



**UNIVERSITY OFTM
KWAZULU-NATAL**

**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

Where the Crawdads Sing as an Eco-Künstlerinroman

Submitted by Nisha Devdhat

Student Number: 202517825

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In the

DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH STUDIES

School of Arts, College of Humanities, University
of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.

August 2026

Supervised by
Dr Jean Rossmann

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Declaration.....	v
AI Declaration	vi
Acknowledgements	vii
Introduction.....	1
Motivation and Background	1
Synopsis	3
Narrative Form and Generic Hybridity.....	5
Author’s Oeuvre.....	6
Literature Review.....	8
Theoretical and Conceptual Framework.....	12
Building on Buckley’s Bildungsroman Framework	13
Revising the Künstlerroman: Huf, Hankins and Varsamopoulou	14
Healing Trauma: Nature’s Nurture and Narrative Memory	18
Methodology	20
Structure of the Dissertation	23
Chapter One: Artistic Interest and Mentorship in the Formative Years.....	24
Introduction.....	24
Ma’s Affinity for the Arts and Her Abandonment of the Family	24
Pa’s Alcoholism, Antagonism, and Abuse	27
Survival and Self-Determination as a Lonely Child	29
“Marsh Girl”: White Trash, Gender Policing, and the Making of an Outsider-Artist	33
The Marsh as Mother	41
The Marsh as a Classroom.....	42
Tate as Friend, Mentor and First Love.....	43
Conclusion	45
Chapter Two: Artistic Development during Adolescence and Young Adulthood	46
Introduction.....	46
Exalting Love and the Awakening of Art.....	47
Authorship and the Emergence of the Artist.....	49
Art, Autonomy, and the Saving of the Marsh	51

Erotic Awakening, Debasement, and the Wounded Self.....	53
Maternal Recognition and Artistic Inheritance	57
Conclusion	59
Chapter Three: Embracing an Artistic Vocation upon Maturity	61
Introduction.....	61
Embracing Identity as a Non-conforming Artist.....	61
Prioritising Self, Art, and the Sublime	63
Choosing a Supportive and Accepting Life Partner.....	65
“Marsh Expert”: Award-winning Author, Honorary Doctor, and Legend	67
Forging New Paths with Lily Briscoe.....	69
The Significance of Art amongst the Creative-Minded	71
The Healing Power of Poetry.....	77
Conclusion	86
Conclusion	87
Appendix.....	92
Kya’s Poems under the Pseudonym Amanda Hamilton	92
References.....	95

Abstract

This dissertation situates Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) as an eco-Künstlerinroman: a contemporary reconfiguration of the artist's novel in which female artistic formation emerges through intimacy with nature. While previous scholars classify the novel as a murder mystery and coming-of-age novel, I argue it inherits and revises the Künstlerroman tradition by situating the protagonist Catherine "Kya" Clark's artistic apprenticeship within the North Carolina marshland. I explore how the marsh functions as a maternal refuge, teacher, moral guide, and artistic muse. As the marsh meets Kya's physical and psychological needs, it enables her development as an artist, while her recognition of nature's own artistry becomes a catalyst for self-discovery. The novel's central concern is the formation of Kya's artistic subjectivity under conditions of precarity: parental neglect, gender-based abuse, social exclusion, and environmental degradation. This dissertation thus reads Kya's development — especially her emergence as a nature artist — as the narrative's organising arc, one that invites analysis through the genre lens of the eco-Künstlerinroman. The analytical chapters follow Kya's development across three stages: her childhood formation through the marsh's tutelage and nurturing presence; her adolescence and young adulthood, during which sexual awakening and romantic betrayal deepen her commitment to artistic creation, authorship, and ecological responsibility; and her maturity, where she embraces her identity as nature artist, poet, and public authority on the marsh. This study builds on Jerome Buckley's (1974) account of the Künstlerroman, while extending feminist approaches to the genre developed by Linda Huf (1985), Kathleen Hankins (1991), and Evy Varsamopoulou (2019). It also draws on Bracha Ettinger's (2006a) feminist theories of the maternal nexus and matrixial borderspace to interpret Kya's development as a motherless daughter and emerging artist, and on Cathy Caruth's (1996) literary trauma theory to elucidate how Kya's poetry becomes a medium through which the unspeakability of trauma is translated. Through this composite framework, the study makes a unique contribution to genre theory, arguing for an ecological and feminist variant of the artist's novel in which nature and art are mutually constitutive forces: while nature serves as a catalyst for aesthetic education, artistic creation in turn becomes a means of healing and flourishing and eco-consciousness.

Keywords: *Where the Crawdads Sing*, Delia Owens, Künstlerinroman, artist's journey, ecofeminism, trauma narrative, maternal nexus, matrixial borderspace, aesthetics, the sublime, nature.

Declaration

I Nisha Devdhat, Student Number 202517825, declare:

1. The research reported in this dissertation, except where otherwise indicated, is my original research.
2. This dissertation has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
3. This dissertation does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.
4. This dissertation does not contain other persons' writing, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other researchers. Where other written sources have been quoted then: a) their words have been re-written, but the general information attributed to them has been referenced; b) where their exact words have been used, their writing has been placed in quotation marks and referenced.
5. If I have reproduced a publication of which I am author, co-author or editor, I have indicated in detail which part of the publication was written by myself alone and have fully referenced such publications.
6. This dissertation does not contain text, graphics or tables copied and pasted from the Internet, unless specifically acknowledged, and the source being detailed in the dissertation and in the Bibliography.

Signed: 

Name of Supervisor: Dr Jean Rossmann

Signature: 

Date: 23 August 2026

AI Declaration

I did not personally use generative artificial intelligence to conduct the research, analyse the primary text or formulate the central argument and findings of this dissertation.

During the post-examination revision process, my supervisor used ChatGPT (OpenAI) as a supervisory aid to consolidate the examiners' comments and propose possible language, editorial and structural revisions. I critically reviewed, verified and adapted all suggestions before incorporating them into the dissertation. Generative AI was not used as part of the research methodology or textual analysis.

Signed: _____

Name: Nisha Devdhat

Student Number: 202517825

Date: 23 August 2026

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my utmost appreciation to Delia Owens for writing *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018). Kya's story touched me deeply. I take pleasure in sharing this book with my female friends as I believe it is powerful and transformative. Analysing the narrative has deepened my knowledge of literary theory and I hope my dissertation does justice to the important themes in the novel.

Next, to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to the following members of staff and departments: Thank you to my supervisor, Dr Jean Rossmann, for her insights, guidance, and mentorship on my dissertation. Her support, skills, and time are truly appreciated. Dr Rossmann's contributions and oversight were crucial for the completion of this project. I am also grateful to Professors Bheki Khoza, Suriamurthee Maistry, and Jaya Naidoo who shared their expertise on research, ethics, article writing, and funding through the University Capacity Development Programme (UCDP) workshops. To the librarians, particularly Ms Jabulile Sibisi-Mshengu, thank you for the comprehensive training on journals, referencing, and the library as a resource. At the Postgraduate Office, I would like to thank Ms Debbie Bowen-Blythe for kindly assisting with my registrations every semester and Mr Christopher Eley for guiding me through the Ethical Clearance and Submission Procedures. In the Discipline of English, I would like to thank Dr Samiksha Laltha and Ms Shazlynn Padayachee for the opportunity to tutor English 101. Tutoring complemented my studies and enriched my learning experience. At the Student Counselling Office, I would like to thank Ms Mariam Jassat for her support towards my wellbeing and her advice for my career. I am also extremely grateful for the bursaries from the Student Funding Department. To my fellow students, Adejoke Aboyeji and Selma Akhoo, thank you for your encouragement and advice. I have learned a lot from you and value the friendships we created.

Finally, to my family, thank you for graciously hosting me and supporting me through this challenging yet satisfying process.

Introduction

Motivation and Background

Where the Crawdads Sing (2018) by Delia Owens is a bestselling American novel that has caught the attention of readers worldwide. In 2021, it won the Pageturner award at the British Book Awards (Owens 2021c) and the Japan Booksellers Award (Owens 2021b). In 2022, the novel's popularity culminated in a film adaptation (Newman 2022) that extended its audience further. While the novel has popular appeal, it is not superficial. It is stylistically innovative, blending a murder mystery with a coming-of-age narrative. The narrative centres around the protagonist, Catherine "Kya" Danielle Clark, who is a strong, independent woman and gifted artist. In her coming-of-age story, readers are introduced to Kya's personal traumas, flaws, and successes as she navigates a life of isolation in a North Carolina coastal marsh during the 1950s and 1960s.

Owens was born in Georgia but spent her childhood summers in North Carolina where she developed a fondness for the region (Owens 2021a). Her intimate familiarity with the unique ecology of this place permeates the novel's imaginative storyworld. While *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) is fiction, it showcases Owens's background in scientific scholarship and nature writing. Owens is an award-winning nature writer and zoologist who is well-known for African nature-writing, co-authored with her then husband, Mark Owens: *Cry of the Kalahari* (1984), *Eye of the Elephant* (1992), and *Secrets of the Savannah* (2006). Corin Kraft notes how Owens's "professional knowledge as a biologist [...] inspired" this fictional text, allowing a "profound ecocritical perspective" that portrays the marsh as a "complex interdependent" entangling human and more-than-human lives (2021: 131). This entanglement of human and nature is a key feature of ecocritical literature. Owens's text also combines ecofiction with a particular form of coming-of-age narrative: the artist's novel, conventionally known by the German term *Künstlerroman*. Since Kya is a female artist, this dissertation later adopts the more precise term *Künstlerinroman*, the feminine form used in feminist scholarship on the artist's novel (Huf 1985, Hankins 1991). I use eco-*Künstlerinroman* to describe Owens's ecological and feminist revision of the form, in which

female artistic development emerges through intimacy with nature and the more-than-human world.

My central claim is that the novel traces the formation of Kya's artistic subjectivity under conditions of precarity, including parental neglect, gender-based abuse, social exclusion, and environmental degradation. Within this precarious world, the marsh functions as Kya's primary source of sustenance, education, protection, and aesthetic awakening. This dissertation therefore reads Kya's development, especially her emergence as a nature artist, as the narrative's organising arc.

Building on scholarship pertaining to the Künstlerroman tradition, ecofeminist literary theory, and the structure of trauma narratives, this dissertation reads Owens's novel through a composite lens — what I term the eco-Künstlerroman: a contemporary reconfiguration of the artist's novel in which artistic formation is produced through an intimacy with, and attention to, nature and the more-than-human world. The Künstlerroman is a subgenre of the Bildungsroman (a coming-of-age story) as the Künstlerroman specifically follows the character arc of a developing artist; however, Owens's text calls for a distinctively ecofeminist variant of the form. Within the modern Anglophone literary canon, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2015 [1916]) is often treated as a seminal modernist Künstlerroman, tracing Stephen Dedalus's growth and development toward self-definition as an artist. Notable female-centred narratives of artistic and intellectual formation include Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1936 [1927]), Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), and Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988), which all foreground the gendered constraints and social pressures through which a woman's creative identity takes shape. Jerome Buckley describes the Künstlerroman as “a tale of the orientation of an artist” and “a novel of youth and apprenticeship” (1974:13). Owens's novel not only follows this trajectory but transforms it by situating Kya's apprenticeship within the marsh, which functions as maternal refuge but also teacher, moral guide and artistic muse. As the marsh meets Kya's physical and psychological needs, she is able to self-actualise and flourish as an artist. Additionally, I argue that Owens renders nature itself as art, and that Kya's recognition of this “artistry” serves as a catalyst in her quest for self-discovery. Philippa Garrard (2009) challenges the assumption that there is one archetypal artist story, showing how female Künstlerromane draw on established conventions while also revising them. This flexibility makes possible further

developments of the genre, including the eco-Künstlerinroman, in which artistic formation is inseparable from ecological identity and the more-than-human world.

My project offers an original reading of Owens's novel by critically evaluating how *Where the Crawdads Sing* both inherits and revises the Künstlerroman tradition. In doing so, I contribute to genre theory by elaborating on an explicitly ecological, feminist variant of the form where nature and art work in a reciprocal relationship, or even as mutually constitutive forces: my study aims to show how the marsh forms Kya's artistic consciousness, and Kya's art, in turn, preserves, interprets, or protects the marsh. Consequently, my analysis follows Kya's development from a traumatised, lonely girl-child to a mature woman and successful artist. Genre theory provides an analytical toolkit: a set of conventions, narrative patterns, tropes and themes against which a novel can be examined. It allows the researcher to explore the extent to which a text conforms to or departs from established conventions — and how such departures may produce new variations or subgenres, such as the eco-Künstlerinroman.

Before turning to the literature review and theoretical framework, I provide a brief chronological synopsis of the key plot events, followed by a discussion of the novel's narrative form and generic hybridity. This overview is useful because the novel's nonlinear structure alternates between Kya's childhood and artistic development and the later timeline of Chase Andrews's death, the murder investigation and Kya's trial. The synopsis clarifies the sequence of these events, while the section that follows considers how the novel's focalisation, dual timeline and withholding of information support its combination of the murder mystery, coming-of-age narrative and eco-Künstlerinroman. Together, these sections provide the narrative groundwork for the later analysis without reproducing the plot in unnecessary detail.

Synopsis

Where the Crawdads Sing follows Kya Clark, who is born in 1945 and grows up in a shack beside the marsh near the fictional town of Barkley Cove, North Carolina. Her father, Pa, is a disabled war veteran whose alcoholism, gambling and violence make the family home unsafe. In 1952, Ma leaves the family, followed gradually by Kya's older siblings. Pa also eventually disappears, leaving Kya to care for herself. After one humiliating day at school,

Kya avoids formal education and remains largely excluded from the town. She survives by collecting mussels and selling them to Jumpin', who, together with his wife Mabel, provides her with practical assistance and kindness.

Kya's earliest experiences of art come through Ma, who paints, sings, dances and recites poetry with her children. After Ma's departure, the marsh becomes Kya's refuge and classroom. She studies its plants, animals, shells and feathers, recording what she sees in detailed drawings. Tate Walker befriends Kya and teaches her to read and write, giving her access to scientific books and poetry. He recognises the value of her observations and encourages her to develop them into illustrated field guides. Although their friendship develops into love, Tate leaves to attend university and fails to return when promised, causing Kya to experience another painful abandonment. During Tate's absence, Kya begins a relationship with Chase Andrews, a popular young man from Barkley Cove. Chase conceals their relationship from his family and community while allowing Kya to believe that he intends to marry her. She later discovers that he is engaged to another woman. Even after his marriage, Chase continues to pursue Kya and eventually assaults her. At the same time, Kya's brother Jodie returns and tells her that Ma has died, ending Kya's hope that her mother might one day come home. Tate also returns and apologises for abandoning her, but Kya remains reluctant to trust him.

The novel opens with Chase's death in October 1969, when his body is discovered beneath a fire tower. Suspicion falls on Kya because of their former relationship and the community's longstanding prejudice against her. She is arrested and tried for murder. The prosecution relies upon circumstantial evidence, including testimony suggesting that Kya was seen near the tower and the disappearance of a shell necklace she had once given Chase. Her lawyer, Tom Milton, argues that the case is shaped by Barkley Cove's prejudice against the "Marsh Girl" and stresses that Kya was in Greenville meeting her publisher when Chase died. The jury finds her not guilty, and she returns to the marsh.

Kya gradually reconciles with Tate, and they spend the rest of their lives together in the marsh, although they do not marry. Her illustrated books bring her financial security and national recognition as a naturalist, writer and artist. Despite this success, she declines public appearances and remains socially separate from Barkley Cove. Over time, however, the town comes to recognise the value of her work and her knowledge of the marsh.

Kya dies in 2009 at the age of sixty-four. After her death, Tate discovers that she had secretly written and published poetry under the name Amanda Hamilton. Among her papers, he also finds a poem describing Chase's death and the missing shell necklace. These discoveries reveal that Kya was responsible for the murder. Tate destroys the necklace to protect her secret. The ending therefore complicates the novel's representation of Kya: she is both a survivor of Chase's violence and the person responsible for his death.

Narrative Form and Generic Hybridity

The novel is narrated in the third person and is largely focalised through Kya. This narrative perspective is not neutral or objective: readers are given close access to Kya's loneliness, fear, attachment to the marsh and experience of social rejection. At the same time, the narration withholds her actions on the night of Chase's death. This encourages readers to sympathise with Kya and to share her uncertainty during the trial, while preserving the central mystery. The final revelation requires the reader to reconsider both Kya's character and the earlier presentation of her as an innocent victim.

The prologue begins with the discovery of Chase's body in 1969. The chapters that follow alternate between the earlier account of Kya's childhood and artistic development and the later timeline of the murder investigation and trial. These two narrative strands gradually converge. The nonlinear structure should not be understood straightforwardly as Kya's fragmented voice, since she is not the narrator. It may, however, be read as formally echoing Caruth's (1996) account of the belated return of traumatic experience: episodes from Kya's past repeatedly enter the murder narrative and help readers understand her fear, guardedness and eventual actions.

The novel's two parts also trace different stages of Kya's artistic development. Part One, "The Marsh", concentrates upon her childhood and adolescence, when she communicates primarily through observation and drawing. After Tate teaches her to read, her creative practice expands to include scientific writing, published illustration and poetry. Part Two, "The Swamp", follows her adult relationships, trial and eventual acceptance of her artistic vocation. Throughout both sections, lyrical descriptions of the marsh draw attention to colour,

sound, movement and natural patterns. Kya's drawings, field guides and poems provide further access to thoughts and emotions that she does not communicate openly to other people.

This structure allows the novel to combine several genres. Chase's death, the investigation and the trial establish its murder-mystery plot, while the account of Kya's development from childhood to adulthood draws upon the Bildungsroman. Her growth as a writer and illustrator places the novel more specifically within the tradition of the Künstlerinroman. Owens revises this form by making the marsh central to Kya's education, emotional survival and creative work. The interaction between artistic development and ecological attachment therefore supports this dissertation's reading of *Where the Crawdads Sing* as an eco-Künstlerinroman.

Author's Oeuvre

Delia Owens, born in 1949, is a zoologist, environmentalist and author from Georgia in the United States (Owens 2021a). She graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Zoology from the University of Georgia and a doctorate in Animal Behaviour from the University of California (Owens 2021a). Her mission for ecological advocacy extends beyond wildlife conservation into authoring books about the natural environment.

Owens's research in Africa has been published in several journals, including *Nature*, *Journal of Mammalogy*, *The African Journal of Ecology*, and *International Wildlife*. As previously mentioned, Owens co-authored three non-fiction books with her ex-husband, Mark Owens: *Cry of the Kalahari* (1984), *Eye of the Elephant* (1992), and *Secrets of the Savannah* (2006). These books combine memoir and nature writing to create eco-consciousness by bringing awareness to the connection between humans and the natural world. *Cry of the Kalahari* (1984) chronicles the Owenses' seven-year stay in the Kalahari Desert where they lived in tented camps amongst wild animals. *Eye of the Elephant* (1992) is about their time in a remote valley in Zambia, and *Secrets of the Savannah* (2006) specifically focuses on their conservation efforts and research on elephants at the Luangwa River in Zambia. Owens's debut novel is *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) and it is currently her only fictional book.

Owens has won the John Burroughs Award for Nature Writing, Golden Ark Award from Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, and the University of California Award for Excellence (Owens 2021d). The three memoirs which she co-authored with Mark Owens also received much praise (Owens 2021d). Given Owens's credentials as a nature writer, the wide appeal of *Where the Crawdads Sing* is striking. Alexander Alter describes the novel's success as "astonishing" for a seventy-year-old debut novelist whose previous publications were grounded in decades of zoological observation and nature writing in Botswana and Zambia (2019). Penguin Random House notes that the novel later sold more than 18 million copies worldwide and appeared in forty-nine international editions (Owens 2021d). Kraft attributes the novel's "immediate success", in part, to its selection as Reese Witherspoon's September 2018 book-club pick (Kraft 2021: 132), and its popular reach was extended further through the 2022 film adaptation of the same name, produced by Witherspoon, written by Lucy Alibar and directed by Olivia Newman (Newman 2022).

Owens's shift in genre and mode (from conservation memoir and nature writing to fiction) is particularly significant in light of her continuing concern with the preservation of threatened environments and wildlife. Fiction enables her to communicate these concerns through the use of characterisation, poetic and lyrical diction, as well as imaginative storytelling. Donna Haraway, a feminist scholar whose work examines relationships between humans, other species and the environment, uses the term "activated storytelling" to describe how fiction can encourage readers to think ethically about their responsibilities towards the living world (Haraway 2016:132). In *Where the Crawdads Sing*, this ecological storytelling is inseparable from Kya's development as an artist. Fiction allows Owens to describe the marsh in rich visual and sensory detail and to show how its colours, sounds, textures and rhythms affect Kya and find expression in her drawings and writing.

As a South African woman reading an American novel, I do not suggest that the North Carolina marsh and South African environments or social histories are equivalent or interchangeable. However, my own experience of being moved by South Africa's ecological diversity and natural beauty helps me recognise the importance of place in Kya's emotional and artistic development. It also makes the novel's emphasis on human dependence upon, and emotional attachment to, the natural world particularly meaningful to me.

Literature Review

Despite the novel's wide popular reach, literary scholarship on *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) remains relatively limited, particularly in established scholarly journals. Existing studies can be grouped into three overlapping areas. Marilyn Stasio (2018) and John Gruesser (2020) consider the novel's genre and narrative features, particularly its combination of the coming-of-age story and murder mystery. Corin Kraft (2021) and Ananthi M. and S. Vanitha (2022), examine the marsh, the relationship between humans and nature, and nature's protective and healing roles. Fionny I. Gustaman and Imelda S. Lolowang Lolowang (2022) and Audrey Eveline Subianto and Yohanes Kurniawan Winardi (2024) focus more closely on Kya's struggle, recovery and developing sense of identity. Across these studies, Kya's isolation, relationship with nature, artistic practices, recovery from trauma and eventual authorship repeatedly emerge as important aspects of the novel. However, these elements have not been considered together as part of her formation as a female artist.

Scholarship on the *Künstlerinroman* helps to explain this gap. Leslie Hankins, in 'Alas, Alack! or A Lass, a Lack? Quarrels of Gender and Genre in the Revisionist *Künstlerroman*' (1991), points out that female artists are not as easily recognised as male artists within the genre (391). Similarly, Evy Varsamopoulou (2019) argues that *Künstlerinromane* are often overlooked because they are categorised as autobiography or placed within overlapping genres (xii–xiv). These observations may help to explain why *Where the Crawdads Sing* has been discussed as a coming-of-age novel, murder mystery and ecological narrative, but not as a *Künstlerinroman*. I have found no sustained analysis that brings these approaches together by examining how Kya's relationship with nature shapes her artistic development and how her story both follows and revises established *Künstlerroman* conventions. I therefore read the novel more specifically as an eco-*Künstlerinroman*.

Stasio's description of *Where the Crawdads Sing* as 'a murder mystery, coming-of-age narrative, and a celebration of nature' provides a useful starting point for considering the existing scholarship. Studies of the novel have largely concentrated on its murder-mystery structure and ecological concerns. Gruesser examines the novel's narrative features as a murder mystery in 'The Crawdads Sing in Poe Country: Delia Owens's Bestseller and "The Gold-Bug"', while Kraft discusses the novel from an ecocritical perspective in 'An Ecocritical

Reading of the Marsh as a Liminal Space in Delia Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing*. My study focuses on the remaining strand identified by Stasio: the coming-of-age narrative. More specifically, I examine Kya's coming of age as the development of a female artist.

