithological reflections or field notes, glossaries, and diary entries, *Graft* illuminates the ecocritical concept of 'enmeshment' through form. In eco-autobiography, such techniques converge to illuminate the ways that human and environmental life cycles are enmeshed. We offer the term 'autobiographical composting' to describe how life narratives can reflect birth, birthing, death and life cycle through textual strategies that break down the organic elements of a life story into a nutrient-rich narrative. These techniques can shape texts that reflect the materiality and deep relationality of a life story.

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