Gruesser's intertextual study compares Edgar Allan Poe's 1843 short story 'The Gold-Bug' with Owens's *Where the Crawdads Sing*, tracing similarities and differences between their characters, settings and plots. He also identifies common symbols and images that foreground both narratives' artistic engagement with the natural world. In particular, he observes two important parallels: the deep isolation of both protagonists and their turn to the artistic study of nature:

Deserted by her battered mother, abandoned by her imperilled siblings, and, finally, left on her own by her abusive father, Kya Clark somehow manages to support herself in a remote dwelling devoid of modern amenities. Like Legrand, she spends much of her time studying, writing about, and painting the natural world around her, and, as with him, people question her sanity. (Gruesser 2020:112)

This description not only highlights Kya's isolation but also shows how she channels her solitude into the sustained observation, study, painting and writing of the natural world. These activities place her on the developmental path associated with the *Künstlerinroman*. I therefore take Gruesser's comparison as a point of departure, but focus more specifically on how Kya's artistic practices shape her development and eventual vocation as an artist.

For Kraft, the setting of the novel — the marsh — is the central concern of her ecocritical analysis. She describes the marsh as a liminal space: physically, it lies between land and water, while symbolically it represents boundaries between humans and nonhumans, safety and risk, fiction and reality, and the individual and the community (138–142). Kraft highlights the ambiguity of the marsh as both a place of exclusion for marginalised people and a source of protection and provision for them (137). She is also interested in Kya's efforts to conserve the Southern wetlands through her research and published books on the North Carolina marsh (145). Kraft's primary focus is on the novel's ecological activism, whereas my study considers how the marsh also becomes the source and subject of Kya's art. I build on Kraft's argument by examining nature not only as something Kya studies and protects, but also as the catalyst for her artistic development.

More recent studies published between 2022 and 2024 develop concerns already evident in Gruesser's and Kraft's work. They return to Kya's isolation, her dependence upon the natural world and her movement towards a more secure sense of self, but approach these subjects through personal struggle, ecopsychology and social identity rather than through genre. In 'Struggle as Seen in Owens' *Where the Crawdads Sing*', Gustaman and Lolowang examine Kya's success in overcoming the difficulties and trauma of her life. They identify three main forms of struggle: 'difficulty accepting the facts of life, achieving goals, and getting affection' (163). They conclude that Kya learns to face the reality of being abandoned (169–170), achieves her goals of learning to read and publishing her books (170), and eventually learns to trust Tate again after he initially breaks her trust (170). Their study presents Kya as a determined survivor who uses her limited resources to achieve her goals. Although they acknowledge her published books as evidence of her success, they do not examine her authorship as the outcome of a longer process of artistic development. My study builds on their discussion of Kya's resilience by relating her survival and recovery more directly to her development as an artist.

In 'The Amalgamation of Human and Natural World: A Study of Delia Owens' Novel *Where the Crawdads Sing*', Ananthi and Vanitha examine the healing power of nature in Kya's recovery from an ecopsychological perspective. They state that Kya 'finds comfort in Mother Nature' (55) and that the 'marshland is her only protector that watches like a guardian-angel to safeguard her innocent life from hazards and evildoers' (59). Their argument draws attention to the connection between humans and the natural world by emphasising that Kya lives in harmony with nature (59). They also note that Kya's brother, Jodie, first advises her to take refuge in the marsh when she experiences trouble with their father or with other people who threaten her. Their discussion therefore reinforces the close bond between Kya's family and the natural world. More importantly, they describe nature as Kya's 'redeemer', arguing that her relationship with the natural world eases her mental turmoil and enables her to continue despite the uncertainty of her life (60). This supports my argument that nature not only inspires Kya's art, but that the creative process also offers her relief during times of distress. Ananthi and Vanitha examine nature's healing role, but do not connect this healing process fully to Kya's artistic development.

The connection between nature, identity and self-acceptance also appears in Subianto and Winardi's 'Exploring Social Identity Transformation: A Journey through Delia Owens' *Where*

the Crawdads Sing'. They examine the roles of nature and society in shaping Kya's identity. They argue that Kya's complex relationships with other people and her struggle for acceptance within the Barkley Cove community result in identity conflict and eventual self-discovery (22–24). They write that, 'Through her encounters, Kya realises that accepting and embodying one's authentic self while challenging societal conventions are fundamental to attaining pleasure' (26). Their discussion supports my argument that Kya uses her creative work to express her feelings about her relationships with the people of Barkley Cove and to establish a sense of self that is not determined by the community's judgement. However, their social-identity approach does not examine how this process of self-discovery is connected to Kya's artistic vocation.

Taken together, these studies provide valuable accounts of the novel's narrative form, ecological setting, representation of trauma and treatment of identity. They also identify many of the elements on which my study builds. Gruesser notices Kya's observation, painting and writing of the natural world, but notably does not consider these activities as stages in the development of an artist. Kraft examines the ecological importance of the marsh and Kya's conservation work, but does not ask how the marsh becomes the subject and source of her art. Ananthi and Vanitha consider nature's healing role, while Gustaman and Lolowang and Subianto and Winardi examine Kya's survival and developing identity. However, these studies also do not connect Kya's recovery and self-discovery to her artistic vocation.

Whereas previous studies treat these aspects of the novel separately, my study brings them together through the lens of genre, specifically the revisionist *Künstlerinroman*. I argue that Kya's relationship with nature, her recovery from trauma, her resistance to restrictive ideas about women and her development as a writer and illustrator are interconnected parts of her formation as an artist. By combining the revisionist *Künstlerinroman* with ecocritical and ecofeminist approaches, I show how *Where the Crawdads Sing* adapts the traditional artist's novel by making the natural world Kya's teacher, the subject of her work and a source of both healing and artistic inspiration. This combination allows me to read the novel as an eco-*Künstlerinroman* and constitutes the study's original contribution.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The primary framework guiding this dissertation is genre theory, specifically the Künstlerroman, through which *Where the Crawdads Sing* is read as a narrative of artistic growth. This generic framework is then extended through ecofeminist theory and trauma studies in order to account for the novel's ecological, gendered, and psychological dimensions. Methodologically, this dissertation employs textual analysis. Following Catherine Belsey (1980), it approaches reading as a close engagement with the text itself while also recognising that meaning emerges through a dynamic interplay between textual detail, theoretical framing, intertextual reference, and socio-cultural context.

Originating in early German Romanticism, the Künstlerroman has developed as a subgenre of the Bildungsroman that is concerned primarily with the story of the growth and formation of an artist (Abrams and Harpham 2012:255). The term is derived from two German words: *Kunst* meaning "art" and *Roman* meaning "novel." Early examples of the genre include Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1989 [1795]) and Ludwig Tieck's *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen* (2012 [1798]). Goethe's novel centres around the life of a thespian while Tieck's novel is about a painter. In the English language, James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (2015 [1916]) is often cited as the earliest known Künstlerroman. As scholarship on the genre developed, however, critics increasingly recognised that the traditional form had been shaped by assumptions about the artist as implicitly male. Gender-conscious frameworks therefore emerged to account for narratives of female artistic development under patriarchal conditions, where women's creative aspirations were frequently constrained by social expectation, limited vocational opportunity, and unequal access to artistic self-realisation (Huf 1985, Hankins 1991). Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1857 [1856]) is widely regarded as an early and important example of this revised tradition. It is worth noting that in German, *Künstler* denotes the masculine form of "artist," while *Künstlerin* marks the feminine. Yet the very need to specify a female version of the artist novel points to the historically masculine coding of the Künstlerroman, much as the Bildungsroman often assumes a male subject as its norm. For this reason, and following Linda Huf (1985) and Kathleen Hankins (1991), this dissertation uses the term *Künstlerinroman*. This German convention allows for more concise phrasing (eco-Künstlerinroman) rather than the cumbersome *female* eco-Künstlerroman. However, I

wish to qualify that my usage does not aim to revive an outdated diminutive distinction such as “poetess.”

Given the novel’s thematic complexity, this dissertation utilises a multi-faceted theoretical approach. For the primary Künstlerroman framework, I rely on Jerome Buckley’s (1974) outline of a traditional Künstlerroman. Buckley’s criteria are informative; however, his model neglects to include insight into the narrative conventions of female artists’ novels. To gain perspective on female Künstlerromane, I have turned to the frameworks of Huf (1985) and Hankins (1991). Additionally, I make reference to Varsamopoulou’s (2019) discourse on the aesthetics of the sublime to deepen understanding of the female artist. Though my focus remains upon the Künstlerroman through an ecofeminist lens, I have also included analysis pertaining to psychoanalysis by Bracha Ettinger (2006a) and trauma by Cathy Caruth (1991). Each of the abovementioned theorists are discussed in my Theoretical and Conceptual Framework to provide an understanding of how their theories have informed the analytical chapters of my dissertation.

Building on Buckley’s Bildungsroman Framework

Although Buckley’s *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (1974) is primarily a study of the Bildungsroman rather than a focused theorisation of the Künstlerroman, it remains a valuable point of departure for this dissertation as he outlines key features of the plot and protagonist’s narrative arc that are equally applicable: a rural upbringing with social and intellectual constraints placed on the “free imagination”, a father who is antagonistic towards the protagonist’s “artistic instincts”, inadequate schooling resulting in the possible relocation to urban areas where apprenticeship takes place, two love affairs (one exalting and one debasing) which results in soul-searching followed by a possible return home to demonstrate their success or wisdom (17-18). Notably, Buckley’s outline implicitly gestures toward the artist’s journey, particularly the emphasis placed on imagination, creativity, and the struggle for self-realisation. His model also lays the groundwork for an ecocritical reading, since it places central importance on the protagonist’s early development in the countryside. In Owens’s novel, that formative environment is the marsh: a place of nurturance, apprenticeship, and imaginative awakening to which Kya repeatedly returns, both physically and psychologically, during her development.

Revising the Künstlerroman: Huf, Hankins and Varsamopoulou

While Owens's novel broadly follows the developmental arc outlined by Buckley (1974), making his model a useful primary scaffold for my analysis, his account remains notably androcentric. It cannot account for what changes when the artist-protagonist is female. For that, later feminist scholarship on the Künstlerinroman is crucial. Together, Linda Huf (1985), Kathleen Hankins (1991) and Evy Varsamopoulou (2019), broaden the discussion beyond plot alone, drawing attention to how women artists struggle against patriarchal gendered expectations to voice, mentorship, maternal absence, vocation, and the aesthetic force of the sublime.

In her foundational text, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman*, Linda Huf (1985) declares that "the woman artist is a missing character in fiction" as women artists rarely celebrate their struggle to become artists (2). Therefore, Huf (1985) identifies recurrent features of the female artist's novel through an analysis of selected nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts. In doing so, she explains that artist heroines have "different traits and troubles than artist heroes" (4). While artist heroes are portrayed as "passive, sensitive, and shy (that is, to have conventionally "feminine" traits), the artist heroine tends to be stalwart, spirited, and fearless (or, to have traditionally "masculine" attributes) (4). Artist heroines are often represented in these texts as "athletic in build, skilled in sports, unshrinking in fights, able in mathematics, plucky in love, and daring in their sexual adventures" (4). This formulation clearly depends on an inverted gender essentialism, since it retains a binary opposition between masculine and feminine traits. Read historically, this inversion is nevertheless revealing: it shows how female artistic subjectivity has often been imagined through a rejection of conventional femininity, so that the woman artist appears as a troublemaker, rebel, or socially disruptive figure. Due to the pressures of being wife and mother, the female artist struggles with conflict between "life and art" as she tries to balance the roles of homemaker and artist (5):

The creative heroine's conflict between woman and artist partly grows out of the practical impossibility of being both selfless helpmeet and committed craftsman. In trying to be both caterer and creator she divides her time between meeting two competing sets of demands: those of others and those of work. (6)

These demands on her lead to feelings of "fear, self-doubt, and guilt" as she is forced to sacrifice family or compromise her artistic pursuits (11). The artist heroine thus sees herself

as a monster. To place her in a more objective light, these narratives often pit her against a foil. The foil's purpose is to make the female artist look heroic, by comparison to the foil (7). Moreover, artist heroines "do not create male muses as their male counterparts create female muses — they do not idealize men, as men idealize women" (9). By the end of Huf's analyses, she signals towards the evolving landscape of the *Künstlerinroman* whereby female artists often dream of escaping their families to relieve themselves of the pressures facing female artists (148). This trope recalls Virginia Woolf's words about "killing the angel in the house" which refers to female artists having to resist the internalised ideal of feminine self-sacrifice, domestic service, and pleasing obedience in order to claim creative freedom (1966 [1931]). Huf also identifies a recurring trope of motherless female artists — these protagonists have to mentor or mother themselves (153).

Thus, based on Huf's (1985) analyses of works by a few select female writers — Fanny Fern (1986), Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (1877), Kate Chopin (1899), Willa Cather (1915), Carson McCullers (1940), and Sylvia Plath (1963) — it becomes apparent that the female writer's voice is shaped by her early life experiences, education, mentors, and the cultural expectations placed on her. In the context of *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018), I examine how Kya's experiences of abuse and trauma shape her artistic voice, as mediated through the novel's third-person narration, which is largely focalised through her perspective, and through her written poetry, which offers more direct access to her self-expression. The imagery in Kya's poetry is of particular interest as it aligns with Huf's summation of common imagery used in the *Künstlerinroman*: monsters, entrapment, flight and failed flight (12). Additionally, I examine Ma and Tate's influential roles as artistic mentors, who pay attention to Kya's inner world and encourage her to find her voice. Furthermore, the cultural expectations placed on Kya by her community indirectly shape her artistic voice: the community tries to silence Kya as a woman and "white trash", but she defies their attempts at suppression and instead speaks her mind through her art.

Chase's purpose as the foil in the novel forms an important part of my analysis as he, by contrast, reveals Kya's traits, values, and flaws, as well as her struggles as a female artist. I examine Kya's choice to liberate herself from cultural expectations regarding marriage and community involvement. However, in analysing these aspects, I turn towards Hankins who offers more insight into the motherless daughter and gendered struggles. In proposing the eco-*Künstlerinroman* as a useful critical category, I examine how nature functions as Kya's

artistic muse. For elaboration on nature's role in the narrative, I include Varsamopoulou's (2019) discourse on the aesthetics of the sublime, which is discussed later in this section. Huf's framework thus also provides a rationale for my use of trauma theory, ecofeminism, and psychoanalytic thought.

Philippa Garrard's 2009 creative-writing doctoral thesis is one of the relatively few sustained studies to develop Huf's account of the female artist's novel. That Garrard's contribution has remains an unpublished thesis, rather than published monograph or article is consistent with Huf's and Hankins's observation that the female artist's novel continues to receive limited critical attention. Garrard challenges the idea that there can be one archetypal artist or artist story, arguing that female artist narratives draw upon established conventions while also resisting and revising them. Her argument provides a precedent for my own positing of a hybrid form, even though she does not explore ecological aspects herself.

Huf's (1985) account of the female artist provides useful critical vocabulary for analysing the formation and expression of Kya's artistic voice. Hankins (1991) serves a different purpose by explicitly revising the conventions of the *Künstlerroman* to account for the gendered conditions shaping women's artistic development. In her essay, 'Alas, Alack! or A Lass, a Lack? Quarrels of Gender and Genre in the Revisionist "Künstlerroman": Eudora Welty's "The Golden Apples"', Hankins (1991) points out that the genre has "excluded not only women artists but also traditionally women's arts and other collective arts" (392-393). Her "revised *Künstlerroman*" identifies narrative conventions of a more distinctly *female* artistic development: the protagonist's artistic goal, the social obstacles she encounters, moments of crisis, and an ending in which artistic vocation must be negotiated against domestic expectation and the patriarchal pressures that seek to constrain women's creative self-realisation. These concerns are especially relevant to Kya, whose artistic formation is forged through a struggle against class prejudice, gendered vulnerability, and maternal absence. Furthermore, Hankins highlights two phenomena that are pertinent to Kya: first, the "maternal nexus", which underscores the centrality of the mother-daughter relationship, and its rupture, especially in relation to the motherless daughter whose development is marked by the absence of a sustaining maternal bond; second, the female artist as a boundary figure who exists on the threshold between art and life (395, 397). Both concepts are central to my reading of Kya's character development, as her artistic formation is conditioned by maternal

absence and by the way her lived experience is repeatedly transformed into artistic expression.

While Hankins brings to the fore the role of maternal absence, Evy Varsamopoulou's *The Poetics of the Künstlerinroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime* (2019) elucidates Kya's fascination with the marsh as her muse and means of escape from reality. Varsamopoulou's (2019) work draws on the Romantic aesthetics of the sublime, a concept associated with encounters of overwhelming beauty, vastness, mystery, or terror that exceed rational understanding and draw the subject beyond the ordinary self. Varsamopoulou (2019) traces the early German Romantic roots of the *Künstlerinroman* and emphasises the female protagonist's resistance to social conformity, arguing that the female artist seeks forms of experience beyond the limits of ordinary social life and finds in art a space of devotion, transcendence, and critique:

In a nutshell, we have the artist as an individual who resists being socialized as a 'useful' or 'productive' socio-economic contributor who merely 'fits into' [her] community; [she] seeks another world and finds it, not in religion, but in art, which [she] pursues with religious devotion. Hence the attraction to what is otherworldly: fairies, magic, infinity, spirituality, the sublime. In this 'otherworldly place' (of art) within the world, the *Künstlerroman* stages its social critique. (xii)

Varsamopoulou (2019) further argues that the metaliterary language used in *Künstlerinromane* "exemplifies a relation to subjectivity, eros and death" in terms of the sublime (xv, xxiv). She also discusses the importance of the sublime for resolving trauma as it relates to Freud's (1974) theories on repetition compulsion and the sublime in his essay on the "Uncanny". Kya's continual return to the sublime is a repetitive behaviour which counters the repeating return of her traumatic memories. As she engages with the sublime in her artwork, her discomfort is eased.

The feminist genre theories of Huf and Varsamopoulou provide a framework for understanding the difficulties Kya faces as a woman artist, and how art, through the sublime, offers release from societal constraints. Owens's novel, however, also requires an ecological framework, since Kya's survival and artistic formation are inseparable from the marsh. Ecofeminism therefore allows this study to read nature as an active force in Kya's healing, aesthetic education, and emergence as a nature artist.

Healing Trauma: Nature's Nurture and Narrative Memory

Ecofeminism illuminates how nature empowers Kya towards healing. Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974) is credited with being the founder of ecofeminism; however, the field has since been developed by many scholars. Greta Gaard and Patrick Murphy's anthology, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, Pedagogy* (1998), provides wide-ranging research on the topic. According to Gaard and Murphy (1998), "ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggles of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities" (2) and "these struggles are waged against the maldevelopment and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations, and global capitalism" (2). The movement aims for "environmental balance, heterarchical and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous cultures, and economic values and programs based on subsistence and sustainability" (2). This study employs ecofeminist principles of the interconnectedness of nature and human life, the linked oppression of women and nature, and the reclamation of the body to illuminate Kya's circumstances as a poverty-stricken woman living under patriarchal violence. I draw on William Rueckert's (in Glotfelty and Fromm 1996) ecological theory of poetry, especially his account of the poem as a form of stored energy, to analyse the role of poetry in Kya's life. Rueckert's work helps explain how Kya's poems preserve and transmit emotional, traumatic, and ecological experience, allowing poetry to function as a source of memory, healing, and renewed relation to the marsh.

To understand how Kya's art serves to mediate trauma and healing, I draw on Bracha Ettinger's psychoanalytical theory of the "matrixial borderspace" as articulated in 'Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze: From Phantasm to Trauma, from Phallic Structure to Matrixial Sphere' (2001), 'Matrixial Trans-subjectivity' (2006b) and *Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma* (2016). Ettinger's matrixial theory is modelled on the prenatal relationship between a mother and her unborn child in the womb. Mother and child are connected bodily and affectively, while still remaining distinct. Ettinger then uses this as a model for thinking about subjectivity more broadly. She extends this relation beyond literal pregnancy, using the womb as a conceptual model for a "matrixial borderspace" (2001:103): a psychic space in which self and other encounter one another, and are connected through shared, permeable borders while still remaining distinct. This relational field may also be

understood as a maternal nexus, since it describes a web of connection, where selfhood is formed through contact, dependency, separation, and shared affect. Ettinger thus imagines subjectivity as shared, relational rather than based on separation, mastery, or opposition.

Her concept of “matrixial trans-subjectivity” describes how memory and feelings transfer between self and other across porous subject boundaries, while her formulation of the “m/Other” foregrounds the maternal other as a figure through whom connection, difference, and shared psychic experience can be understood (2001: 103—104; 2016: 285). The “matrixial gaze” names this mode of encounter: a way of seeing or witnessing in which the subject is opened to the traces of another’s trauma without fully possessing or mastering it (2001:89-90). Ettinger’s theory lends itself to analysing the effect/affect of art — how meaning emerges through the encounter between artist, artwork, and viewer, a process Ettinger describes as “co-emergence” or “copoiesis” (2006b: 220). Ettinger identifies three witnesses to the trauma in the artwork: the subject (the creator/artist), the objects (those who engage with the art), and the second-generation witnesses (who inherit trauma through their predecessors). As the creator and the viewers share subjectivity during their interpretations of the trauma in the artwork, the meaning emerges relationally between them. By utilising the matrixial theory to analyse *Where the Crawdads Sing*, I argue that Kya’s art operates as a matrixial space that connects her with her mother, and with Mother Nature, thereby enabling her processes of survival and healing.

Cathy Caruth’s literary trauma theory further illuminates Kya’s challenges both on a personal level and as an artist. Kya experiences several traumas in childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1991:181). In her groundbreaking book, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and Memory* (1996), she argues that the suffering of trauma does not stem directly from the event itself, but from survival in its aftermath. She terms this the “belatedness” of trauma (92), in which repressed memories resurface through flashbacks and nightmares, producing ongoing pain. Building on this definition, she contends that trauma narratives embody and give form to this belated experience. She explains that a survivor’s fragmented voice in the narrative links back to parts of their memory as a way to release trauma. In her later work, ‘Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival’ (2001), Caruth writes about the “language of memory” (15) or “the

language of the life drive” (18), by which she means that as survivors take charge of their own story, they regain control over the narrative and, in doing so, reclaim agency. By acquiring power over the narrative, the survivor also gains power over their emotions and choices. Owens’s postmodern, non-linear narrative structure, together with the recurring crises that shape Kya’s life resonates with key features of Caruth’s theory. More specifically, her work helps illuminate the belated return of trauma, the fragmentation of narrative and memory, the repetition of trauma caused by repressed memories that occur in dreams and flashbacks, as well as the limits of language in articulating experience. In Kya’s case, healing is found through nature and artistic expression.

Postcolonial scholars criticise Caruth for presenting a largely Western understanding of trauma and for paying too little attention to how experiences of trauma are shaped by colonialism, race, poverty, gender and culture (Visser 2015). Although Caruth’s theory helps explain Kya’s recurring memories of abandonment and violence, it does not fully account for the continuing effects of poverty, social exclusion, neglect and gender-based violence on her life. Nevertheless, Caruth remains useful for analysing how Kya is unable to understand her traumatic experiences fully when they occur and how they return later through memory, fear and repeated feelings of abandonment.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, hermeneutic approach and uses close textual analysis as its primary method. Hermeneutics refers here to the interpretation of texts: examining how meaning is created through language, form, genre and socio-cultural context. Catherine Belsey maintains that “textual analysis is indispensable to research in cultural criticism” and adds that, in close reading, “the text sets the agenda” (2013: 160, 167). Following Belsey, my analysis begins with the details of Owens’s novel and develops interpretations from patterns within the text, rather than imposing a conclusion upon it in advance. The analysis is qualitative because it offers a reasoned interpretation supported by evidence from the primary text and relevant literary scholarship.

I examine the language, imagery, narrative structure, characterisation and recurring symbols in *Where the Crawdads Sing*, paying particular attention to passages that trace Kya’s development as an artist. These include descriptions of her relationship with the marsh, her

observation and illustration of plants and animals, her experiences of trauma and social exclusion, her relationships with mentors, and her progression from a self-taught naturalist to a published writer and illustrator. These passages are considered in relation to one another so that Kya's artistic development can be traced across the novel rather than treated as a series of isolated events.

Drawing on key genre scholarship, I use critics' accounts of the recurring conventions of the Bildungsroman, Künstlerroman and Künstlerinroman as a framework for my analysis. Genre provides a set of working features against which the novel can be examined. Drawing on Buckley's account of the Bildungsroman and the feminist revisions of the Künstlerroman developed by Huf, Hankins and Varsamopoulou, I consider features such as childhood isolation, conflict with family and society, education and mentorship, artistic awakening, resistance to restrictive gender roles, and the eventual acceptance of an artistic vocation. I examine the extent to which Kya's story follows these established patterns, where it departs from them, and how it reshapes them by making the natural world central to her education and art. Genre is therefore not simply used to classify the novel. It provides a way of showing how *Where the Crawdads Sing* revises the traditional artist's novel and develops what I describe as the eco-Künstlerinroman.

The genre-based reading is supported by ecocritical, ecofeminist and trauma-informed perspectives. Ecocriticism helps me examine the marsh as more than a setting, focusing on how it becomes Kya's teacher, refuge and artistic subject. Ecofeminism draws attention to the connections between Kya's treatment as a poor and socially marginalised woman and the exploitation or dismissal of the natural environment. Trauma theory assists in examining how abandonment, domestic violence and social exclusion affect Kya's development and how her art provides a way of expressing and working through these experiences. These perspectives deepen the genre analysis, but the Künstlerinroman remains the main framework through which Kya's development is traced.

To add further depth to the analysis, the primary text is also examined within its socio-cultural context. In *Reading and Critical Practice*, Catherine Belsey (2003) explains the importance of reading literature alongside other cultural forms and of recognising that a text can produce more than one meaning. She stresses that meaning is created not by the author, text or reader alone, but through the exchange between the reader and the text. Belsey writes:

Reading itself plays a part in the construction of meaning [...]. Reading is thus a transaction, a relationship between a practice of interpretation and a text, in which neither the intention of the author nor the design of the reader can be seen as determining [...]. It follows that meaning is not a dead thing, interred in the text at the moment of its composition, but generated by this transaction in the reading process itself. (2003:25)

Because meaning is produced through this reading process, Belsey supports the use of different theoretical perspectives when interpreting literature. She reminds us that texts are shaped by cultural and linguistic systems and should not be examined in isolation. Her statement that “all texts offer their readers a place to read from” (2003:28) suggests that a text positions its readers and guides how they understand its characters, values and conflicts. Following Belsey, I do not treat the author’s intention as the final explanation of the novel. Instead, I examine how its language, narrative form, genre conventions and cultural context contribute to the meanings produced through reading.

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992) provides a further way of examining how trauma is represented through narrative. Their work on testimony and witnessing is useful in considering how Kya’s experiences of abandonment, domestic violence and social exclusion are communicated through memory, silence, storytelling and art. I do not approach Kya as a clinical case. Rather, I examine how the novel represents the effects of trauma and how Kya’s creative work allows her to express experiences that she cannot communicate openly to the people around her.

Kya’s experiences are also read in relation to the fictional social world of Barkley Cove and the broader conditions of the American South during the 1950s and 1960s. The community’s class prejudice, racism and restrictive ideas about women shape Kya’s exclusion and influence her decisions and actions. Attention to this context helps to explain how poverty, gender and social marginalisation affect her development as both an individual and an artist. The methodology therefore combines close textual analysis, genre theory and relevant contextual perspectives to examine how Kya’s relationship with nature, her experiences of trauma and her artistic development come together in the novel’s revision of the *Künstlerinroman*.

Structure of the Dissertation

Having introduced the novel, outlined the study's central aims, reviewed the existing scholarship, and established the theoretical and conceptual framework, I now provide an outline of the dissertation's structure.

The close readings of *Where the Crawdads Sing* are organised into three chapters that follow Kya's development from childhood vulnerability to artistic maturity. Chapter One, titled 'Artistic Interest and Mentorship in the Formative Years', describes Kya's early encounters with the creative arts through her mother, her non-conventional schooling methods, and the childhood traumas that drove her to take refuge in nature and the arts. Chapter Two, titled 'Artistic Development during Adolescence and Young Adulthood', focuses on Kya's two romantic relationships and how these relationships influence her development as an artist and the content of her artworks as well as her initial successes with publishing her illustrations and creating financial independence. Chapter Three, titled 'Embracing an Artistic Vocation upon Maturity', discusses Kya's legacy as a famous artist, offers a comparison between Kya and Lily Briscoe from *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf 1936), highlights art's importance for the creative-minded characters in the narrative, and explains the significance of Kya's poetry. The dissertation concludes by reflecting on the significance of reading the novel as an eco-Künstlerinroman, followed by an appendix containing Kya's poetry and a reference list of the sources cited in the study.

Chapter One: Artistic Interest and Mentorship in the Formative Years

Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that Kya's development as an artist is shaped by her early childhood experiences with adversity. Utilising Buckley's (1974) criteria, I review Kya's relationship with her abusive father and her restrictive schooling environment. To extend Buckley's framework, I refer to the narrative frameworks of Huf (1985), Hankins (1991), and Varsamopoulou (2019) who provide insight into female artist narratives. Based on Huf's (1985) features, I highlight Ma's and Tate's roles as mentors who influenced Kya as an artist. Also, based on Huf's (1985) framework, I examine the cultural expectations placed on Kya as a girl-child and the social obstacles faced by her in a patriarchal society. With reference to Hankins' (1991) criteria on the female *Künstlerroman* and Ettinger's (2006a) theory on the matrixial borderspace, I analyse Kya's moments of crisis and her experience as a motherless daughter. Lastly, based on Varsamopoulou's (2019) literature on the aesthetics of the sublime, I argue that Kya's early development as an artist is driven by her desire to seek the otherworldly in nature as a coping mechanism that provides her an escape from childhood trauma. I begin this chapter by exploring Kya's family dynamic, her place in society, and her relationship with nature. Thereafter, I look specifically at her education and friendship with Tate Walker.

Ma's Affinity for the Arts and Her Abandonment of the Family

Kya's mother Julianne Maria Clark, who Kya calls Ma, tries her best to create a stable and healthy upbringing for her children despite the chaos caused by her abusive husband. She spends time nurturing her children, cooking and cleaning for them, while also doing her best to provide emotional support and life advice in their volatile home. In her efforts to bring joy into their lives in the marsh, Ma paints watercolours, reads poetry, and sings and dances around the home with her children. Kya paints watercolours on brown paper bags with her mother. It is Ma who first brings out Kya's inner artist by introducing her to song, dance, painting, and poetry. Ma also encourages her children to explore the surrounding marsh without fear. Despite the violence at home, she refuses to let her children grow up in fear. She advises them to "go as far as you can — way out yonder where the crowdads sing"

(Owens 2018:59). Ma and Kya share a tight bond as Kya is the youngest of five siblings. Amongst all her siblings, Kya is the closest to her brother Jodie. Jodie takes Kya out on adventures in the family boat and as an older brother he is protective of her. Ma is Kya's primary caregiver up until the day (in 1952) when she walks out on the family without saying a word. The following passage encapsulates the home environment but Ma's departure:

Most dawns, smiling wide, Ma hugged her - "Good morning, my special girl" — and the two of them moved about the chores, dancelike. Sometimes Ma sang folk songs or quoted nursery rhymes: "This little piggy went to market." Or she'd swing Kya into a jitterbug, their feet banging the plywood floor until the music of the battery-operated radio died, sounding as if it were singing to itself at the bottom of a barrel. Other mornings Ma spoke about adult things Kya didn't understand, but she figured Ma's words needed somewhere to go, so she absorbed them through her skin, as she poked more wood in the cookstove. Nodding like she knew. Then, the hustle of getting everybody up and fed. Pa not there. He had two settings: silence and shouting. So it was just fine when he slept through or didn't come home at all. (Owens 2018:13)

This passage describes Kya's special relationship with her mother. Warmth and affection are implied by the words "smiling" and "hugged". Through nursery rhymes, folk songs, and swing dancing, Ma exposes Kya to their local culture. Their fun moments together double as educational lessons. Though living in the wild, far removed from almost all contact with city-life and institutional "culture", Ma brings education to Kya in an informal way. These oral and embodied practices are educational in the way that they transmit language, rhythm, stories, and ways of feeling, long before Kya can name them as "art". Ma and Kya sing and dance together until the radio batteries die; this stresses how these moments of warmth and levity are precarious and easily stifled by Pa. The word "barrel" brings images of a beer barrel and gun barrel to mind — both images representing Pa's alcoholism and violence. Ma spoke to Kya about "adult things" though Kya did not understand. By verbalising her thoughts, Ma processes her feelings about all that she is experiencing. It is her way of unburdening herself of life's troubles. Kya becomes a silent witness to Ma's distress, absorbing her mother's words and feelings through the body rather than through conscious understanding.

Ma's abandonment devastates Kya as a child, and Kya never stops yearning for her mother's return. For most of her life, she cannot understand why her mother would leave her. Kya's early life as a motherless daughter results in yearning, loneliness, and the need for external validation. Hankins (1991) writes about the way that Virgie, in Eudora Welty's *The Golden*

Apple (1949), is “defined by the presence of absence” after losing her virginity during rape (401) — she is “defined by her lack, her losses, and her silence” (398). For Kya, losing her mother leaves her without an artistic “mentor of her own sex” and according to Huf (1985), she “must become her own model or mother” (Huf 1991: 153). Kya, however, fills the void of mother with nature and art as these are areas in which her mother mentored her. According to Ettinger’s concept of the maternal nexus — which proposes that identity is trans-subjective and initially forms in a shared relation with the m/Other prior to birth — subjectivity remains shaped by traces of this formative relationality. Losing her mother at a young age, Kya longs to restore her mother’s presence by emulating aspects of her identity; for Kya, this becomes a symbolic way of keeping her mother “with” her. Kya’s identity as an artist thus forms through a subconscious mirroring of her mother’s interests in nature and the arts. Within Ettinger’s matrixial borderspace (a relational, trans-subjective zone of encounter), Kya and her mother continue to “meet” through the art Kya produces, as her mother’s memory and influence are carried forward in her representations of the natural world. Ma’s influence on Kya and Kya’s memories of her mother manifest in Kya’s art about nature, as both nature and art were important to Ma. To escape the reality of being without Ma, Kya creates another world through her art where she and her mother can be together in a psychic space.

This otherworldly experience provides Kya with relief from her agony as a motherless daughter, and nature steps in to soothe the lonely daughter. Nature begins to take on its own identity and is personified as a living being that comforts her. I posit that this depiction of nature in the novel invokes the mythic and transhistorical trope of nature as the original maternal figure, evident in the term Mother Nature. Although ecofeminist scholarship cautions against the essentialist feminisation of nature, which can naturalise gender roles and reduce women to their biological destiny, Owens nonetheless deploys this archetypal figure in an affirmative way, as a source of empowerment. This early suggestion of the marsh as a nurturing presence anticipates my later section, “The Marsh as Mother,” where this symbolism is explored in detail. As Kya retreats from the human world and turns increasingly to the natural world, her fascination with it takes on a life of its own. The marsh functions in the novel as a manifestation of the sublime: a landscape that is at once alluring and overwhelming, inspiring awe through its vastness, strangeness, and indifferent power. This sublimity adds aesthetic value to Kya’s artwork by shaping not only what she depicts, but how she sees. According to James Shelley (Gaut and Lopes 2013), the term aesthetic originates from the eighteenth century and has come to “apply to a variety of items, including

judgments, attitudes, experiences, qualities, objects and values” (246). Consequently, what defines art, or being named an artist, is not only determined by a material output or artefact but also by a unique way of perceiving and inhabiting the world. Kya’s intimate knowledge of the marsh therefore transfers onto paper in drawings and words (“objects” of art), yet her artistry is equally evident in her aesthetic orientation towards the world around her: her values, judgements, and modes of attention through which she engages with nature. Her creative identity is thus shaped as much by perception and lived experience as by tangible artistic output.

Read in this way, Owens’s novel aligns with the female *Künstlerroman*, where the protagonist’s artistic development is often measured through relational and experiential forms of creativity rather than solely through institutional or economic validation. Kya’s special understanding of nature transfers onto paper in drawings and words, and it is this unique perspective that distinguishes her artwork from others, as it relates to her personal experiences, judgements and values, as a female living alone in full immersion with nature, while not having any economic support from government or familial support from community.

Pa’s Alcoholism, Antagonism, and Abuse

Kya’s father Jackson Henry Clark, who she calls Pa, is a war veteran who fought against Germany in World War II. After returning home from war, he is partially disabled and unable to financially provide for his family. Although his family had once been financially secure, their wealth was lost during the Great Depression (Owens 2018:34). He now relies upon his veteran’s grant as a source of income. Pa is also an alcoholic who gambles and violently abuses his family. Kya’s father does not directly limit her creativity by telling her to stop, but at the same time, he does not encourage it as he is a negligent parent. Only once did he show an interest in Kya’s hobbies when he gave her his old army knapsack to collect her shells and feathers:

As Kya washed up after, Pa walked into the kitchen, carrying his old World War II—issue knapsack. Standing near the door, he flung it roughly onto one of the chairs. It slid to the floor with a thud, which made her jump and whirl around.

“Thought ya could use that fer yo’ feathers, bird nests, and all that other stuff ya c’lect.”

“Oh,” Kya said. “Oh, thank ya.” But he was already out the porch door. She picked up the frayed knapsack, made of canvas tough enough for a lifetime and covered in small pockets and secret compartments. Heavy-duty zips. She stared out the window. He had never given her anything. (Owens 2018:33)

Though this was the only time that Pa showed recognition of Kya’s collection, in the context of their evolving relationship, this incident is significant. In the days leading up to giving Kya the bag, a tentative closeness develops between them. While Pa does not demonstrate overt acts of affection or suddenly become warm and endearing (the household is still tense, and she is still afraid of him) a significant shift is taking place. By giving her the bag to collect her stuff, he is showing, in his own way, that he is supporting what she does. Though he does not understand its significance, and merely refers to it as “stuff”, he recognises that it is significant to Kya. The army bag represents his honour as a war veteran, so it is a personal and meaningful gift. It is not simply a random store-bought bag but one that holds importance for him, and he passes that onto Kya for what is important to her. This is why Kya responds with both surprise and gratitude towards the gift. Pa’s abrupt delivery — throwing the bag and walking out immediately — might be read as callous, I argue that it is better understood as an attempt to avoid sentimentality, as men of his era were expected to be tough and avoid displaying emotions openly.

The bag also proves to be practical in the way that it allows Kya to sort, categorise, and store her specimens in the hidden compartments and zipped pockets. This little practice builds towards Kya’s future skills as a curator of art. To clarify what “creative art” involves here, it helps to introduce Paolo J. Knill, a key figure in expressive arts therapy (an arts-based field that thinks about how imagination communicates through different forms). In his discussion of interdisciplinary arts therapies, Knill describes the arts in very broad terms as a “language of the imagination” (1994:322), emphasising how creative practice can carry meaning through different media and forms. Kya’s collections are her imaginative way of making sense of the world, communicating what she cannot say. What constitutes art is not only the high arts: painting, sculpture, poetry and literature. Seen in this light, Kya’s early collecting is already evidence of her aesthetic sensibility and way of being. She communes with the marsh by gathering specimens and producing drawings of flora and fauna, which will later become a recognised naturalist art, not merely “stuff”.

Pa's general neglect of Kya results in neglect of nurturing her interests and talents. For this reason, Kya is not enrolled in a school where her interest in nature and skills for the arts can be developed and honed. On the one hand this restricts Kya's development as an artist in childhood, but on the other hand, it allows Kya the freedom to draw instinctively without the influence of structured schooling which could potentially interfere with her original thoughts. In some cases, schools restrict creativity by making learners follow the paths of those who came before them. By drawing alone in the marsh, Kya does not have the ideas of former artists instilled in her mind; she is free to create from her own experience.

Survival and Self-Determination as a Lonely Child

Kya's pain from abandonment is amplified when her siblings follow their mother's lead and leave to escape their father's abuse. It is particularly difficult for Kya to accept that Jodie has left her too. Amongst his last words to Kya before leaving, he advises her to take refuge in the marsh when being hunted by their father or anyone else threatening. The next excerpt describes the heartbreaking exchange between Kya and Jodie before he leaves:

Later, near sunset, Jodie found Kya on the beach staring at the sea. As he stepped up beside her, she didn't look at him but kept her eyes on the roiling waves. Still, she knew by the way he spoke that Pa had slugged his face. "I hafta go, Kya. Can't live here no longer."

She almost turned to him, but didn't. Wanted to beg him not to leave her alone with Pa, but the words jammed up.

"When you're old enough you'll understand," he said. Kya wanted to holler out that she may be young, but she wasn't stupid. She knew Pa was the reason they all left; what she wondered was why no one took her with them. She'd thought of leaving too, but had nowhere to go and no bus money.

"Kya, ya be careful, hear. If anybody comes, don't go in the house. They can get ya there. Run deep in the marsh, hide in the bushes. Always cover yo' tracks; I learned ya how. And ya can hide from Pa, too." When she still didn't speak, he said good-bye and strode across the beach to the woods. Just before he stepped into the trees, she finally turned and watched him walk away. (Owens 2018:14-15)

The image of the setting sun functions as an objective correlative for Kya's emotional state: the fading light and approaching darkness externalise the loss and vulnerability she experiences as Jodie leaves. Kya's last bits of light (and hope) leave with Jodie. Darkness will

be ushered into her life after Jodie leaves. He is the departing son and “sun”. Jodie speaks to Kya as an older brother which is both patronising and protective in this passage. Kya feels insulted by his suggestion that “she will understand when she is older” because she is already painfully aware that Pa’s violence is driving everyone away. Her desire to “holler out” in protest conveys her pent-up frustration and the pressure of words she cannot yet release. Jodie’s brotherly advice about taking refuge in the marsh goes on to serve Kya well in the future when she has to hide from various threats. Kya could not face Jodie and could not bring herself to “holler out” at him in anger or “beg” him to stay in desperation. This demonstrates Kya’s empathy — she puts aside her own feelings and prioritises Jodie’s wellbeing because she knows that escape is his only option for safety. During this painful goodbye, Kya “kept her eyes on the rolling waves” — this is just one of the many instances in the narrative where Kya turns to nature for distraction and comfort during painful circumstances. It is Kya’s instinct to ground herself in nature when her life is being turned upside down. The “rolling waves” represent changing tides and Kya’s life is about to change with Jodie’s absence.

For a short period, Kya and her father try to survive without their mother but Pa is still unreliable as a father. He continues to get drunk and sometimes disappears for days without giving Kya any warning. During this time, Kya takes on the role of the mother-figure in the house. She cooks, cleans, and does the household shopping with the little money Pa gives her. A role reversal takes place where Kya as a child, must take on the responsibilities of an adult and parent while her father is volatile and immature. As a female, she is expected by her father, to take care of domestic duties, despite being a child. In traditional *Künstlerinromane*, the trajectory of the female artist figure is marked by finding freedom from gendered expectations of patriarchy. This struggle recalls Virginia Woolf’s account of “killing the Angel in the House” in “Professions for Women” (1966 [1931]), where the woman writer must resist the internalised ideal of feminine self-sacrifice, domestic service, and pleasing obedience in order to claim creative freedom. Kya follows these gender expectations in childhood but later in life when she attains agency, she makes the decision to step away from these cultural practices (discussed in more detail under the sections ‘Maternal Recognition and Artistic Inheritance’, ‘Choosing a Loving and Supportive Life Partner’, and ‘Forging New Paths with Lily Briscoe’).

Kya's trauma is intensified when one day a letter arrives from Ma, and Pa burns the letter without first reading it to Kya. Kya's only chance of finding answers about her mother's abandonment are destroyed by her father. The letter sends Pa into a rage and along with the letter, he burns most of Ma's belongings, including her books and paintings. The next passage describes Pa's meltdown and the consequences of this fury:

Kya slipped quietly out the porch door, but walking along the beach searching for mussels, she smelled smoke and looked up to see a plume rising from the direction of the shack. Running as fast as she could, she broke through the trees and saw a bonfire blazing in the yard. Pa was throwing Ma's paintings, dresses, and books onto the flames.

"No!" Kya screamed. He didn't look at her, but threw the old battery-operated radio into the fire. Her face and arms burned as she reached toward the paintings, but the heat pushed her back.

She rushed to the shack to block Pa's return for more, locking eyes with him. Pa raised his backhand toward Kya, but she stood her ground. Suddenly, he turned and limp-stepped toward his boat. Kya sank onto the brick 'n' boards, watching Ma's watercolors of the marsh smolder into ash. She sat until the sun set, until all the buttons glowed as embers and the memories of dancing the jitterbug with Ma melted into the flames.

Over the next few days, Kya learned from the mistakes of the others, and perhaps more from the minnows, how to live with him. Just keep out of the way, don't let him see you, dart from sunspots to shadows. Up and out of the house before he rose, she lived in the woods and water, then padded into the house to sleep in her bed on the porch as close to the marsh as she could get. (Owens 2018:15)

Pa's pain at learning that Ma will not return sends him into a fury. In his anger, he burns Ma's clothes, artworks and books. This is his attempt at erasing her from his life. Amongst her belongings being burnt is her radio. The radio is symbolic of Ma's connection to the outside world. Perhaps Pa thinks that Ma's desire for the outside world lured her away from him and their home in the marsh. The radio was also Ma's connection to the arts; she listened to song on the radio and danced along to it. Song and dance brought joy into Ma's life, thus by burning the radio, Pa is trying in some sort of distorted way to destroy Ma's sources of happiness. As Kya watches Ma's cultural and aesthetic legacy go up in flames, Kya's connection to Ma is also lost. They had connected through the arts (singing, dancing, and painting together), and now Pa destroys that connection in his selfless ambition to remove Ma's memory from his mind. He pays no regard to the damage he is causing Kya by denying her access to Ma's letters and destroying the last material connection between Kya and her mother. Pa's entitlement speaks to the patriarchal structures in Barkey Cove, during the

1950s, when men's authority took precedence over women's property. Not only does Pa shatter a mother-daughter connection, but also the sorority between two females. In keeping with the novel's theme of the power of nature, the bonfire is symbolic of nature's destructive side. Fire, as one of the four natural elements, has two sides: a side that brings warmth and light, and the other side which brings about destruction. Much, like the marsh with its duality (as mentioned in the prologue), fire also displays duality.

After this dramatic meltdown, Pa abandons Kya too. As each family member leaves, Kya's responsibilities grow. She learns to take care of herself and the shack, from cooking and cleaning to earning a living. At the tender age of ten, Kya's survival instincts are strong. After experiencing the torment of hunger, she learns to run her own business. She nervously negotiates a deal with a local shopkeeper called Jumpin', and they agree that Kya will supply him with mussels to sell in his gas and bait shop at the wharf. With determination and commitment, Kya wakes up before dawn every day to catch and sell mussels to Jumpin' and his wife, Mabel.

Nature serves as provider for Kya in this instance. The ocean provides mussels which Kya can freely take to sell for monetary profits. Kya's reliance upon nature grows from friend in loneliness to provider when in financial need. Kya's relationship with nature evolves as her needs change, and nature always meets her needs, in one way or another. Kya's mussel business is successful because of her determination to survive and nature's faithfulness to provide what she needs for survival. Even when the world demands money for survival, nature provides a way for Kya to earn money. Mother Nature sacrifices of herself for the survival of her children. Mother Nature freely provides the mussels for Kya's benefit in a man-made economic system (capitalism) which ultimately threatens the death of nature.

Kya's ability to fend for herself in these circumstances fits in (to a certain degree) with Huf's (1991) description of the female artist who is "stalwart, spirited, and fearless" (4). Kya is competitive amongst the fishermen who supply Jumpin' and she is brave in the way she negotiates the business deal with Jumpin' (a grown man). She goes fishing for mussels before dawn, which is a job usually done by men. From the perspective of Huf (1985), one could argue that this displays Kya's "masculine" attributes" (4). Though, for Varsamopoulou (2019) these "overgeneralisations" and "sexual stereotypes" are problematic as they limit the varying types of female artists in the broader genre of *Künstlerinromane* (xx-xxi).

“Marsh Girl”: White Trash, Gender Policing, and the Making of an Outsider-Artist

Apart from personal trauma, Kya is also negatively impacted by cultural trauma, and this compounds her struggles as a developing female artist. Cultural trauma, as defined by Laurie Vickroy (2015:19), affects an individual through their race, sex, or class. From an intersectional point of view, it is evident that Kya faces gender and class discrimination due to being a female living below the poverty line. Kimberlé Crenshaw (2006), who coined the term intersectional feminism, argues that women of colour face multi-layered discrimination due to the overlapping conditions of being black, poor, and female. Though Kya is not black, she is considered by her community as white trash, which is a “stigmatising stereotype” and “racial slur” generally used to describe “poor rural white people” (Wray 2006:3). Additionally, Kya is judged for living the life of a non-conventional artist who does not adhere to the cultural expectations imposed on her by the white, heteronormative, middle-class society in Barkley Cove. This trope aligns with Huf’s (1991) view of the female artist who “acquires the reputation of a troublemaker” (11).

Due to gender and class policing, Kya’s access to education, safety, mobility, and cultural life is restricted. These restrictions on her development as an artist lead to more exploration of nature which later comes to function as an alternative form of schooling and creative space. Barkley Cove is a conservative town. The clergy are supported and financed by the community, and this comes with privileges and respect for them. According to this social hierarchy, rank is based on power and money. This episode at the Piggly Wiggly reveals how Barkley Cove’s moral economy of “cleanliness” and respectability excludes Kya, who is treated as both socially inferior and unclean.

Barkley Cove served its religion hard-boiled and deep-fried. Tiny as it was, the village supported four churches, and those were just for the whites; the blacks had three more.

Of course, the pastors and preachers, and certainly their wives, enjoyed highly respected positions in the village, always dressing and behaving accordingly. Teresa White often wore pastel skirts and white blouses, matching pumps and purse.

Now she hurried toward her daughter and lifted her in her arms. Stepping away from Kya, she put the girl back on the sidewalk and squatted next to the child.

“Meryl Lynn, dahlin’, don’t go near that girl, ya hear me. She’s dirty.”

Kya watched the mother run her fingers through the curls; didn't miss how long they held each other's eyes.

A woman came out of the Piggly Wiggly and walked quickly up to them. "Ya all right, Teresa? What happened here? Was that girl botherin' Meryl Lynn?"

"I saw her in time. Thank you, Jenny. I wish those people wouldn't come to town. Look at her. Filthy. Plumb nasty. There's that stomach flu goin' around and I just know for a fact it came in with them. Last year they brought in that case of measles, and that's serious." Teresa walked away, clutching the child.

Just then Pa, carrying some beer in a brown paper bag, called behind her, "Whatcha doin'? C'mon, we gotta git outta here. Tide's goin' out." Kya turned and followed, and as they steered home to the marsh, she saw the curls and eyes of mother and child. (Owens 2018:38)

This passage highlights the juxtaposition between church folk and the marsh dwellers. The social order is made clear: at the top, the pastor's wife is well-dressed and protected by the community, and at the bottom is Kya and the poor people like her who come from the marsh. Meryl comes to Jenny and Teresa's rescue when she thinks that Teresa is at risk of harm by the dirty girl from the marsh. This passage further highlights the hypocrisy of the church who are meant to display love and compassion yet insult Kya with the words "filthy" and "nasty". Pa's oblivion to what is going on in this passage, demonstrates his ongoing neglect towards Kya. He is not even aware of what she has just experienced, as he is more caught up in purchasing his alcohol at the Piggly Wiggly. As a child, Kya is insulted by adults, and her parent does not defend or protect her. Furthermore, this passage provides an understanding of Kya's rejection of the Christian God. Kya's negative experience with church people leads her away from organised religion; instead, she discovers a sense of the spiritual in nature. Instead of the Bible or church, Kya turns to nature as her moral guide. Kya had been to church a few times with her mother but did not recall any positive memories of those experiences:

Kya couldn't remember how to pray. Was it how you held your hands or how hard you squinted your eyes that mattered? "Maybe if I pray, Ma and Jodie will come home. Even with all the shouting and fussing, that life was better than this lumpy-grits."

She sang mis-snippets of hymns—"and He walks with me when dew is still on the roses"—all she remembered from the little white church where Ma had taken her a few times. Their last visit had been Easter Sunday before Ma left, but all Kya remembered about the holiday was shouting and blood, somebody falling, she and Ma running, so she dropped the memory altogether. Kya looked through the trees at Ma's

corn and turnip patch, all weeds now. Certainly there were no roses. “Just forget it. No god’s gonna come to this garden.” (Owens 2018:40)

In this passage, Kya tries to connect with the God of the Bible. She wants to pray for Ma and Jodie to return home, but her connection to God is tainted by her memory of church which represents violence, chaos, and exclusion. By thinking “No god’s gonna come to this garden”, Kya believes that God is only with the rich townspeople at the top of the social order in Barkley Cove and will not come down to the bottom ranks to people like her in the marsh. Society has conditioned Kya as a child to believe that God only lives amongst those who are rich and powerful. Through judgement, the townspeople had taught Kya that she was not good enough to pray and that God would not accept her prayers.

The town blames the marsh dwellers for crimes and accuses them of bringing diseases into Barkley Cove. They are judged for being poor and uneducated and are dehumanised by being called “rats” (Owens 2018:12, 19). Rats are vermin who are harmful to people; they are an annoyance and hindrance which people wish to exterminate. Therefore, describing the people who live in the marsh as rats reveals the general attitude of the townspeople towards the marsh dwellers as detestation and disgust. According to Julia Kristeva’s (1982) theory on abjection, this type of rejection occurs when identity is separated into self and other, and the self views the other as grotesque or as a threat to their identity. Therefore, the subject casts off the object from the collective in order to preserve the pure identity of the subject. In Barkley Cove, those who live at the marsh are treated as outcasts — they are othered because Barkley Cove does not want to accept that their community could include poverty, drugs, crime, and disease. The history of the marsh is described as a place that sheltered, since the 1500s, “a mishmash of mutinous sailors, castaways, debtors, and fugitives dodging wars, taxes, or laws that they didn’t take to” and in later years “were joined by runaway slaves, who escaped into the marsh and were called maroons, and freed slaves, penniless and beleaguered, who dispersed into the water-land because of scant options” (Owens 2018:12). The townspeople do not even refer to Kya by her real name; instead, they label her the “Marsh Girl” (Owens 2018:50). This is only one of several derogatory names imposed on her, alongside terms such as “Marsh Hen” and “Swamp Trash.” In one encounter, Mr Lane calls Kya a “beggar-hen” and even grunts at her in disgust (Owens 2018:32). Collectively, these labels conflate Kya with the marsh, treating girl and landscape as a single degraded category and revealing how the townspeople devalue both the environment and those associated with it. Patriarchal logic

aligns women with nature (the body and reproduction) while men are associated with culture (reason, public authority, and production). This binary has long been used to legitimise the control of both women and the natural world. Pa himself uses the term “white trash” (Owens 2018:33) when referring to fellow marsh-dwellers, signalling how class stigma operates even within whiteness. In Barkley Cove’s racialised social order, the marsh community is treated as a boundary group — cast as dirty and undeserving, and positioned outside “respectable” whiteness. As Kraft (2021:136) explains:

Kya, as well as Jumpin’ and Mabel, are outsiders to the dominant white culture of Barkley Cove, which seems to be reminiscent of the white plantation South society. Kya and her family are constructed as outcasts because they are poor — “white trash” (57). Moreover, Kya’s father is a gambler and drinker and as such refers to the imagination of the swamp as a place that harbors outlaws. Jumpin’ and Mabel are outsiders because they are Black in the rural South.² Their social status is reflected in the places they live: the margins. Whereas Kya lives in a shack in the marsh, Jumpin’ and Mabel live in “Colored Town” (100): both places are situated on the edge of Barkley Cove. On the one hand, the white society of Barkley Cove needs outsiders to occupy the edges to allow the town’s inhabitants to define themselves against these others, an act which ultimately justifies their superior social position. On the other hand, these outcasts pose a threat to Barkley Cove: Jumpin’ and Mabel are a reminder of the South’s history of slavery and of the Lost Cause, while Kya is represented as a “swamp guide” (Wilson 14) who easily navigates the marsh and can make herself invisible when confronted with uninvited guests, such as the police or social services. These three characters are proof of Barkley Cove’s limitations when it comes to dominating the supposedly uncivilized.

By patriarchal logic, women are equated with nature while men are equated with culture. As such, sexist men have aimed to control both women and nature. Pa himself uses the term “white trash” (Owens 2018:33) when talking about his fellow dwellers in the marsh. Within Barkley Cove’s racialised class hierarchy, the marsh community functions as a boundary group: they are positioned outside normative respectable whiteness and treated as inferior to black people. Dominant white respectability treats them as a social “stain”, a group to be kept at the margins or symbolically erased in order to maintain the town’s image of cleanliness and moral order. There is irony in Pa’s use of “white trash” to refer to marsh-dwellers while failing to recognise that he belongs to the same group. From Pa, Kya also learns to refer to herself as white trash. In doing so, Kya internalises the identity imposed on her by those who abuse and reject her. As a child and teenager, she comes to see herself through their lens: worthless and undeserving.

There are instances when teenage boys from the town show up at Kya's shack at night to taunt and tease her. While Kya is quietly spending an evening alone in the shack, the boys turn up at her shack to shame her. They laugh at her and call her Wolf Child. They bang on the shack door to incite fear in her. This scene illustrates the town's intimidation tactics.

That night after watching the turkeys, she ate a supper of leftover cornbread and beans, then lay on her porch bed, watching the moon touch the lagoon. Suddenly, she heard voices in the woods coming toward the shack. They sounded nervous, squeaky. Boys, not men. She sat straight up. There was no back door. It was get out now or still be sitting on the bed when they came. Quick as a mouse, she slipped to the door, but just then candles appeared, moving up and down, their light jiggling in halos. Too late to run.

The voices got louder. "Here we come, Marsh Girl!"

"Hey — ya in thar? Miss Missin' Link!"

"Show us yo' teeth! Show us yo' swamp grass!" Peals of laughter.

She ducked lower behind the half wall of the porch as the footsteps moved closer. The flames flickered madly, then went out altogether as five boys, maybe thirteen or fourteen years old, ran across the yard. All talking stopped as they galloped full speed to the porch and tagged the door with their palms, making slapping sounds.

Every smack a stab in the turkey hen's heart.

Against the wall, Kya wanted to whimper but held her breath. They could break through the door easy. One hardmyank, and they'd be in.

But they backed down the steps, ran into the trees again, hooting and hollering with relief that they had survived the Marsh Girl, the Wolf Child, the girl who couldn't spell *dog*. Their words and laughter carried back to her through the forest as they disappeared into the night, back to safety. She watched the relit candles, bobbing through the trees.

Then sat staring into the stone-quiet darkness. Shamed. (Owens 2018:50)

In a similar manner to the way the passage with Teresa reveals hypocrisy in the church, this passage reveals the hypocrisy of the community at large. The passage begins with Kya following her familiar evening routine: she eats dinner and relaxes on the porch while enjoying nature. By contrast, the boys turn up like thugs, shouting and banging, laughing mockingly, and behaving in a threatening fashion. They break the law by trespassing on Kya's property and harass her, showing no self-control or dignity. They show no signs of humanity and civility, yet ironically and hypocritically dehumanise Kya by calling her "Wolf

Child.” Being too young and afraid, Kya is unable to see this hypocrisy and internalises the shame which they inflict upon her. As a result, she withdraws further into isolation to protect herself from the hurtful words and actions of her community. Nature continues to be the only source of safety and comfort for her in a place where she is victimised. This incident occurs at night, which represents the darkness of the boys who are bullies. By contrast, Kya is seated next to candlelight which represents her innocence and purity. The term Wolf Child implies that Kya is an animal, wild and dangerous. By calling her “Marsh Girl” they highlight their male dominance over her as a female. The boys call Kya Wolf Child, yet they turn up in a group like a pack of wolves; their herd mentality is demonstrated by the way they behave collectively to shame Kya. Kya’s shame is formed as a result of their insults; her shame is not inherent but rather defined by society’s judgements on her and then internalised. While humans shame Kya, nature does not judge her. Nature is objective, nature is not biased and treats everyone the same. This drives Kya closer to nature as a safe space where she is free to be herself.

The way in which the white boys taunt Kya is similar to the way that they mistreat Jumpin’. Jumpin’ and Mabel who are a “colored”¹ couple who live in “Colored Town”² and they own the local gas and bait shop in Barkley Cove. They are among the few people who treat Kya kindly and with respect. Without embarrassing her, they give her small donations. They treat her with dignity and love, despite their racial differences. Kya reciprocates their love and is defensive of Jumpin’ when some white boys accost him near Colored Town. Her loyalty and moral courage are depicted in a pivotal scene where she protects Jumpin’, hitting the boys with her bag.

Then, nearing a bend in the road, Kya heard voices coming toward her. She stopped, listened carefully. Quickly she stepped off the path into the woods and hid behind a myrtle thicket. A minute later, two white boys, dressed in raggedy bib overalls, came around the bend, toting fishing tackle and a string of catfish long as her arm. She froze behind the thicket and waited.

One of the boys pointed down the lane. “Looke up thar.”

¹ During the Jim Crow era in the United States, the term ‘coloured’ was used to refer to people of colour, especially black people. The term was abolished during the Civil Rights Movement and is now considered offensive amongst Americans.

² In the narrative, “Colored Town” is a residential area designated for black people next to Barkley Cove. People of colour were further segregated from white people in churches, administrative buildings, and other public spaces. This is a reflection of the United States during the Jim Crow era (1870s to 1960s), which led to the American Civil Rights Movement where black activists across the country challenged racist and discriminatory laws during the 1950s and 1960s.

“Ain’t we lucky. Here comes a nigger walkin’ to Nigger Town.” Kya looked down the path, and there, walking home for the evening, was Jumpin’. Quite close, he had surely heard the boys, but he simply dropped his head, stepped into the woods to give them a berth, and moved on.

What’s the matter with ‘im, why don’t he do sump’m? Kya raged to herself. She knew *nigger* was a real bad word — she knew by the way Pa had used it like a cussword. Jumpin’ could have knocked the boys’ heads together, taught them a lesson. But he walked on fast.

“Jest an ol’ nigger walkin’ to town. Watch out, nigger-boy, don’t fall down,” they taunted Jumpin’, who kept his eyes on his toes. One of the boys reached down, picked up a stone, and slung it at Jumpin’s back. It hit just under his shoulder blade with a thud. He lurched over a bit, kept walking. The boys laughed as he disappeared around the bend, then they picked up more rocks and followed him.

Kya stalked through brush until she was ahead of them, her eyes glued on their caps bobbing above the branches. She crouched at a spot where thick bushes grew next to the lane, where in seconds they would pass within a foot of her. Jumpin’ was up ahead, out of sight. She twisted the cloth bag with the jam so that it was wrung tight and knotted against the jars. As the boys drew even with the thicket, she swung the heavy bag and whacked the closest one hard across the back of his head. He pitched forward and fell on his face. Hollering and screeching, she rushed the other boy, ready to bash his head too, but he took off. She slipped about fifty yards into the trees and watched until the first boy stood, holding his head and cussing. (Owens 2018:55-56)

This passage parallels the ways in which the white boys treat Kya and Jumpin’. Both black people and white trash are marginalised in Barkley Cove. Black people have a different experience of racism from white trash but commonly both groups are mistreated and are considered as not good enough to be valued in society. In this passage, the white boys use racial slurs to demean Jumpin’. The boys try to exert power over Jumpin’ by calling him “nigger-boy” though Jumpin’ is the adult and they are the boys. They laugh after throwing rocks at Jumpin’, revealing their lack of conscience when it comes to violence against a black person. By contrast, Kya is struck with empathy for Jumpin’. Kya understands what that kind of abuse feels like because she is also a victim of bullying in Barkley Cove. She has firsthand experience with the entitled attitudes and brutish behaviour of the white boys. Due to these similar abuses, Kya can easily empathise with Jumpin’. In addition to being harassed by the white boys at night in her shack, the white boys almost ran her over on the street with their bicycles. These firsthand and second-hand experiences with abuse cause Kya to react in anger. Kya’s anger stems from emotional pain and is indicative of the trauma she is experiencing. According to Vickroy (2015:7) rages are a symptom of trauma. These painful

experiences with abuse shape Kya's voice as an artist. Power, fear, and loneliness show up as recurring themes in her poetry which is discussed in detail in Chapter Three. According to Huf, the female artist's voice is shaped by their early life experiences. As a survivor of abuse Kya's silenced voice is liberated in her poetry, and writing poetry is healing for her, as it shifts her traumatic memories into narrative memory. In addition to classism and racism, Kya's experiences with sexism shape her voice as a writer. The power dynamics between men and women intrigue Kya. This leads her to observe male-female relationships in nature, and her observations influence her personal decisions and art.

The town also has strong patriarchal structures. Adrienne Rich (1986) asserts that "the woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected (55)". Through control of women's bodies men are able to exert power over women and this is demonstrated in the novel through Pa's control of his daughters and Chase's attempted control of Kya's body. The narrative is set during the 1960s and 1970s; this was a significant period in American history for women. A second wave of feminism was taking place which focused on issues of inequality and discrimination against women, but in the small backwater town of Barkley Cove, change had not yet arrived. This is evidenced in the novel by the way girls wear skirts to school and women are not allowed in the beer hall. There is a strong emphasis on gender roles, as can be seen in the way Kya's father does not allow his daughters to use the boat for fishing, yet he allows his sons to use the boat. This type of gender policing limits Kya's access to resources and opportunities. The boat is transport to resources and opportunities within the marsh and in the town. By restricting access to transport, Kya and her sisters, as females, are controlled by their father. Restricted transport also limits Kya from collecting aesthetic objects from beyond her immediate surroundings and limits her from possibly meeting other like-minded individuals who may have an interest in learning about nature and art with her. These restrictions on access to the outside world provide Kya with opportunities within the marsh, where she can focus on details others have not documented. By focusing on a limited space, she can delve more deeply into the marsh's inner workings.

Despite all the abuse, prejudice, and exclusion, Kya watches the people of Barkley Cove from the periphery and yearns to be a part of the community who harms her. She seeks validation and approval from the very people who reject and oppress her.

The Marsh as Mother

As a child who is alone in the marsh, with strong feelings of rejection and grief, Kya seeks maternal care. Heeding the advice that her mother had previously given her, about finding peace and comfort in the marsh, Kya leans upon the marsh for strength and guidance. Thus, the marsh is personified as a mother figure. The following passage marks a turning-point in the narrative, explicitly signalling the transfer of “motherhood” from human care to the more than human — marsh itself:

Months passed, winter easing gently into place, as southern winters do. The sun, warm as a blanket, wrapped Kya’s shoulders, coaxing her deeper into the marsh. Sometimes she heard night-sounds she didn’t know or jumped from lightning too close, but whenever she stumbled, it was the land that caught her. Until at last, at some unclaimed moment, the heart-pain seeped away like water into sand. Still there, but deep. Kya laid her hand upon the breathing, wet earth, and the marsh became her mother (Owens 2018:34).

I assert that ‘Mother Nature’ takes on her own role as a character in the narrative. The earth is endowed with “breath”: a universal sign, not only of biological life, but inner life or spirit too. The text moves beyond simple personification toward a form of animism in which the marsh is figured as a living, responsive body. These words prepare the reader for the later declaration that “the marsh became her mother,” — a vital and corporeal presence rather than remaining an inert backdrop. Owens animates and anthropomorphises the entire landscape — weather, sky, marsh and creatures — granting it agency as a protective, maternal force. The sun embraces her with its “blanket” and “coaxes her”; the landscape “catches” Kya when she stumbles. In isolation, away from close human contact, Kya views the creatures of the wild as her kin. As an example, she talks to the seagulls when she feels lonely on her birthday. As she immerses herself more deeply in the marsh, she discovers many different species in the marsh and her fascination with nature leads her to capture its beauty in drawings.

Ettinger (2006a) talks about the matrixial borderspace in which the meaning of art is co-created between the artist, the audience and the art itself. Kya’s artwork is demonstrative of this matrixial borderspace as she is linked both to her mother and Mother Nature in her paintings. Her mother being the one who influenced her love of nature and the arts, and Mother Nature being the inspiration and content of her paintings. In this psychic space, Kya finds a way to connect to the mother she misses so intensely, and in being able to express her

emotions in her artwork, through her love for nature, she is able to find comfort from the pain that gnaws at her deepest core. Greta Gaard and Patrick D. Murphy (1998:6) explain that the self-other relationship between humans and nature can also be viewed as one of interanimation, thus mutual co-creation occurs as Kya draws inspiration from nature for her artworks. As Kya's paintings take shape, the essence of nature is captured in eternal form. The narrative states that "Her talent had matured and now she could draw, paint, and sketch anything. Using chalks or watercolors from the Five and Dime, she sketched the birds, insects, or shells on grocery bags and attached them to her samples" (Owens 2018:49).

It can also be noted that in Kya's business venture as a mussel supplier for Jumpin', nature is the provider of the mussels. Nature is rich in resources that provide for Kya's needs. Kya does not have to pay nature anything for the mussels; she is free to take from nature as she would from a loving and generous parent. With no monetary costs in her business, Kya is able to run a profitable business by selling and bartering mussels.

The Marsh as a Classroom

Prior to being abandoned by her family, Kya's education in the marsh mostly involves what she learns from her mother and siblings. She observes her mother cooking, helps her mother wash clothes, and takes care of the chickens. She explores the marsh with Jodie, and he is influential in her life as he teaches her about the creatures of the wild in the marsh. Kya does not attend school in Barkley Cove therefore she cannot read or write. After Kya is gradually abandoned by her family, social services convince her to attend primary school, but she is not properly clothed or psychologically prepared for this big step in her life. On her first day at school, her schoolmates laugh at her when she cannot spell the simple word 'dog'. They make fun of her on the school bus by name-calling and dehumanising her with phrases like "MISS Catherine Danielle Clark! [...] Where ya been, marsh hen? Where's yo' hat, swamp rat?" (Owens 2018:22). To escape the torment, Kya jumps off the bus and runs into the marsh where she bursts out crying and takes refuge. As a result, Kya never returns to school after this humiliating experience.

Thereafter, Kya's education takes place in the marsh using non-traditional schooling methods. Kya's relationship with nature is one of intimacy. Not only does Kya observe insects, birds,

animals, trees, plants, and flowers, but she also interacts with them. She lives in harmony and oneness with nature. Kya does not separate humans from nature. She does not view humans as “self” and nature as “other”; instead, she believes in interconnection between the two. The prologue of the novel also brings attention to duality in nature by distinguishing between a marsh and a swamp. In a poetic style, the marsh is described as light and the swamp as darkness. However, these binaries are not considered as opposites. Instead, they are viewed as co-dependents. The co-existence between light and dark represents the duality that exists inside Kya as both victim and perpetrator; thus, the prologue works to foreshadow the final chapter of the book in which Kya’s full nature is revealed. As Kya studies nature, she learns how wildlife grows and adapts for survival, and she takes lessons from nature on how to make decisions and survive in the wild. Metaphorically, the marsh is her classroom, and it is in the marsh (her classroom) that she meets Tate Walker.

Tate as Friend, Mentor and First Love

Tate is one of Jodie’s friends and slowly becomes Kya’s friend as well. Tate later teaches Kya to read and write, thus playing one of the most influential roles of mentorship in her life. Tate is four years older than Kya and takes her under his wing; he encourages her love of nature, regularly brings her textbooks, recites poetry to her, and buys her art supplies for her paintings. Tate shares Kya’s love for nature and together they explore and enjoy the marsh until they fall in love with each other. Kya’s unconventional and non-traditional education feeds her imagination and creativity as an artist, as she draws inspiration from nature for her artworks. In one of her paintings, she captures the beauty of the rare feather which Tate gives her. This feather holds different meanings to Kya. On the surface, it literally is a beautiful, rare feather and special gift that Tate has given her, but on a deeper level, metaphorically, it describes her personality:

A great blue heron is the color of gray mist reflecting in blue water. And like mist, she can fade into the backdrop, all of her disappearing except the concentric circles of her lock-and-load eyes. She is a patient, solitary hunter, standing alone as long as it takes to snatch her prey. Or, eyeing her catch, she will stride forward one slow step at a time, like a predacious bridesmaid. And yet, on rare occasions she hunts on the wing, darting and diving sharply, swordlike beak in the lead (Owens 2018:49).

The blue heron's dual personality is reflective of Kya's light and dark sides. On the one hand, she is quiet and easily overlooked but, on the other hand, she is a decisive and proactive leader. From this example, I postulate that Kya's talent as illustrator is not superficially informed but rather driven by a deep understanding of the connection between humans and the natural world.

Tate and Kya read Aldo Leopold's (1949) book, *A Sand County Almanac*, and Kya learns from his book about the interconnection between nature and human. Kya describes Leopold's writing style as poetic and learns from him that nature is alive.

For the rest of the summer Kya and Tate did the reading lessons at the tumbledown cabin. By mid-August they had read through *A Sand County Almanac*, and although she couldn't read every word, she got most of it. Aldo Leopold taught her that floodplains are living extensions of the rivers, which will claim them back any time they choose. Anyone living on a floodplain is just waiting in the river's wings. She learned where the geese go in winter, and the meaning of their music. His soft words, sounding almost like poetry, taught her that soil is packed with life and one of the most precious riches on Earth; that draining wetlands dries the land for miles beyond, killing plants and animals along with the water. Some of the seeds lie dormant in the desiccated earth for decades, waiting, and when the water finally comes home again, they burst through the soil, unfolding their faces. Wonders and real-life knowledge she would've never learned in school. Truths everyone should know, yet somehow, even though they lay exposed all around, seemed to lie in secret like the seeds. (Owens 2018:60)

This passage animates the nonhuman world by using phrases such as rivers "claim" floodplains back, wetlands "come home," seeds "wait" and then "burst" and "unfold their faces." This imagery is a more-than-human illustration and displays nature as agentic and meaningful. Nature here has its own will and persona. Additionally, this passage invokes an image of multispecies entanglement (Cornelius and Rossmann 2024) in which Kya and Tate as humans are interdependent with the nonhuman species that are reading about in Leopold's book.

According to the Aldo Leopold Foundation (2025), Leopold is "considered by many to be the father of wildlife ecology and modern conservation" and "was a forester, philosopher, conservationist, educator, writer, and outdoor enthusiast". Leopold's concept on the "land ethic" has been foundational in paving the way for "an ethical, caring relationship between people and nature". The intertextual reference to Leopold's work in *Where the Crawdads*

Sing (2018) implies that Kya respects and cares for nature. This is then evidenced by the ways in which Kya applies Leopold's teachings to her interactions with nature, her work, and life in general. When the narrator says that Kya could not have learned in the classroom what she learned from Leopold's book, the narrator is signalling Kya's intelligence type, according to Howard Gardner's (2011) theory of multiple intelligences. Based on this theory, Kya's intelligence type would be naturalist. This is someone who is nature smart; these types of people are good with plants, animals, and natural patterns. Additionally, the way that Kya's mind links Leopold's prose to the poetic, indicates her linguistic and musical intelligence. As a result of the way her mind works with nature, language, and music, she is able to create art that is both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating.

Kya and Tate's shared love of nature brings them closer together. Their common interest in learning about nature creates a unique bond between them.

Conclusion

The narrative of Kya's childhood follows key conventions of *Künstlerromane*. Kya's artistic voice is shaped by her early childhood experiences (Huf 1985) as an abandoned girl-child facing cultural and social challenges (Hankins 1991). Her moments of crisis (Hankins 1991) include parental neglect and abuse from her community. Kya's abusive father hinders Kya's development (Buckley 1974) by causing her mother, and artistic mentor (Huf 1985), to abandon her at a young age. Pa's alcoholism and gambling worsens the family's financial situation, and this leads to an impoverished life which lacks formal education (Buckley 1974) for Kya. As a motherless daughter (Hankins 1991) who is also facing ostracism from her community, Kya seeks out care and mentorship (Huf 1985) from nature and Tate. Tate leads Kya towards education through books while nature provides resources for Kya to study in a non-conventional learning environment (Buckley 1974), the marsh. Kya's relationship with nature is otherworldly (Varsamopoulou 2019) — Kya and nature transform into oneness. Thus, nature is central to Kya's development because it is the muse that inspires her creativity and self-expression. Additionally, the maternal nexus (Hankins 1991) and matrixial borderspace (Ettinger 2006a) are significant for the formation of Kya's artistic identity.

Chapter Two: Artistic Development during Adolescence and Young Adulthood

Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Kya's romantic relationships influence her artwork and her development as an artist. Drawing on Buckley's (1974) criteria that the artist-protagonist experiences two main romantic relationships — one exalting and one debasing (17-18) — I read Tate as the nurturing relationship that supports Kya's growth, and Chase as the destructive one that deepens her trauma. Tate encourages Kya's intellectual and artistic development, while Chase's manipulation and abuse expose the gender-based violence and intergenerational trauma that shapes her path as a woman artist. Through these contrasting relationships, the chapter extends my reading of the novel as a female eco-Künstlerroman. This chapter also builds on Huf's (1985) and Hankins's (1991) feminist revisions of the Künstlerroman by considering the cultural pressures, emotional wounds, and social obstacles that complicate the female artist's journey and self-realisation. In Kya's case, her growth as an artist is inseparable from her experiences of abandonment, her longing for intimacy, and her struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal society. At the same time, ecofeminist ideas help illuminate the links between the exploitation of women and the exploitation of nature, particularly in the sections that focus on Kya's relationship with the marsh and her efforts to protect it. Trauma theory is also relevant here, especially in understanding how Kya's repeated experiences of rejection, violence, and loss shape both her inner life and her artistic becoming.

The chapter begins with a focus on Tate as the exalting love relationship in Kya's life — but also one that brings heartbreak. It then turns to Kya's success as a published artist and her emergence as a landowner who protects the marsh from commercial destruction. Thereafter, I examine Chase as the debasing relationship, showing how his deceit, possessiveness, and violence intensify Kya's trauma and reshape her thinking. The chapter ends with Jodie's return and the news of Ma's death, a moment that reopens the maternal thread in the novel and brings Kya to a deeper understanding of her mother's absence and her maternal artistic inheritance.

Exalting Love and the Awakening of Art

As a lonely and emotionally guarded teenager, Kya builds walls of protection around herself; she does not allow herself to get emotionally or physically close to people, but Tate slowly earns Kya's trust over the years, and their friendship slowly blossoms into love. Tate brings Kya stability and peace in the chaos of Kya's life. As an example, when a local shop owner, Mr Johnny Lane, calls Kya "swamp trash", she is less affected by it because Tate brings her "calmness" and eases her "tightness" (28). Mr Lane's words remain as brutal as they have always been but this time, Kya is able to handle it better. Back when she was alone, she was "scared" but this time when hearing the hateful words, she shifts her mind to Tate in the marsh (28). When Kya thinks of Tate, she associates him with the marsh. Along with the "grass and sky and water" she imagines Tate's presence in the marsh. Kya experiences a continuity of feeling between the marsh and Tate: both become associated with safety, calmness, and happiness (28). Tate's confidence, which is described as "sure and easy" compensates for Kya's insecurities (28). Furthermore, Kya expresses that she needs Tate just as much as she needs the "boat" which brings her access, freedom, and exploration.

Over time, Kya comes to depend on Tate not only as a romantic partner, but also as the person who first introduces her to reading, books, and a wider world beyond the marsh. At this point, Kya is still only about fifteen, while Tate is older and ready to leave for university. This creates a developmental and educational gap between them: he is moving into adulthood and formal study, while she remains behind in the marsh, still young and vulnerable. When Tate leaves for university in 1960, he promises to return on the Fourth of July, but does not. Due to Tate being both partner and mentor, and because Kya is still only a young teenager while he is moving into a new adult and educational world, his departure feels to her like another profound moment of heartbreak and abandonment rather than an ordinary parting. She loses not only the boy she loves, but also the person who had begun to guide her intellectually and emotionally through literacy, encouragement and companionship. From this point on, Kya's trust in humanity is completely broken. Later, Tate will admit that he was an immature coward who did not know how to negotiate life beyond the marsh, in terms of his relationship with her. For Kya, however, what matters is that he is gone. She comes to believe that "needing people end[s] in hurt" (76), which strengthens her sense that nature is a source of support. The morning after the 4 July (the date of their promised reunion), still clinging to

“shreds of cruel hope”, she returns to the lagoon — the place where his boat would signal his arrival — and listens for the sound of him coming back. When no boat appears, she cries out in despair, “TATE, TATE, NO, NO” and “[drops] to her knees [with] her face against the mud”, feeling a “strong pull” out from under her as “a tide she knew well” (76). In this moment, the marsh seems to catch her when she falls, becoming the emotional ground that holds and supports her. Her face against the mud represents Kya’s closeness to the earth in both a literal and metaphorical sense. For most, falling face-first into mud would imply humiliation, and evoke disgust, but for Kya it is not alien or degrading; it is familiar, grounding, and protective. The “pull” that she feels is grief. The feeling is described as a “tide” to indicate its repetitive, cyclical nature and power. First her mother left, then her siblings and father. Now, the love of her life leaves. Once again, loss returns in a wave she recognises. This moment also aligns with Caruth’s theory of trauma as belated and repetitive, since Tate’s abandonment is experienced not as an isolated loss, but as the return of a familiar wound.

After Tate’s broken promise, Kya becomes inconsolable and withdraws into the shack for nearly a month, only leaving when she runs out of food. Even in this period of deep despair, however, nature remains an active force in pulling her back towards life. The Cooper’s hawk that repeatedly visits her shack interrupts her withdrawal and becomes the catalyst for change. Through this bird’s presence, the natural world calls Kya out of her grief and back into motion. Earlier in this section, Kya links Tate with the boat and the marsh; though Tate is gone, the boat still remains, carrying her back into the marsh that continues to sustain her. In this sense, nature offers more than comfort; it enables her survival and healing. Her return to the marsh marks the beginning of a new independence that is sustained by her continuing relationship with the natural world.

More importantly, this moment advances her development in both *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* terms: heartbreak becomes the crisis through which she moves into greater independence, while the marsh reclaims its place as the environment that nurtures her artistic formation. From this point onward, Kya’s growth depends less on human support and more on the natural world that continues to shape her into an artist. This renewed dependence on the marsh is soon channelled into sustained artistic labour, ultimately leading to her first publication.

Authorship and the Emergence of the Artist

Following this emotional turning point, Kya redirects her attention completely to nature and the arts. Nature essentially becomes Kya's artistic muse for creative inspiration. Huf (1985) states that female artists do not turn to males for artistic inspiration — Kya demonstrates this by choosing nature as her muse after her breakup with Tate. She throws herself into research in the marsh: collecting specimens, making notes, and painting detailed watercolours of what she observes. As she borrows books from the library in Barkley Cove and self-educates at home, her shack gradually fills with an expanding collection of flora and fauna and artwork:

By the end of August, her life once more found its footing: boat, collect, paint. Months passed. She only went to Jumpin's when low supplies demanded, but spoke very little to him. Her collections matured, categorized methodically by order, genus, and species; by age according to bone wear; by size in millimeters of feathers; or by the most fragile hues of greens. The science and art entwined in each other's strengths: the colors, the light, the species, the life; weaving a masterpiece of knowledge and beauty that filled every corner of her shack. Her world. She grew with them — the trunk of the vine —alone, but holding all the wonders together. (Owens 2018:76)

Kya's daily routine, culminating in painting, marks a decisive moment in her development as both scientist and artist, as the marsh becomes the “the trunk of the vine”: the structuring principle of “her world”. This scene foregrounds Kya's intellectual and creative maturation: she is no longer defined by illiteracy; instead, she emerges as a self-taught practitioner with an eye for detail. The image of Kya as “the trunk of the vine—alone, but holding all the wonders together” captures the tension at the heart of her Künstlerroman trajectory: her growth depends on this solitude in marsh, even as that solitude deepens her sense of isolation. She is now an artist to be taken seriously. Despite her growing feelings of loneliness, which even nature cannot soothe at this point, Kya remains focused on her art.

By the time Tate returns to apologise to Kya, her art collection is so impressive that Tate suggests she publish her works. After some time, Kya takes his advice and to her delight her first book, titled *The Seashells of the Eastern Seaboard*, is published in 1968. Kya's reaction upon receiving the hard copy of her first book is deeply emotional and reveals the personal meaning behind her artworks:

Now in her hands, the final copy — every brushstroke, every carefully thought-out color, every word of the natural histories, printed in a book. There were also drawings of the creatures who live inside — how they eat, how they move, how they mate — because people forget about creatures who live in shells. She touched the pages and remembered each shell and the story of finding it, where it lay on the beach, the season, the sunrise. A family album. (Owens 2018:121)

Kya's characterisation of the book as "a family album" foregrounds how this book exceeds scientific documentation, instead revealing her loving and affective relationship with the creatures she paints: it suggests that she sees the creatures of the marsh as kin. Kya's book "postulates a view on nature that does not privilege humans over the environment, but rather studies their reciprocal relationships" (Kraft 2021:143). In particular, Kya identifies with "creatures who live in shells" for she too has lived a reclusive life and felt forgotten. Moreover, much like a mollusc, Kya's hard (wild) exterior protects her soft (vulnerable) interior. This duality shapes how she is perceived by her two lovers: Chase is drawn to her wild and untamed nature, whereas Tate is responsive to her softness and vulnerability. (Chase's attraction to Kya will be discussed further in the next section of this chapter.) While some might simply view her book as "natural history" (biology and science) — cataloguing behaviour, habitat, and form — Kya elevates science to art, through attention aesthetic details: colour, pattern, and shape. For her observation of nature is inseparable from memory and feeling, reinforcing the fusion of art and science.

Additionally, the book is Kya's way of sharing her love of the marsh with others—specifically, the readers and viewers of her work. In this sense, she captures and translates the experience of the "sublime" (Varsamopoulou 2019), making the beauty of the natural world accessible to those who have not encountered it directly. Kya's book in the novel is "metafictional" and serves as lens to view Kya's "subjective" interpretation of the "sublime" (Varsamopoulou 2019:xv). In constructing a metafictional perspective, "a double reading, or a reading that attends to the metafictional dimension, fully allows the intra/intertextual dialogue — which is as much part of the novel as its fictional narrative — to take place" (xvi). The shift from Kya's personal encounter to shared experience can be further understood through Ettinger's concept of the matrixial borderspace. As the initial witness and creator of the artwork, Kya engages the secondary witness—the reader or viewer—in a relational space where affect and meaning are co-experienced. Their shared engagement with the marsh thus becomes not only aesthetic but also intersubjective. Moreover, revenue from the book sales is Kya's way out of poverty and means to independence as a woman who does not have to rely

on a father, brother, or husband for financial stability. From this point of view, nature's role as provider is highlighted, because it is Mother Nature that has provided the content and inspiration for Kya's successful book. In the context of Ettinger's matrixial borderspace, Mother Nature is as an active 'other' that participates in the co-creation of meaning, shaping Kya's artistic practice and the resulting drawings of the seashells.

As Kya reflects on what the book means to her, and gratitude towards Tate fills her heart, as he is the one who gave her the idea of publishing her research and illustrations.

Sitting at the kitchen table, she drafted a letter of thanks to Tate, but as she read it over, her heart paused. A note did not seem enough. Because of his kindness, her love of the marsh could now be her life's work. Her life. Every feather, shell, or insect she collected could be shared with others, and no longer would she have to dig through mud for her supper. Might not have to eat grits every day. (Owens 2018:109-110)

As Kya introspects in this passage, her values stand out — she has not forgotten the one behind her success; she fully acknowledges Tate's role in supporting her. Not only does she acknowledge his contribution towards her success, but she is also deeply appreciative of it. Even though Tate has hurt her in a romantic sense, she is still fair in assessing the positive role he played in her success as a published writer and artist. When Kya thinks that she will no longer "have to dig through mud for her supper" or "eat grits every day", she is showing her 'big picture' thinking, as she realises that the success of this book, is her freedom from financial constraint. She understands the impact of the published work on her life in a broader sense, and this also comes back to Tate who not only encouraged her to publish but was the one who first taught her to read and write. This is a positive example of a male mentor in Kya's life. After being let down by her father and older brother, Tate was the one who stepped up to help educate Kya.

Art, Autonomy, and the Saving of the Marsh

Following the happiness of publishing her first book, Kya is faced with an existential threat. She learns from her friend, Jumpin', that commercial property developers "were coming to the area with big plans to drain the "murky swamp" and build hotels" (Owens 2018:110). To these "developers" the marsh is wasteland; they do not see the value in the biodiversity which contributes to the balance of surrounding ecosystems. From an ecofeminist perspective, the

destruction of the marsh is not only an assault on the natural world, but an expression of a wider extractivist patriarchal logic that also devalues those who exist on the social margins including Jumpin' as a Black man and Kya as both a woman and a figure marked by class stigma as "white trash". With reference to David C. Miller's *Dark Eden* (1990), Kraft (2021) identifies that "American literature and culture" considers the swamp as a place associated with savagery, "sin, death, decay, witchcraft, and outlaws" (134). The swamp thus comes to represent a place of "otherness", where society's outcasts can find "shelter" (134). However, "society's outcasts and outlaws seem to be the only ones capable of finding their way through the swamps and thus are threatening civilization's power with their knowledge and ability to conquer nature" (134). Therefore, to the developers, draining the swamp has the added benefit of eradicating the outcasts and their perceived "risks and threats to the established social order of Barkley Cove" (Kraft 2021:133). This treatment of the marsh reflects the same patriarchal logic of control that is later directed at Kya, especially in Chase's attempts to dominate and possess her (discussed later in this chapter).

Kya thwarts the property developers' attempts to destroy her home, and with determination she sets out to solve the problem by challenging anthropocentric decisions that threaten nonhuman life in the marsh. Once again, through this act, Kya's resilience and strength are exemplified. Her confidence has increased after becoming a published author, giving her the courage to approach the Barkley Cove courthouse and secure legal ownership of her family's land. Using the money earned from her publisher, she pays the back taxes and takes ownership of "three hundred ten acres of lush lagoons, sparkling marsh, oak forests, and a long private beach" (Owens 2018:111). In this moment, Kya not only saves her home, but also protects the wildlife of the marsh. Significantly, when she returns home, she reassures the heron that "it's all right" and "the spot is your'n" (Owens 2018:111), suggesting a reversal in roles: whereas nature has long sustained and sheltered Kya, she is now able to protect it in return. In this sense, Kya and the marsh come full circle, as she repays the care that Mother Nature has extended to her throughout her life.

Kya's view of the marsh, as something valuable and worth protecting, echoes the attitudes of the early Romantics who opposed the destructive side effects of The Enlightenment. Varsamopoulou (2019) notes that "a distinguishing quality of the *Künstlerinroman* [...] is the adherence to Romantic discourse over and against narrative realism" (xiv).

Erotic Awakening, Debasement, and the Wounded Self

After years of loneliness following Tate's departure, Kya begins to experience desire for male companionship at the age of nineteen in 1965. However, this time, her longing for intimacy takes on a more explicitly sexual dimension — Kya begins to experience an erotic awakening. One day on Point Beach, she notices herself feeling attraction towards Chase Andrews (Barkley Cove's star quarterback and admired businessman). Chase is also attracted to Kya as he is "intrigued by her self-reliance as well as her beauty"; she stirs "curiosity" and "desire" in him (169).

During their first outing together — a secluded picnic on the beach — Chase makes an unwanted sexual advance. Kya pushes him away and leaves. After he apologises and promises to treat her with greater respect, she agrees to see him again. Chase thereafter replaces overt force with deception and manipulation. Kya does not realise that Chase's pursuit is shaped by sexual entitlement and a desire for control. Although Kya is sexually drawn to Chase, she remains hesitant about becoming intimate. This would be her first sexual experience, making the moment an especially significant threshold in her coming-of-age — one she does not take lightly. Chase exploits that vulnerability by creating the expectation of marriage. Her consent is therefore shaped by deception and unequal power rather than by straightforward mutuality.

Away from Kya, Chase boasts about his sexual encounters with her to his friends in ways that demean her. His comments include "she's wild as a she-fox in a snare", "just what you'd expect from a marsh minx", and "worth every bit a' the gas money" (Owens 2018:100). Chase's language reflects patriarchal attitudes and reveals how he views Kya. By describing her as a "she-fox in a snare", he inadvertently suggests that he has trapped her, thereby exposing the predatory nature of his pursuit. Furthermore, by claiming that she is worth the money spent on petrol, he treats their relationship as a transaction and Kya as a sexual commodity. His words therefore demean, eroticise and animalise Kya, while also presenting female desire as shameful. This sexual double standard can be understood through Freud's (2014[1912]) concept of the Madonna-whore complex, which feminist critics have extended to examine how patriarchal societies police women's sexuality and desire (Kane and

Schippers 1996). Chase's male friends admire his promiscuity, whereas Kya's sexual desire becomes a source of judgement, mockery and contempt.

For a time, Kya experiences her relationship with Chase as pleasurable and exciting. There are times when he plays the harmonica for her and she sings along (Owens 2018: 83, 92, 101). Their shared music creates moments of romance and intimacy, making the relationship appear affectionate and mutually enjoyable. Kya interprets the melancholy in Chase's playing as evidence of emotional depth, thinking that he "most had a soul" when he performed "these melancholic tunes" (101). The songs also carry historical and social associations, with some recalling the country's history of slavery and the wider socio-political climate of the period. The song, "Michael Row the Boat Ashore", reminds Kya of her mother who used to also sing the same tune. Chase's music as an artform highlights Ettinger's matrixial borderspace, since the music carries memory and feeling between people; an aesthetic representation of trauma (Ettinger 2001). The song's origins in the African American spiritual tradition connect it to experiences of enslavement and suffering, but also of hope. Kya and Chase engage with this history through the song, while Ma is brought into the scene through Kya's memory. Without equating Kya's experience with slavery, the song's themes of oppression and freedom anticipate Chase's later attempts to dominate and control her.

After becoming physically intimate, the dynamics of their relationship change. Chase does not visit Kya over Christmas but continues to encourage her belief that they will marry. She is therefore shocked and feels betrayed when she discovers through a newspaper announcement that he is engaged to his supposed "friend"³, Pearl Stone. When Kya ends their relationship, Chase responds with anger and violence. His behaviour eventually culminates in a physical assault and attempted rape, after which Kya begins to view him as a continuing threat to her safety and survival.

Chase confronts Kya after she has broken up with him, revealing how his obsessive and coercive control has been masquerading as love. Despite her repeated refusals — "Don't touch me" (Owens 2018:134), "No, stop!" (135) and "Leave me alone" (137) — he ignores

³ In the narrative, Chase had introduced Pearl Stone to Kya as his friend. Kya had seen them together before amongst their other friends therefore Kya had no way of knowing they were romantically involved. Kya had sometimes watched Pearl and her friends having fun and wished to be a part of their social circle. Kya never knew their names but had come up with descriptions to name them: "Tallskinnyblonde, Ponytailfreckleface, Shortblackhair, Alwayswearspearls, and Roundchubbycheeks" (Owens 2018:45).

her and attempts to overpower her physically. His language makes the patriarchal violence of the moment explicit: “Like it or not, you’re mine” (135). Through Kya’s focalisation, this assault is linked to her earlier family trauma through the sudden flash of recognition, “Just like Pa hitting Ma” (135), showing how the attack reactivates older memories of abuse. Yet the scene is not only one of violation, but also of resistance: Kya fights back and escapes, although she is left visibly shaken, with “hands shaking” (135) as she flees. The assault therefore leaves her not simply hurt, but living in terror. A realisation dawns on her: “being isolated was one thing; living in fear, quite another” (144).

The novel presents Kya as driven towards an extreme response by fear, isolation, and the failure of social protection. She recognises that the gendered assumptions of Barkley Cove make it unlikely that her account of Chase’s violence will be believed or that she will receive protection. Fearing further assault, Kya comes to regard killing Chase as her only means of securing her safety. Kraft argues that “[p]ushing Chase Andrews from the fire tower into the swamp is not an immoral act in Kya’s understanding of life and death, but merely an expression of her struggle for life” (2021:141–142). I concur with Kraft’s reading. Having been raised largely outside human social institutions, Kya regards the marsh as her primary teacher, and her moral reasoning is shaped by the laws of survival she observes there. In the natural world, deception and violence may be necessary to escape a predator or eliminate a threat. Kya therefore understands Chase’s murder according to this survival logic rather than the moral conventions of Barkley Cove. This interpretation does not absolve Kya or make the murder ethically unambiguous; it explains how she can be both a survivor of Chase’s violence and responsible for his deliberate death.

Kya is abused by Chase, in a similar fashion to the way her mother is abused by her father; and much like her mother, Kya takes refuge in the arts through poetry and painting. This cycle of gender-based violence is representative of intergenerational trauma. Marinella Rodi-Risberg (in Kurtz 2018:119-120) explains that trauma is “communicable from one generation to another” and that “the modes of transmission range from the molecular to the psychological, the intrafamilial, and beyond to the socioethnocultural and the political”. I argue that not only does Kya face personal trauma from her experiences with her family and cultural trauma from her community, but also intergenerational trauma as passed down to her from her parents. Experiencing abuse from Chase leads to a life-changing realisation regarding her mother’s abandonment of the family. After years of questioning why her

mother left, Kya finally understands the kind of fear and distress Ma experienced at the hands of Pa's violent abuse. The realisation comes to Kya as she looks upon her "monstrous" appearance caused by Chase's physical assault on her (139).

Her face darkened to green-purple now, eye swollen like a boiled egg, neck stove-up. Parts of her upper lip twisted grotesquely. Like Ma, monstrous, afraid to go home. In sudden clarity Kya saw what Ma had endured and why she left. "Ma, Ma," she whispered. "I see. Finally I understand why you had to leave and never come back. I'm sorry I didn't know, that I couldn't help you." Kya dropped her head and sobbed. Then jerked her head up and said, "I will never live like that—a life wondering when and where the next fist will fall. (Owens 2018:139)

The image of Kya's injuries highlights the brutality of the attack. Her upper lip is described as "twisted grotesquely", while Kya sees herself as "[l]ike Ma, monstrous" (Owens 2018:139). Importantly, this monstrous appearance is not inherent in Kya but has been inflicted upon her through male violence. The description also recalls the derogatory names, such as "swamp trash", through which the people of Barkley Cove repeatedly present her as socially aberrant (Owens 2018:16, 28). Read alongside Huf's discussion of the female artist, the image acquires further significance: "images of monsters are common, suggesting that the woman artist sees her refusal to conform to a traditional role as making her a freak, an aberration of her sex" (1985:12). Kya's refusal to submit to Chase's expectations therefore parallels her broader refusal to conform to the restrictive gender roles that seek to limit her independence and artistic development.

As Kya experiences the epiphany, she vocalises her thoughts as if speaking to her mother. She utters an apology to her mother and sobs in powerlessness, until she makes the decision to not live the same way her mother did. In *Künstlerinroman*, "the relationship of the female artist to the maternal is a source of contradiction and collision, for she may combine the desire for the mother's unconditional love ("I want to have that") with the critical addition of the question "Do I want to be that?" (Hankins 1991:395). Kya musters strength in this moment and refuses to be a victim of abuse. It is almost as if she is making a promise to her mother and herself to not repeat the same fate. The urgency to create a different life from her mother's goes beyond survival. Kya will not relinquish her artistic goals and dreams in the way that Ma did. Looking back at Ma's departure, it becomes apparent in this moment why Ma wore "alligator shoes" when leaving (Owens 2018:11). Alligators symbolise strength,

power and survival. Ma was trying to take back her power from Pa; she walked out wearing “gator heels” in quest for survival (11).

Kya’s erotic awakening with Chase does not culminate in a stable romantic pair bond, but in a traumatic recognition of the costs of heteronormative intimacy. This recognition, in turn, leads to another existential awakening: her mother’s silenced life and (in contrast) Kya’s own need for a very different mode of selfhood — one more closely aligned with art, autonomy, and a non-dominating pair bond. Ma’s life was stifled under the conditions of domestic abuse — besides being permanently separated from her children, she never realises her full artistic potential. Ma was a woman with feeling, sensitivity, and artistic expression, yet her artistic journey was thwarted. In a sense her story was an unrealised *Künstlerinroman* in Kya’s story. Some of her art survives, but only belatedly, as a kind of fragmentary inheritance. Kya’s recognition of her mother’s suffering is therefore not only psychological; it can also be read as an awakening to the gender-power dynamics that can silence or destroy women’s artistic lives. That, in turn, gives greater weight to Kya’s own movement toward independence and self-authorship. Kya feels “compelled to finish the incomplete or frustrated artwork of [her] mother” (395). Her erotic awakening thus has a double effect. On the one hand, it is wounding: it makes her more wary of human intimacy, especially the heterosexual couple bond. On the other hand, it is paradoxically generative, because it drives her inward, where longing, betrayal, and trauma are increasingly reworked through artistic expression. According to Huf (1985), “she must give birth to herself” after losing her mother as artistic mentor, and her “rebirth as an artist is of necessity a self-birth” (153).

Additionally, in *Künstlerinroman* terms, Chase’s role as the “foil” in the narrative serves to contrast his manipulative and violent nature with Kya’s innocence and vulnerability (Huf 1991:29). Chase’s betrayal of Kya also places Tate in a less severe light. Tate’s abandonment of Kya seems less devastating than Chase’s attempted rape of Kya. This makes it easier for the reader to forgive Tate for hurting Kya when comparing him to Chase.

Maternal Recognition and Artistic Inheritance

Jodie’s unexpected return to the marsh in the winter of 1968, when Kya is twenty-two years old, brings two key revelations for Kya: one involving Ma and the other involving Tate.

Jodie's return is set in motion when he comes across Kya's book — he is surprised to learn that Kya still lives in the shack and eagerly returns to reunite with her. Kya's authorship has made her visible; her art literally becomes the means by which family recognition and connection returns to her. Having her work widely recognised across the country is also validating for Kya as an artist. Kya is overjoyed to be reunited with Jodie, but her happiness is short-lived, as Jodie brings news of their mother's death. For Kya, "this is one of the happiest and yet saddest days of [her] life" (Owens 2018:120).

Jodie explains to Kya that their mother left them to live with their aunt because she was experiencing mental illness. Ma's condition worsened because she also got sick with leukaemia, and this led to her eventual death. Kya is devastated to learn that she will never see her mother again. She had never lost hope of seeing her mother until this moment. Kya had chosen not to leave the shack because she always hoped her mother would return. Though devastated about the permanent loss of her mother, a part of Kya is also relieved to learn the reasons why her mother abandoned them. She now knows that her mother had planned to return to them, but circumstances and her failing health had prevented her. Jodie eases Kya's heartbreak by telling her that her mother never forgot them. While she was away, she painted pictures of her children. Jodie brings some of these pictures for Kya and she hangs them up in the shack. Receiving her mother's paintings introduces a maternal artistic lineage. Kya is not simply an isolated artist emerging out of nowhere; she can now be understood as inheriting, however belatedly and painfully, a maternal genealogy of artistic expression.

Ma's paintings bring Kya peace and a new revelation; Kya notices a painting of herself and Tate together. Jodie explains that Tate had always been protective of Kya, and he encourages Kya to forgive Tate for hurting her because Tate is a good person. Jodie tells Kya about a time when Tate stood up to Pa for her.

One afternoon Tate boated into our lagoon, where Pa was pulling on his poke, really drunk. You were wading and Pa was supposed to be watching you. Suddenly, for no reason at all, Pa grabbed you by your arms and shook you so hard your head was thrown back. Then he dropped you in the mud and started laughing. Tate jumped out of the boat and ran up to you. He was only seven or eight years old, but he shouted at Pa. Of course, Pa smacked him and screamed at him to get off his land, never come back or he'd shoot him. By this time we'd all run down to see what was happening.

Even with Pa ranting and raving, Tate picked you up and handed you to Ma. He made sure you were all right before he left. (Owens 2018:119)

This passage delivers two important messages: the severity of Pa's abuse and the extent of Tate's care for Kya. Pa seems to be out of control in this scene. He laughs after dropping Kya in the mud, showing his cold-hearted and possibly psychopathic nature. Pa's violence is juxtaposed with Tate's protection. Even at the tender age of "seven or eight years old", Tate is willing to fight a grown man for Kya's protection. Tate displays bravery and strength of character whereas Pa's choice to hit to child displays weakness and cowardice. While Pa laughs at Kya in the mud, Tate remains with her to make sure she is okay before leaving. Tate hands Kya over to her mother, bringing mother and child together. This is the opposite of what Pa does; Pa drives Ma away from Kya and her other children.

As Jodie retells this story, Kya realises that Tate had always been looking out for her, and that she had also been searching for him every time she went into the marsh. Within the matrixial borderspace, Ma's paintings have spoken to Kya psychically. In this case, Kya is the witness that co-creates meaning with Ma and the paintings themselves. Without intending to, Ma and the painting have reminded Kya of Tate's goodness, and this begins to reorientate Kya away from a predatory or coercive relationship, toward a more sustaining and enabling form of connection. More than being a romantic partner, as outlined in Buckley's (1974) framework, Tate is the mentor whom Huf (1985) associates with artistic and intellectual growth, encouragement, recognition, and relational support.

Conclusion

Kya's development in Chapter Two moves from an exalting relationship that awakens artistic possibility, through public authorship and growing autonomy, into a dark erotic awakening that exposes the violence of patriarchal intimacy; this crisis then leads to a painful recognition of maternal suffering and, finally, to a renewed understanding of a female artistic inheritance (or genealogy). In *Künstlerroman* terms, the corruption of desire has a double effect: it leaves Kya more wary of human intimacy, especially the heterosexual couple bond, yet it is also paradoxically generative, driving her inward, where longing, betrayal, and trauma are reworked through artistic expression.

Kya's story fulfils the *Künstlerroman* criterion of having two lovers: one exalting and the other debasing (Buckley 1974). These relationships directly and indirectly fuel Kya's passion for the arts. With Tate's guidance and encouragement Kya learns to read and this results in her publishing a book of her illustrations and writing poetry. Kya's poetry is discussed in the next chapter. When Tate abandons Kya, she throws herself deeper into her work as an artist and researcher, becoming fully committed to her artistry and rarely leaving the marsh which is her artistic muse. Kya's success as an artist leads to further personal advancements. Using the money earned from her publications, she is able to take ownership of her family's land and save the marsh from greedy corporations that want to turn the marsh into commercial property. If it had not been for Tate teaching Kya how to read, she would not have been able to read her family's names and documents that lead to her taking ownership of their land. Chase brings music back into Kya's life through the songs he plays on his harmonica, and one of the songs he plays brings back the memory of Kya's mother singing it. Art is always a part of Kya's life, in one form or another. In the matrixial borderspace (Ettinger 2006a), art connects Kya to her mother, Tate, Chase, and nature. Chase's abuse of Kya reveals the social challenges (Hankins 1991) facing Kya in terms of gender-based violence in patriarchal societies. Kya challenges the social constraints (Varsamopoulou 2019) and cultural expectations (Huf 1985) for women to silently accept abuse from their male counterparts. Kya's fight for freedom from abuse results in further suffering, as she makes a decision that is morally ambiguous as it blurs the lines between self-defence and murder.

Chapter Three: Embracing an Artistic Vocation upon Maturity

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine Kya's transformation from trauma survivor to renowned author. Her incarceration and the threat of possible execution force her into a period of painful self-reflection, after which she returns to the marsh with renewed emotional strength, maturity, and self-possession. This trajectory recalls Buckley's (1974) account of the Bildungsroman plot, which is also relevant to the artist's novel, in which the protagonist returns home after a period of painful self-searching and demonstrates a measure of success or wisdom. Kya's return, however, revises this pattern. She does not return to the marsh in order to display her achievement to the community, but because the marsh remains the place where she feels safest, most rooted, and most fully herself. Her return is therefore marked by humility, reserve, and emotional resilience.

To understand Kya's transformation, I analyse her time in jail, her decision to be a recluse, her reconciliation with Tate, her poetry as a form of ongoing catharsis, and her impact on Barkley Cove. The significance of Kya's poetry is examined through Rueckert's ecocritical theory on poetry as an energy source, Caruth's theory on the language of memory, and Ettinger's theory on witnessing in the matrixial borderspace. In addition, this chapter draws on Huf's (1985) and Hankins's (1991) feminist accounts of the Künstlerinroman to consider how Kya's mature choices resist intersecting forms of gendered and class-based marginalisation, especially the social expectations surrounding marriage, domesticity, respectability, and female artistic vocation.

Embracing Identity as a Non-conforming Artist

During Kya's trial for Chase's murder, her time in jail is marked by loneliness and fear. Although she receives support from Jodie, Tate and his father Scupper, as well as from Jumpin', Mabel, her lawyer and her publisher, the wider community of Barkley Cove vilifies her while presenting Chase as the victim. Her only companion during this time is a stray cat whom she calls Sunday Justice. Over the two-month period leading up to her trial on 20

February 1970, Kya spends time soul-searching as she recalls her childhood memories and the traumas she has faced. She begins to make sense of everything that she has been through and the events that have led her to this point.

Eventually, Kya comes to the realisation that she no longer desires to be part of the Barkley Cove community. Through the process of the trial, Kya realises that Barkley Cove is made up of intolerant, judgemental, and superficial people. By hearing her lawyer's defence in the courtroom, she becomes aware of everything that has been said about her, and how the community truly perceives her. Though she already has partial awareness of this, Tom's defence makes their blatant prejudice visible. Tom lists their pejorative labels for her, and their neglect of her as part of their community. Tom's defence also offers a counter-narrative, validating Kya as a self-educated and renowned naturalist, author and marsh expert. Tom dismantles the prejudice that lies in the name "Marsh Girl" by renaming Kya "Marsh Expert" (Owens 2018:172-173). "Marsh Girl" infantilises Kya: the name was given to her as a child, but when she grows up, she is still referred to as a girl. Tom corrects the community's mindset in this regard by removing "girl" from the name and replacing it with "expert". By reframing Kya in the eyes of the jury and the community, he restores her dignity and personhood.

As a result, Kya no longer seeks validation or approval for her existence from the unhealthy community of Barkley Cove. This demonstrates Kya's newfound maturity and confidence. It is also a turning point in her healing process. She is no longer an insecure girl and young woman seeking external validation. She is now content with who she is as a person. Kya embraces her identity as an artist and refuses to conform to "the rigid system of social norms" (Hankins 1991:405) dictating her lifestyle based on "the suffocating constraints of gender stereotypes" (Varsamopoulou 2019:xxiii). In Kya's case, these gendered constraints are intensified by class prejudice, since the community also marks her as "white trash".

Kya has learned self-love and self-acceptance while away from the marsh. She is now able to understand that the community to which she once desperately wanted to belong is no longer what she needs or wants in her life. She prefers to live alone in peace rather than to engage with people who are racist, classist, sexist, and elitist. Kya is now content to be a "boundary figure" (Hankins 1991:397) on the threshold between life and art, where she chooses her "otherworldly" (Varsamopoulou 2019:xi) relationship with the marsh over the community.

Being an “outcast/outlaw” no longer feels exclusionary; instead, Kya has found her own way of “balancing and orienting [herself] to art, to boundaries, to life” (Hankins 1991:408). She does not “avoid the site of boundaries” but instead embraces it (408).

Prioritising Self, Art, and the Sublime

Returning to the marsh after the trial, Jodie tries to convince Kya to maintain connections with people. Kya responds with visible pain and anger. She makes it clear to Jodie that she has been the victim all along, and that Barkley Cove has failed to recognise the harm it has done to her. Raising her voice, she explains: “I lived alone almost all my life. I never hated people. They hated me. They laughed at me. They left me. They harassed me. They attacked me” (Owens 2018:178-179).

Jodie tries his best to console and support Kya, but he does not understand what Kya has been through or what she really feels. He is too quick to give Kya advice without first taking time to understand her. Being misunderstood frustrates Kya and she raises her voice to Jodie. When Jodie says goodbye to Kya before abandoning her (as discussed in Chapter One), she experiences similar frustration although she suppressed her voice. This time Kya raises her voice and articulates her thoughts clearly, and when she has finished having her say, she does not wait for his response. Instead, she walks away from him — a reversal of the time he walked away from her. Kya’s decision to walk off into the oak forest demonstrates that she feels more understood by the oak trees than she does by Jodie. Over the years, the oak trees have been with her, growing strong alongside her — the oak trees will not leave Kya, and she finds comfort in them after this distressing moment. Kya feels close kinship to the oak trees. As symbols of longevity and ancient wisdom, the oak trees represent a steadfast support that she finds lacking in her relationship with her brother. Kya’s retreat into the forest therefore reinforces a pattern that runs throughout the novel: when human relationships fail her, she returns to nature for solace and stability. This movement recalls Varsamopoulou’s (2019:248) argument that the artist-protagonist repeatedly returns to the sublime in an effort to ease the discomfort of recurring traumatic memories. After Jodie leaves, Kya settles back into the marsh and resumes her research and writing in a renewed state of calm.

According to Kraft (2021), “classic tropes and characters associated with Southern Swamps in the period from the mid-nineteenth century to the present” represent the swamp as a place of the “unknown” where marginalised characters are “allowed new experiences of self-discovery” (135-136). Kya’s decision to retreat into the marsh therefore follows the trope whereby the marsh functions as “a place of potential escape from rigid social codes and from collective racial and cultural sin of Southern traditions” (135). The “social world” views the marsh as a place of “danger”, “ambiguity” and “conflicting possibilities” where one could lose their “stable sense of self and identity” (137), but for Kya the marsh is a part of her identity — in oneness with the marsh, Kya makes meaning out of her life and finds her purpose for living. Thus, Kya’s core existential needs as a human are fulfilled through interconnection with nonhuman life in the marsh. Additionally, “the marsh means shelter, economic security, and medical supply” for Kya (140). And arguably the most important aspect of living in the marsh, it allows her the space she needs to have “alternative perspectives” as an artist which are not necessarily accepted or appreciated by those in Barkley Cove (138). Kya’s books offer her readers “an enabling distance to look at Southern wetlands from an ecocritical perspective” (142-143). Her “literature is not merely an isolated aesthetic product but a ritualised form of reflection and critique in and for a given society” (142). Kya’s ecocritical understanding of the marsh therefore drives her purpose in raising eco-consciousness. Kraft notes that Kya’s books “hold the potential to become a means to create or increase an ecocritical consciousness that inspires readers to critically reflect on their relationship with wetlands and eventually change their behavior towards this unique ecosystem” (146). Although Kraft makes this point about Owens’s novel as a whole, her argument can be extended to Kya’s own nature writing within the narrative. Like Owens’s text, Kya’s books invite readers to view wetlands through an ecocritical lens and to reconsider their relationship with the more-than-human world.

As time passes, she gains more recognition for her work. The narrative explains that “Kya published seven more award-winning books. And though she was granted many accolades — including an honorary doctorate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill — she never once accepted the invitations to speak at universities and museums” (Owens 2018:183). Kya’s decision to remain a recluse and not engage with the public, despite being famous, reveals a few insights into her mindset. Kya’s refusal of public appearances suggests her continued guardedness and her reluctance to expose herself to the judgement of others. Although her books circulate widely, she maintains a protective distance from her readers.

Ettinger's (Ettinger 2001:90) theory is useful here because Kya's art enables a mediated form of encounter: through her books and poems, readers can engage with traces of her trauma, ecological knowledge, and emotional life without requiring her direct social presence. In this sense, Kya's work creates a matrixial space of relation, where art becomes the medium through which memory, loss, and attachment are witnessed. Her connection with readers therefore remains indirect, aesthetic, and carefully bounded, allowing her a form of belonging that does not compromise her need for solitude and safety.

Choosing a Supportive and Accepting Life Partner

Though Kya is happy to be exonerated and back home in the marsh, the moment is bittersweet because she experiences a profound feeling of loss — she misses Tate immensely. The absence of Tate forces her to recognise that her attachment to him has long been woven into her attachment to the marsh itself. The following passage reveals that Tate has remained central to Kya's emotional life, even during the years when she has outwardly rejected him:

Agony ripped her. Finally, after a lifetime, she admitted it was the chance of seeing Tate, the hope of rounding a creek bend and watching him through reeds, that had pulled her into the marsh every day of her life since she was seven. She knew his favorite lagoons and paths through difficult quagmires; always following him at a safe distance. Sneaking about, stealing love. Never sharing it. You can't get hurt when you love someone from the other side of an estuary. All the years she rejected him, she survived because he was somewhere in the marsh, waiting. (Owens 2018:179)

This passage reveals that Kya's love for Tate has always been mired in secrecy ("sneaking" and "stealing" moments together (179)) and self-protection. Her "agony" (179) arises from the sudden realisation that Tate has been one of the hidden forces drawing her back into the marsh throughout her life. The estuary is both a meeting ground and barrier: it allows Kya to love Tate from a protected distance, preserving the possibility of attachment while shielding her from further abandonment. Nature therefore does not merely provide the setting for their relationship; it mediates the terms on which Kya is able to love. Tate, like the marsh, represents continuity, safety, and shared ecological knowledge. Their bond is rooted in a mutual attentiveness to the natural world, through his scientific work and her artistic practice, making the marsh the space in which love, kinship, and creative vocation converge.

Tate's appreciation for poetry also resonates with Kya. His father, Scupper, raises him to value emotional honesty, respect for women, and attentiveness to art. Scupper once tells Tate:

Don't go thinking poetry's just for sissies. There's mushy love poems, for sure, but there's also funny ones, lots about nature, war even. Whole point of it—they make ya feel something." His dad had told him many times that the definition of a real man is one who cries without shame, reads poetry with his heart, feels opera in his soul, and does what's necessary to defend a woman. (29)

Tate and Scupper read poetry together and remember Tate's late mother through shared feelings and poetic language. This emotional openness makes Tate a source of safety for Kya. His gentleness contrasts sharply with Chase's possessive and predatory behaviour. Kya herself compares the two men, observing that Tate "had seemed as natural and accepting as other marsh creatures", while with Chase "she felt exposed, as if someone were filleting her like a fish" (87). Tate's connection to poetry and nature therefore aligns him with the marsh world that has always sustained Kya. After her time in jail, Kya is able to return to him with a more mature understanding of love, trust, and companionship. In terms of Buckley's (1974) framework, Tate fulfils the role of an "exalting" romantic partner who supports the protagonist's emotional and artistic development (17).

Though Kya and Tate never marry in a legal or institutional sense, they form a deeply committed partnership on terms that Kya defines for herself. Her refusal of conventional marriage signals her resistance to the domestic and patriarchal expectations placed on women, especially the assumption that intimacy must be formalised through socially sanctioned structures (Hankins 1991: 397). This choice highlights her desire to redefine intimacy outside of patriarchal models of marriage that would confine her to the "domestic sphere" (Hankins 1991:397). According to Huf (1985), female artists are "plucky in love, and daring in their sexual adventures" — Tate loves and appreciates these qualities in Kya. When Tate asks Kya to marry him, she responds by saying, "We are married. Like the geese" (Owens 2018:182). Tate accepts her answer by saying, "Okay. I can live with that" (182). This answer realigns marriage with the patterns of the natural world. Kya embraces the idea of the pair bond, but she refuses to have that bond defined by the legal, religious, or patriarchal conventions of marriage. Notably though, Kya keeps the secret of her murder and her identity as Amanda Hamilton. These secrets do not necessarily prove that she lacks trust in Tate; they may also suggest the persistence of trauma, the need for self-protection, and the

preservation of a private artistic self. It is only after her death that Tate discovers the hidden poems and the shell necklace, and his decision to destroy the evidence indicates his continued loyalty to Kya and his final act of protection over the life she chose to keep partly hidden.

As the person closest to Kya, Tate witnesses the effects of violence and abandonment in her childhood, and he also knows enough about Chase to recognise the threat he poses. At the Christmas gala dinner in Barkley Cove, Tate overhears Chase speaking about Kya in a degrading way. Chase boasts about his relationship with her, objectifying her in front of his friends and treating her as a sexual conquest (Owens 2018:100). Hearing this is unbearable for Tate, as he respects and values Kya. However, his emotional restraint comes to the fore in this moment as rather than confronting Chase, he forces himself to walk away, restraining his anger. This scene establishes an important contrast between the two men, and two competing forms of masculinity. Chase embodies a toxic, possessive masculinity rooted in sexual entitlement, public performance, and the objectification of women. Tate, by contrast, represents a non-dominating masculinity, characterised by restraint, emotional openness, respect for Kya's autonomy, and shared attentiveness to the natural world.

These opposing masculinities also illuminate the divided ways in which Kya is perceived and positioned within the novel. Through Chase, she is reduced to an object of desire, conquest, and social shame; through Tate, she is recognised as an artist, naturalist, and autonomous subject. This contrast also highlights Kya's representation as a liminal figure Hankins (1991) might say, "an enigmatic threshold figure" (398). Kraft (2021) describes the marsh as liminal space "between water and land, between human and nonhuman, and between life and death" (131); similarly Kya occupies a threshold position between two social categories: she is victim and survivor, outsider and artist, accused murderer and celebrated naturalist. But, as far as Tate is concerned, Kya is an innocent victim. His point of view is confirmed by his decision to protect Kya's reputation after her death. He chooses to keep her dark secret and protects her reputation because he understands that Kya has acted in self-defence. He never loses his respect for her, even after finding proof that she murdered Chase.

"Marsh Expert": Award-winning Author, Honorary Doctor, and Legend

By the end of her life in 2009, Kya is a legend in Barkley Cove. The town transforms from an unknown backwater town into the famous resting place of Catherine "Kya" Danielle Clark

(Owens 2018:182-184). She dies at the age of sixty-four and, ironically, the whole town attends her funeral, believing that she never should have been accused of murder in her younger years. The community that once hated her now display her books in their stores and promote Barkley Cove as her hometown, thus revealing their fickle nature. When Kya was a “nobody”, they disrespected and neglected her, even as a starving child, but when she is rich and famous, they want to cash in on her successes. This reiterates the selfish and shallow nature of the community. Even while they “support” her, they are in truth being manipulative, as they use her name and fame for their own personal advancement. They profit off Kya’s hard work by selling her books in their stores.

Kraft (2021) posits that Kya’s efforts for eco-consciousness were ultimately futile because Barkley Cove transformed into a commercial hub for tourists. In fact, she argues that Kya was the reason the town turned into a tourist trap, meaning that Kya’s intentions defeated its purpose:

Her books do indeed get attention, however, not in the way she hoped. Paradoxically, her books seem to contribute to yet another type of exploitation of the Southern wetland coast in the form of overflowing tourism. Instead of an ecocritical awareness and the urge to protect Southern wetlands, Kya’s fictional readers want to consume the beauty of the marsh that she accurately describes to them in her books. Attracted by the wonders of Southern wetlands, the fictional readers come to Barkley Cove and indulge in unsustainable leisure activities that destroy this unique environment even more. Jumpin’s shack is replaced by a “fancy marina” and a “gift shop” that sells Kya’s books as souvenirs to tourists. (362)

Kraft’s assertion that Kya’s books lead to the “exploitation of the Southern wetland” is too strong, and misplaced. Kraft fails to foreground that the developers’ plans for the marsh predate Kya’s fame as an author, which suggests that the later commercialisation of Barkley Cove cannot be attributed solely to the circulation of her books. Unfortunately, Kya and her readers were not powerful enough to stop the town from being developed but it was not Kya’s fault. The capitalists saw an opportunity to use Kya’s name to draw in tourists, but Kya never encouraged her readers to visit — she had declined invitations to public events to keep distance between herself and her fans.

Kya does not pay much attention to what goes on in town as she quietly lives and works in the marsh, rejecting social norms and expectations. Kya finds contentment in nature, Tate,

and her work. This fragile peace is captured in the narrator's observation that that "though Kya was never completely healed from the scorn and suspicion surrounding her, a soft contentment, a near-happiness settled into her" (182). She accepts that she is different from others and appreciates the uniqueness of her life's journey. Her legacy does not depend on biological descent or genealogical continuity; rather, it continues through her books, art, ecological knowledge, and forms of more-than-human kinship in the marsh. This recalls Donna Haraway's call to "Make Kin Not Babies!" (2016:102), which asks readers to imagine kinship beyond reproductive futurity and biological inheritance. Kya's life is exemplary of Haraway's call to make conscious, chosen forms kin across species boundaries. Kya has collected her kin: Tate, the marsh, and the many human and nonhuman lives with which she shares her world. The book ends by describing Kya as being "bonded to her planet" and "rooted solid in this earth" — these descriptions reiterate the interconnection between humans and nature, and it brings focus back to the earth as mother.

It is perhaps understandable that existing scholarship has not foregrounded *Where the Crawdads Sing* as a Künstlerinroman, since Kya's artistic development is embedded within, and almost eclipsed by, more obvious plot elements: the story of her survival amid poverty, class prejudice and gendered violence, and the suspense of the murder mystery. Yet this embeddedness is what makes Hankins's account of the revisionist female artist's novel is particularly relevant to Kya's journey. Hankins calls for us to reconsider how we define and measure artistry and the artist in the Künstlerinroman. She argues that the "shift in emphasis from *the work of art as product* and the *individual artist as subject* is not necessarily a sign of failure; perhaps the point is to re-define the artist, to re-negotiate the role of art in the context of a *whole life*, placing the artist within culture, rather than limiting the artist to solitude in an ivory tower (my emphasis; 396). Thus, Kya's story of becoming an artist includes the gender-related obstacles she faces, her traumatic interactions with her community, and the losses she experiences while pursuing her artistic endeavours. Reading the novel as a Künstlerinroman therefore reveals that art is not merely a sign of achievement for Kya, but a mode of survival.

Forging New Paths with Lily Briscoe

To clarify Kya's place within the Künstlerinroman tradition, it is useful to read her alongside Virginia Woolf's character, Lily Briscoe, one of the most significant female artist figures in the modernist canon. This comparison shows how Kya shares the genre's concern with

women's creative autonomy under patriarchy, while Owens's novel extends this tradition through its emphasis on class marginalisation, gendered violence, ecological belonging, and art as survival.

As a boundary figure finding "the balance between art and life" (Hankins 1991:397), Kya's struggles as a female artist parallel some of the gender-related obstacles faced by Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1936). Set across the years before, during, and after the First World War, *To the Lighthouse* (1936) offers an important modernist example of female artistic self-definition through Lily Briscoe, whose painting develops in defiance of the gendered assumption that "women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf 1936:78). *Where the Crawdads Sing* (2018) as a postmodernist novel, set after World War II, motivates women to walk away from abusive relationships. Kya's story comes with an important lesson, too — the novel critiques the conditions that leave abused women without protection and it draws attention to the long afterlife of trauma. Both Lily and Kya are forging paths of independence for themselves in patriarchal worlds, but their stories are not simply about resisting patriarchy — both are female artists negotiating conditions that threaten to constrain their vision, freedom, and creativity.

Lily is disparaged by Charles Tansley (a male scholar) who says, "women can't paint, women can't write" (Woolf 1936:78). Through her commitment to painting, Lily resists the gendered assumptions that confine women to maternity, marriage, and domestic care. Read alongside Lily Briscoe, Kya similarly refuses to be a submissive woman, claiming instead a life defined by artistic freedom. Furthermore, Kya's refusal to marry Tate does not signal a rejection of love. She embraces the pair-bond as a natural and freely chosen form of attachment, while refusing to submit that bond to the patriarchal and legal structures of institutionalised marriage. In choosing partnership on her own terms, Kya follows the patterns of the natural world rather than the dictates of an oppressive, patriarchal social order. Her life with Tate is therefore grounded in mutual care, sexual autonomy, shared ecological work, and respect for her independence. In comparison to Lily, Kya appears as a more socially marginalised but also more publicly recognised artist.

This public success complicates the pattern Hankins (1991) identifies in the *Künstlerinroman*. Hankins observes that female artist figures are often "late bloomers by male standards" (1991: 395), noting that "Lily Briscoe is around forty when she adds the final stroke to her

painting” (395). Kya partly departs from this pattern, since she begins publishing her illustrated nature books in her early twenties and achieves financial independence through her artistic and scientific work. Her development remains consistent with the broader concerns of the *Künstlerinroman*, however, because her creative autonomy is achieved only through a prolonged struggle against abandonment, sexual violence, class prejudice, imprisonment, and public judgement. Her trial and return to the marsh mark a further stage in this development: she is legally vindicated, reclaims her chosen life, and continues to define herself through art, knowledge of the marsh, and her independence. This trajectory recalls Varsamopoulou’s account of the *Künstlerinroman* as a “self-reflecting structure” concerned with the artist’s “growth, development, and background” (2019: xiii), as well as the emergence of “critical awareness of the metier of literary art” (xii-xiii).

The Significance of Art amongst the Creative-Minded

Having situated Kya within the *Künstlerinroman* tradition through Woolf’s Lily Briscoe, this section turns to the role of poetry, song, and pseudonymous authorship in Kya’s artistic formation. Owens does not present Kya’s creativity only through drawing, collecting, and scientific illustration, or through singing hymns and songs. Through Amanda Hamilton, Kya enters the public literary sphere of Barkley Cove indirectly: her poems circulate in local magazines, while her identity as their author remains hidden. The movement from listening to other people’s words to writing and publishing her own marks an important stage in Kya’s development as a female artist. Poetry becomes a medium through which she processes her feelings of abandonment, desire, grief, fear, and moral ambiguity. At the same time, poetry allows her to speak to the Barkley Cove community from which she remains socially excluded. This section therefore argues that Kya’s poetry extends the novel’s eco-*Künstlerinroman* structure by showing how artistic voice emerges from ecological intimacy, trauma, secrecy, and survival.

Kya and several other characters are repeatedly drawn to poetry and song, and these artistic forms serve several important narrative functions. First, the poems and lyrics operate as intertextual allusions, bringing the voices of other poets and musicians into Owens’s novel and placing Kya’s own emerging creativity within a wider artistic tradition. Second, they function as a form of characterisation: the poems Ma marks, the poems Scupper reads to Tate,

and the poems Kya remembers or writes all reveal emotional states that the characters cannot always express directly. Third, poetry and song create bonds between characters. They connect Kya to Ma, Kya to Tate, Tate to Scupper, and, more uneasily, Kya to Chase. These shared artistic moments are marked by emotional intensity, and pockets of intimacy and mutual care and recognition. Finally, poems and songs help establish mood, develop recurring motifs of loss, longing, nature, and survival, and sometimes foreshadow later events in the narrative. The following examples show how Owens uses poetry and song as intertextual devices that deepen characterisation, create emotional connections between characters, and trace Kya's gradual emergence as an artist in her own right.

After Kya's fight with her father over Ma's letter, she tries to console herself with a hymn about God (Owens 2018:40). The hymn evokes the presence of God as a source of comfort during suffering, but for Kya it is also connected to Ma, since Ma was the one who had taken her to church. Although Kya cannot remember the words clearly, she attempts to sing the line, "and He walks with me when dew is still on the roses" (40). As it has come to be expected of Kya, the only lyrics she remembers are the ones related to nature: "dew" and "roses". Dew on roses is associated with freshness, newness, innocence, a moment of beauty before the day becomes ordinary or tainted. The hymn implicitly alludes to The Garden of Eden, a place of spiritual perfection and divine presence. While Kya does not connect with the Christian anthropocentric image of God, she finds 'god' in natural imagery. In another part of the novel, art is used to demonstrate bonding between a parent and child — this interaction, involving poetry, takes place between Tate and his father, Scupper.

During father-son bonding time, Scupper reads Tate a poem and they have a heart-to-heart talk about Tate's late mother (29). The poem is light-hearted and Tate has a chuckle at one of the verses which mocks Plumtree in Tennessee. Scupper tells Tate that his mother also found that part funny. Scupper has used the poem to teach Tate a little about his mother. As both Tate and his mother laugh at the same verse, it shows their similarity in personality — both having the same sense of humour. The poem has created the opportunity for Tate to bond with his mother even though she no longer lives.

And there sat Sam, looking cool and calm, in the heart of the furnace roar;
And he wore a smile you could see a mile, and he said, 'Please close that door.
It's fine in here, but I greatly fear you'll let in the cold and storm—
Since I left Plumtree down in Tennessee, it's the first time I've been warm.' (29)

After this emotional conversation, Tate finds a poem by Thomas Moore which reminds him of Kya (29). It is about a woman paddling her canoe in the swamp. This poem works as foreshadowing in the narrative, hinting that Tate and Kya will be together as life partners. The poem also foreshadows Kya's dark experience at the swamp when she acts like a female firefly killing Chase. At the end of the novel, the lines, "I'll hide the maid in the cypress tree / When the footstep of death is near" are repeated — Tate recalls these lines when burying Kya amongst the Cypress trees after death (184).

... she's gone to the Lake of the Dismal Swamp,
Where, all night long, by a fire-fly lamp,
She paddles her white canoe.
And her fire-fly lamp I soon shall see,
And her paddle I soon shall hear;
Long and loving our life shall be,
And I'll hide the maid in a cypress tree,
When the footstep of death is near. (29-30)

Tate and Kya also bond over poetry. Both their parents recited poetry to them, and they carry this tradition over into their relationship. The first poem which Tate recited to Kya, written by Edward Lear, was about a spider and a fly: "Mr. Daddy Long-legs / And Mr. Floppy fly" (lines 1 and 2). This shows how the elements of the natural world almost always feature in their discussions. Their fascination with botany and biology overlap with their interests in literature. In the poem, the spider and the fly escape on a boat to a faraway place. The spider and the fly represent Tate and Kya, who later in the novel leave society to make their own life, just the two of them together in a remote place (the marsh).

Then Mr. Daddy Long-legs
And Mr. Floppy Fly
Rushed downward to the foamy sea
With one sponge-taneous cry;
And there they found a little boat,
Whose sails were pink and gray;
And off they sailed among the waves,
Far, and far away. (61)

After Tate recites the first poem to Kya, she takes up making her own "simple verses, singsong and silly" (61). She did this while "she boated through the marsh or looked for shells" (61) as it helped take her mind off her loneliness. Kya was quick to learn how to

create these verses after hearing just one poem from Tate. This reveals Kya's natural talent to create poetry — it comes easily to her. One of the verses Kya composes focuses on a mother bird taking flight: "There's a mama blue jay lifting from a branch; I'd fly too, if I had a chance" (61). Although simple, the line reveals much about Kya's emotional life. Her attention is drawn first to a "mama" bird, suggesting her continued search for maternal presence within the natural world after Ma's abandonment. The image of flight is equally significant. As Huf (1985) notes, flight is a recurring image in the *Künstlerinroman*, often expressing the female artist's desire to escape restriction, confinement, or prescribed roles (12). Kya's verse therefore links maternal longing with the wish for release: she does not want to escape the marsh itself, but the loneliness, rejection, and emotional confinement that shape her childhood.

After being prompted by Tate to read poetry, Kya finds her mother's book of poetry and reads some of Ma's favourite poems (61). She reads a fragment from James Wright's "Evening" (1957), a poem that centres on longing for a lost child. Wright (2011) is a Pulitzer prize-winning American poet who often wrote about poverty and the Great Depression in the Midwest. In the context of Ma's abandonment, the lines seem to speak indirectly to the maternal bond Kya has lost and still longs to recover.

Suddenly lost and cold,
I knew the yard lay bare,
I longed to touch and hold
My child, my talking child,
Laughing or tame or wild . . .
Trees and the sun were gone,
Everything gone but us.
His mother sang in the house,
And kept our supper warm,
And loved us, God knows how,
The wide earth darkened so. (61)

Following the poem by Wright, Kya reads a verse by another Pulitzer prize-winning poet, Galway Kinnell (1982) who is known for writing poems about the natural environment. The poem is titled "The Correspondence School Instructor Says Goodbye to His Poetry Students" and is about isolation and longing for connection.

I did care...
I did say everything I thought

In the mildest words I knew. And now, ...
I have to say I am relieved it is over:
At the end I could feel only pity
For that urge toward more life.
... Goodbye. (61)

Though Kya did not understand the meaning of these poems, she felt that they brought her closer to her mother, as if her mother were communicating with her:

Kya touched the words as if they were a message, as though Ma had underlined them specifically so her daughter would read them someday by this dim kerosene flame and understand. It wasn't much, not a handwritten note tucked in the back of a sock drawer, but it was something. She sensed that the words clinched a powerful meaning, but she couldn't shake it free. If she ever became a poet, she'd make the message clear. (62)

Kya's creative and analytical mind is at work as she reads Ma's favourite poems by Wright and Kinnell — she thinks about her future as a poet and how her poems would differ from theirs. Though her thoughts are simply hypothetical at this point, later on in life Kya does become a poet who writes vivid poetry. Her poetry is accessible and understandable to the locals in Barkley Cove. Later in the narrative, after Jodie explains Ma's departure and death to her, Kinnell's poem returns to Kya's mind (119). With new insight into Ma's departure and death, Kya now understands why Ma had underlined Kinnell's poem in her book. The poem resonates with Ma's feelings about doing her best for her family but still needing to leave them because she could not live a full life under Pa's control. Thus, Kinnell's poem has communicated Ma's thoughts and worked as a mechanism to facilitate bonding between Kya and her late mother.

Reading the words of poets and hearing the lyrics of singers feeds Kya's imagination. When Chase asks Kya out on their first date, she recalls one of her favourite poems by John Masfield called "Sea Fever" (153), and immediately after reciting that poem, she recites one of her own poems about Tate. As an artist, Kya appreciates the works of other artists and their art sparks her creativity. Similarly, when Chase plays his harmonica, Kya sings along. Chase and Kya bond over music and some of his tunes remind her of Ma. Chase's songs include "Dixie" by Daniel Decatur Emmett (83), "Mr. Tambourine Man" by Bob Dylan (100), and the Irish folksong "Molly Malone" (101). Apart from educating Kya on popular culture, these

songs reveal Chase's personality and character, as well as his perspectives and emotions⁴. Originally written for the blackface minstrel stage in 1859, "Dixie" expresses a nostalgic longing for an idealised American South. During the Civil War, it became closely associated with the Confederacy and Southern cultural pride (Dziak 2023). However, the antebellum social order it evokes was sustained by slavery and white supremacy. The nostalgia attached to the song is therefore inseparable from the racial hierarchy of the antebellum South, in which white people enslaved Black people and placed themselves at the top of the social order. Whether or not Chase consciously endorses this history, his choice of song associates him symbolically with the racial privilege and white supremacy embedded in Barkley Cove's social order. By contrast, "Mr. Tambourine Man" (1965) is commonly interpreted as a song about escape, freedom, and artistic expression. Its inclusion suggests that Chase experiences his time with Kya as a temporary departure from the conventions of Barkley Cove. Unlike Kya, however, Chase can return at will to the status and privilege that the town affords him. Nevertheless, in the marsh, he joins her world where nature and imagination meet to create a magical and surreal experience with art.

The songs Chase plays also acquire more personal meanings through their associations with Kya. "Molly Malone", first published in 1876, tells the story of a hardworking street vendor who sells cockles and mussels before dying at an early age; according to the song, her ghost continues to wheel her barrow through Dublin. The song invites a comparison with Kya, who similarly supports herself by gathering and selling mussels. It may also suggest that Kya continues to haunt Chase's thoughts when he is away from her. His refusal to leave her alone after marrying Pearl should not, however, be romanticised: it increasingly reveals his possessiveness and desire to control her rather than an inability to end a loving attachment.

Throughout the novel, poetry, song, and visual art create connections between Kya and other characters. Art provides a shared point of contact even in her relationship with Tom. While Kya is in jail, he brings her a book containing paintings of shells, using her interest in art and the natural world to open communication and gradually earn her trust. While in jail, Tom uses a book with nature art to earn Kya's trust. At first, Kya is too afraid to speak to her lawyer, so he brings her "a glossy coffee-table book" with "life-sized oil paintings of shells from the

⁴ I have not included full analyses of these songs as social commentary; nor have I included a comprehensive psychoanalysis of how these songs represent Chase's inner mind, as that exceeds the scope of my project which pertains to Kya's artistic development. Investigating these musical intertexts could be a separate future study.

most distant shores on Earth” (132). The book is titled, *The Rarest Shells of the World*. After receiving this gift, Kya slowly begins to warm up to Tom and eventually they are able to communicate about her defence case.

For Ma, Kya, Tate, and Chase, poetry and song are expressions of their inner worlds. Through the works of artists around them, their thoughts and emotions became known. When feeling overwhelmed while on trial, Kya recites poetry by Emily Dickinson (2016), who is known as a major poet of grief, death, nature, perception, and spiritual uncertainty. As Kya thinks about life imprisonment away from her loved ones, the words of Dickinson from the poem “The Bustle in a House” resonate with her:

The sweeping up the heart,
And putting Love away
We shall not want to use again
Until Eternity. (151)

Kya is facing the possibility of permanent separation from the marsh and from the people she loves, and Dickinson’s image of “sweeping up the heart” gives language to grief that must be contained, folded away, and endured.

The use of songs and poems as a literary device is fitting for a *Künstlerinroman*. Owens has enriched the narrative as songs and poems carry cultural significance. As each verse is unpacked, layers of meaning, with which to understand the characters and setting, unfold. Silenced characters are heard and the thoughts of the living characters are revealed through the words of other artists. As characters enjoy, appreciate and share others’ art, they bond with each other in the matrixial borderspace (Ettinger 2006a).

The Healing Power of Poetry

Apart from drawing and publishing books, Kya writes poetry which she publishes in local magazines under the pseudonym of Amanda Hamilton. (See the appendix at the end of this dissertation for a full list of Kya’s poems.) Kya never tells anyone that she is Amanda Hamilton, perhaps due to the fear of having her poems rejected or because anonymity gives her the freedom to express her mind without reservation. Part One of the novel does not include any of Kya’s poetry, most likely because she is illiterate for this period of her life, but

throughout Part Two, Kya's poems are referenced when she is being introspective or when she is overcome with emotion. Kya's poetry "becomes [her] space for personal confessions and psychological introspection, social critique and cultural analysis, linguistic playfulness and narrative experimentation" (Varsamopoulou 2019:xiii).

Kya's poems are marked by vivid natural imagery and by recurring emotions of love, loneliness, grief, guilt, and fear. They also raise philosophical questions about death, survival, responsibility, and moral ambiguity. Moreover, the imagery glorifies nature as the sublime, showing its power and omnipresence, often in hyperbolic language. Kya's appreciation for nature's aesthetic is woven into her poetry as a recurring theme, thus revealing the way in which her worldview entwines with natural law. As an example, in the poem (which I have titled "Fading Moon, Follow" for ease of reference), Kya writes to the moon about loneliness. She personifies the moon, calling out to it as if it were sentient. She calls on the moon to understand her feelings of loneliness, because much like herself, the moon is far removed from people, distanced and separated in silence for a long time.

Fading moon, follow
My footsteps
Through light unbroken
By land shadows,
And share my senses
That feel the cool
Shoulders of silence.

Only you know
How one side of a moment
Is stretched by loneliness
For miles
To the other edge,
And how much sky
Is in one breath
When time slides backward
From the sand. (Owens 2018:108)

Kya's use of lunar and celestial imagery in this poem demonstrates her development from illiteracy into a self-conscious poetic voice. The "fading moon" is addressed as a companion and witness, able to "follow" her footsteps and "share" her senses. This is significant because Kya turns to the nonhuman world for the recognition and companionship she cannot reliably find in human society. The poem extends this moon imagery into a wider language of

distance and vastness: loneliness is “stretched” for “miles”, while “one breath” seems to contain an entire “sky”. Through these images of moonlight, silence, distance, sand, and sky, Kya transforms private loneliness into an expansive ecological landscape. Kya’s identification with the natural world is even more explicit in the next poem, which I have titled “Child to Child” for ease of reference:

Child to child
Eye to eye
We grew as one,
Sharing souls.
Wing by wing,
Leaf by leaf
You left this world,
You died before the child.
My friend, the Wild. (110)

Here, Kya personifies the wild as a companion with whom she has grown “child to child” and “eye to eye”. The repetition of this structure creates a sense of intimacy and equality, suggesting that Kya does not see nature as an object to be observed from a distance, but as animate, a friend and companion with whom she has shared a childhood. The rhyme between “child” and “Wild” reinforces this bond, linking Kya’s own identity to the natural world. The repeated phrases “wing by wing” and “leaf by leaf” also gather together animal and plant life, suggesting that Kya’s sense of kinship extends across the more-than-human world. By capitalising “Wild”, nature is addressed as a known “friend”. Yet the poem is also elegiac: the line “You died before the child” suggests that Kya experiences the loss of wildness as a form of personal bereavement. The poem therefore links ecological loss with childhood loss, showing how deeply Kya’s emotional life is bound to the survival of the natural world.

In “Broken Gull of Brandon Beach” reveals Kya’s characteristic movement from natural observation to emotional self-recognition: the damaged bird becomes a mirror for her own wounded life. The repeated question, “But who decides the time to die?” introduces one of the novel’s central moral ambiguities: whether death belongs to divine will, human choice, natural process, or violent intervention. Kya’s repeated question does not offer a simple answer; instead, it suspends the reader between pity, fear, and moral uncertainty. The poem therefore anticipates the ethical complexity of Chase’s death, where questions of victimhood, survival, justice, and violence become difficult to separate. As a “boundary figure” (Huf 1985), Kya occupies an uneasy position between these different systems of meaning. She has

been shaped by scientific observation and the laws of the natural world, yet she also lives within a human community governed by moral judgement and legal consequence.

“Broken Gull of Brandon Beach”

Winged soul, you danced the skies,
And startled dawn with shrilling cries.
You followed sails and braved the sea,
Then caught the wind back to me.
You broke your wing; it dragged the land
And etched your mark upon the sand.
When feathers break, you cannot fly,
But who decides the time to die?

...

You disappeared, I know not where.
But your wing-marks still linger there.
A broken heart cannot fly,
But who decides the time to die? (141)

This concern with injury, entrapment, and survival continues in Kya’s later poems. Significantly, the first of Kya’s poems to appear in the narrative (which I have titled “Trapped Inside” for ease) is linked to the heartbreak caused by Tate, while the last is “The Firefly”, the poem associated with Chase’s death (185). Taken together, these poems trace Kya’s movement from abandoned love to threatened survival, showing how poetry becomes the form through which she processes the two most consequential romantic relationships of her life. She describes trapped love as a “caged beast eating its own flesh” (lines 2-3), which implies that repressed love is self-harming and destructive. She believes that love should not be pushed away and people should freely love whomever they want. She uses the word “breathe” to signify that love should be alive. When love is trapped, it is self-destructive, but when it is free, it brings life. This poem foreshadows what is to come later when Kya’s love for Chase is trapped inside her.

Trapped inside,
Love is a caged beast,
Eating its own flesh.
Love must be free to wander,
To land upon its chosen shore
And breathe. (80)

In the poem, The Firefly, which is about murdering Chase, love has gone wrong; it has turned destructive and led to a fatal outcome. Entrapment is described in both poems. In “Trapped

Inside”, love is trapped inside Kya, and it causes her internal suffering. However, in the poem about Chase, Kya sets a trap for Chase; her love is not self-destructive this time, instead she turns the destruction outwards at the one causing her pain. Huf (1985) explains that images of entrapment (in the forms of “cages, jars, and glass bells”) in the *Künstlerinroman* suggest that “the female artist sees herself as caught in a trap, not simply in the trap of the feminine role but also in a more complicated kind of double bind” (12). Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963) presents a useful example of this imagery. A bell jar is a bell-shaped glass dome often used to enclose, display, preserve, or isolate an object. In Plath’s novel, the image suggests a transparent but suffocating enclosure: The protagonist Esther Greenwood can see the world around her, but feels separated from it, trapped inside a space that distorts her relation to herself and others. Esther suffers from depression and describes the feeling of being depressed as being trapped in a bell jar. Much like Kya, Esther also survives an attempted rape and feels constrained as a woman who has less freedoms than men when it comes to reproduction choices. Esther’s physical entrapment occurs in mental hospitals. In Kya’s case, she feels trapped by overwhelming pain or fear and a predatory ex-lover. Esther’s physical entrapment occurs in mental hospitals. In Kya’s case, she feels trapped by overwhelming pain or fear and a predatory ex-lover. Entrapment is a recurring theme in the narrative: Ma felt trapped by Pa and had to escape his abuse; likewise, Chase trapped Kya in an abusive relationship, then she retaliated by trapping him at the water tower which resulted in her being trapped in a jail cell. Kya’s specimens are stored in jars, again repeating the theme of entrapment. Whilst Ma and Kya are able to escape their cages (both metaphorical and literal), Chase is unable to escape his, setting up Kya as “the firefly” who devours her mate. The firefly representing light yet at the same time devouring its mate seems contradictory, but it reiterates Kya’s duality which shows up in symbols throughout the narrative (as previously discussed). In “Broken Gull of Brandon Beach” (Owens 2018:141), Kya questions who decides death, and in “The Firefly” (185) it is evidenced that Kya has sided with natural laws on who determines death. Kya has followed evolutionary instincts based on survival of the fittest. From nature, she has learned how to survive predators, and in her childhood, Jodie had taught her about predators. He “had said that if a bird becomes different from the others—disfigured or wounded—it is more likely to attract a predator, so the rest of the flock will kill it” (49). From this, Kya understood that she was an easy target. Chase had wounded her, making her vulnerable for attack.

The Firefly

Luring him was as easy
As flashing valentines.
But like a lady firefly
They hid a secret call to die.
A final touch,
Unfinished;
The last step, a trap.
Down, down he falls,
His eyes still holding mine
Until they see another world.
I saw them change.
First a question,
Then an answer,
Finally an end.
And love itself passing
To whatever it was before it began. (185)

Through written word, Kya communicates thoughts which she cannot verbalise to anyone in real life. Therefore, the poems work as a means of communication between her and the community that shuns her. In publishing her poetry in the local community magazines, Kya finds her own way of making her voice be heard amongst a people who try to silence her. Thus, poetry works as a form of liberation for Kya. Rueckert (in Glotfelty and Fromm 1996) suggests that poems are “stored energy” and a part of “energy pathways that sustain life” (108-110). Based on his theory, I posit that Kya’s poetry works as a source of life (or lifeline) to resuscitate her from the life-threatening traumas she encounters. Kya’s energy and essence is captured in her written poetry through her words, expressions, and symbols, and her messages are carried in the form of energy to her readers. By linking Ettinger’s (2006a) theory on the matrixial borderspace and Rueckert’s (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996) theory on poetry being energy, I argue that energy transfers from the creator to the readers in the matrixial borderspace through the artwork. As Kya’s poetry connects her to her readers in the matrixial borderspace, Kya experiences a sense of community. In reality, Barkley Cove denies her a space in their community, but by connecting with readers in Barkley Cove through her poetry, she carves out her own space in the community as the local poet Amanda Hamilton. Publishing her poetry in local magazine gives Kya the opportunity to be heard by those who shun her. Though she writes under a pseudonym, her words are still being heard by those who try to silence her.

Knowing that no one will believe her about Chase's abuse, she writes a poem (which I have titled "I Must Let Go" for convenient reference) to describe the regret she feels about getting romantically involved with him. As she compares Chase to Pa and remembers Ma's words about men being "*leapfrogging sneaky fuckers*" (107), she recites the poem to herself. This poem alludes to her plan to murder Chase. She speaks of releasing him "to float adrift with seaweed" (lines 16 and 17). This refers to the way she dropped him from the water tower into the swamp amongst the seaweed. The poem is ironic in tone and subverts the expected with the unexpected. While love is expected to draw people closer, love does the opposite with her and Chase; it separates them.

I must let go now.
Let you go.
Love is too often
The answer for staying.
Too seldom the reason
For going.
I drop the line
And watch you drift away.

All along
You thought
The fiery current
Of your lover's breast
Pulled you to the deep.
But it was my heart-tide
Releasing you
To float adrift
With seaweed. (107)

Poetry also works as a catalyst for healing by allowing Kya to take ownership of her own narrative. By placing herself in the position of narrator in the poems, she is able to take charge of the narrative, thus reshaping her own reality. Caruth's (2001) account of the "language of memory" (15) or "the language of the life drive" (18) relates to Kya's experience because it suggests that traumatic experience may return through forms of speech, repetition, and narration that bear witness to survival. She explains that as the survivor takes charge of their own story, they are able to gain control over the narrative, thus giving them agency in their story. By acquiring power over the narrative, the survivor gains power over their emotions and choices. This process transforms Kya's traumatic memories into narrative memories, thus bringing relief from post-traumatic stress and aiding post-traumatic growth. For example, in the poem below (which I have titled "Sunsets are Never Simple" for ease of

reference) Kya writes using the subjective plural pronoun “we”. This places her in control of the narrative being told while sharing responsibility with the collective about “covering truths” and “covering lies” (line 15).

Sunsets are never simple.
Twilight is refracted and reflected
But never true.
Eventide is a disguise
Covering tracks,
Covering lies.

We don't care
That dusk deceives.
We see brilliant colors,
And never learn
The sun has dropped
Beneath the earth
By the time we see the burn.

Sunsets are in disguise,
Covering truths, covering lies. (126)

Ted Morrissey, author of *Trauma Theory As an Approach to Analyzing Literary Texts* (2021), writes that symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder may include isolation, loneliness, departmentalised perception, merging of unreal worlds, profound feelings of disconnectedness with oneself and others, and paranoia (117,179). In this poem (which I have titled “Never Underrate” for the purpose of referencing), Kya explains the disconnection she experiences between heart, mind, and actions. She explains that her behaviour and decisions are based on emotions which her mind cannot conceive, showing the cognitive dissonance she feels as she reflects on what she has done. Her mind tries to reconcile how Chase’s actions and her actions have led to this outcome.

Never underrate
the heart,
Capable of deeds
The mind cannot conceive.
The heart dictates as well as feels.
How else can you explain
The path I have taken,
That you have taken
The long way through this pass? (158)

Poetry works as a medium of expression for Kya's intense emotions so when she experiences the distressing symptoms of trauma, she is able to release these strong emotions in her poems, especially when it comes to the abuse received from Chase. According to Judith Herman (1997), the defining symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) include hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. She explains that "hyperarousal reflects the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion reflects the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; constriction reflects the numbing response of surrender" (43). The next poem (which I have titled "You Came Again" for easy reference) is reflective of Kya's symptoms of PTSD. Kya describes the way in which Chase stalks her like a predator. She is always uneasy knowing that he will return. Thoughts of him "haunt" (line 7) her and she wishes to be free of him forever. She describes his manipulation and deceit as "blinding [her] eyes" (line 2). She writes about "the shimmer of the sun on the sea" (line 3) and "the moon", indicating that Chase emerges like a predator after sunset, arriving at night to taunt her in darkness. Kya feels threatened by Chase, leading to hyperarousal as she is expectant of the danger he brings to her.

You came again,
 Blinding my eyes
 Like the shimmer of sun upon the sea.
 Just as I feel free
 The moon casts your face upon the sill.
 Each time I forget you
 Your eyes haunt my heart and it falls still.
 And so farewell
 Until the next time you come,
 Until at last I do not see you." (178)

Post-traumatic growth occurs when a survivor is able to transform their life in a positive manner after experiencing post-traumatic stress. As defined by Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (2004), "the term post-traumatic growth refers to positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances" (1). Kya's poetry demonstrates her transformation from fear and helplessness to agency and empowerment. In the words of Robert L. McLaughlin (Morrissey 2021), "art seeks to make us whole" (9), and in Kya's case, poetry as a written art form has indeed functioned as a tool for her healing, bringing much-needed catharsis. Before knowing that Kya is Amanda Hamilton, Tate had commented that he did not think much of Hamilton's poetry, but Kya never let his opinion stop her from writing and publishing her poetry. This suggests that the

healing benefits which Kya received from expressive writing, outweighed the opinions of her readers. Her poetry was personal and served her emotional needs.

Conclusion

Though being on trial for murder is excruciating for Kya, it gives her the time she needs to stop and examine her traumas. Hearing her lawyer's point of view also gives her new revelations into her predicament. As an adult in jail, Kya is able to look back on her childhood, her teenage heartbreak, and her abusive relationship with Chase, with a new level of understanding. As Kya processes the pain, she comes to terms with the reality of what she has been through, and the severity of it. At the same time, she recognises her own resilience and achievements: becoming literate without receiving a formal education, taking ownership of her family's land and saving the marsh from destruction. This recognition contributes to greater self-awareness and, ultimately, self-acceptance. After her acquittal, Kya withdraws from the hostile social order of Barkley Cove, establishes a stable relationship with Tate, and actively pursues her work as a naturalist, writer, illustrator, and researcher. Through publication, her writing and visual art enter a matrixial borderspace in which her experience of the marsh can be encountered by readers and viewers. Art therefore enables Kya to form connections with others even while she limits direct contact with the wider community.

Conclusion

Through close analysis of key passages, this study has shown that *Where the Crawdads Sing* can be read as a Künstlerinroman within the frameworks developed by Buckley (1974), Huf (1985), Hankins (1991) and Varsamopoulou (2019). While the novel is commonly read as a murder mystery or coming-of-age story, its underlying structure traces the formation of a female nature artist. This dissertation also proposes the eco-Künstlerinroman as a useful critical term for an artist's novel in which a woman's artistic development is shaped by her relationship with the natural world. In Kya's case, the marsh acts as her refuge, classroom, mentor and principal artistic subject, while poverty, gender expectations and social exclusion restrict her development.

In terms of Buckley's (1974:17–18) criteria for the traditional Künstlerroman, *Where the Crawdads Sing* meets four key conventions. First, Kya has an antagonistic father. Pa is an alcoholic, a gambler and a disabled war veteran whose violence and neglect leave Kya with little support or opportunity to develop her artistic interests. Although he does not directly forbid her from making art, his misogynistic beliefs are evident in his abuse of Ma and his attempts to control his daughters. Second, Kya grows up in a rural environment and receives no sustained formal education. After her brief and distressing experience of school, the marsh becomes her classroom and teaches her about plants, animals and natural law. Before abandoning the family, Ma gives Kya a cultural education through painting, dance and poetry. Tate later becomes Kya's friend and mentor, teaching her to read and encouraging her to publish her research and illustrations.

The third genres conventions, in Buckley's formulation, concerns Kya's love relationships. In line with his third criteria, she experiences two contrasting love relationships, one exalting and the other debasing. Tate shares her love of the marsh, supports her intellectual and artistic development, and eventually becomes her life partner. Chase, by contrast, is controlling, manipulative and violent. His death leads to Kya's arrest, removal from the marsh and trial for murder.

Finally, Buckley's typical plot ends with a period of soul-searching in which the protagonist decides what kind of relationship with the wider world can be honestly sustained. In Owens's murder-mystery plot, Kya's trial and acquittal form the climax. Within her artistic-development plot, however, the trial functions as a period of enforced separation and

reflection, while the resolution occurs after her return to the marsh. Kya does not seek acceptance within Barkley Cove; instead, she chooses a private life with Tate and continues her work as a writer and illustrator. Owens therefore revises Buckley's model: Kya remains socially separate from the town but participates in the wider world through her publications, art and growing reputation.

As the preceding discussion of Kya's character arc makes clear, her artistic development does not follow a straightforward path. Her personal traumas, together with the restrictions imposed by Pa and the wider community, repeatedly interrupt her pursuit of art. Buckley's (1974) framework traces the comparatively linear development of the male artist, whereas the female artist's journey is often shaped by additional barriers arising from restrictive gender roles. Huf (1985), Hankins (1991) and Varsamopoulou (2019) revise the traditional *Künstlerroman* framework to account for these differences. They use the term *Künstlerinroman* — from the German *Künstlerin*, meaning “female artist” — to describe the female form of the artist's novel.

In keeping with these gender-conscious revisions of the *Künstlerroman*, Kya's narrative both draws on and extends the existing frameworks. She resembles Hankins's (1991) “boundary figure” because she occupies several ambiguous positions in the text. The marsh itself lies between land and water, while Kya lives between the marsh and Barkley Cove, belonging fully to neither the town nor its conventional society. Her poverty and gender contribute to her exclusion, while her lack of parental care places her between childhood and premature self-reliance. As Huf's (1985) “motherless daughter”, Kya is forced to raise and educate herself, and she finds in nature the protection, instruction and sense of kinship that her family and community fail to provide. Chase's death places her on another difficult boundary: she is both a victim of his abuse and, as the ending reveals, the perpetrator responsible for his death.

Kya's identity as an artist creates a further tension between domestic expectation and artistic independence. Ma faces the same conflict: when she leaves, Kya asks, “Who's gonna cook?” and “Who's gonna dance?” (Owens 2018:15), capturing the division between her domestic duties and her creative life. Kya initially wants to be accepted by Barkley Cove, but eventually rejects its restrictive expectations and chooses her artistic vocation and an unmarried partnership with Tate. Liminality is therefore evident not only within the novel's setting and Kya's characterisation, but also in its hybrid genre. *Where the Crawdads Sing* crosses the boundaries between murder mystery, coming-of-age narrative, ecological fiction

and Künstlerinroman. The term eco-Künstlerinroman names this hybrid form and shows how the traditional artist's novel is reshaped when nature becomes the female artist's teacher, refuge and artistic subject. Through Kya's published books and illustrations, her private relationship with the marsh also enters the matrixial borderspace, connecting her work with readers who share her interest in the natural world.

Where the Crawdads Sings (2018) extends the existing Künstlerinroman frameworks by placing the natural world at the centre of the female artist's development. Kya turns to nature and art for comfort and healing during periods of loneliness and trauma. Her experiences of the sublime in the marsh inspire her to record the plants and animals she observes through illustration, scientific writing and poetry. By personifying elements of the nonhuman world in her poetry, Kya gives expression to her close relationship with nature. Her art creates a matrixial borderspace (Ettinger 2006a) in which her private experience of the marsh is shared with her readers. Kya's artistic development, ambitions and work all arise from her sustained engagement with nature; her identity as an artist is inseparable from the marsh.

Kya's artistic formation, artistic goals, and artwork are a reflection of her deep immersion with nature; her identity is formed through relation with the marsh. Her language is infused with references to nature, and her thoughts are conceived through understanding natural laws. She is reliant upon nature for more than physical survival; nature gives meaning and purpose to her life as a researcher, writer, and artist. Her close observation of the marsh distinguishes her work and gives her books their richness, accuracy and originality. The natural world therefore provides both the subject of her art and the foundation of her career. Her publications bring her financial security and national recognition after years of poverty and exclusion. Although she is transformed in the public imagination from the "Marsh Girl" into a respected authority on the marsh, her identity remains rooted in the natural world. Her development thus reflects the novel's broader understanding of human life as inseparable from nature.

Building on the frameworks developed by Buckley (1974), Huf (1985), Hankins (1991) and Varsamopoulou (2019), I propose that the eco-Künstlerinroman traces a female artist who overcomes gender-based barriers through a close and sustained relationship with the natural world. Nature is not simply the setting or subject of her work, but a living force that shapes her artistic development; her creative awakening therefore occurs through ecological

immersion. More specifically, nature plays a maternal role by aiding her artistic development through protection, provision, guidance, or inspiration. In an Eco-Künstlerinroman, nature is a pedagogical and maternal space which creates alternative forms of belonging outside conventional society for female artists who are ostracised by their communities. Her art includes elements of nature, and the interconnection between humans and nature is important to her because it brings her healing and self-making through environmental intimacy. She reveres nature as the sublime; therefore, ethically relates to nature in her art-making processes and products. She has a mature and personal understanding of ecological balance and subverts anthropocentrism in her artworks and actions. Thus, her artistic journey and artwork result in creating eco-consciousness for her readers in the age of the Anthropocene when environmental precarity creates anxiety.

The eco-Künstlerinroman framework developed in this study offers a new way of understanding female artistic development in narratives where creativity is shaped by a close relationship with the natural world. Although this study applies the framework specifically to *Where the Crawdads Sing*, its wider relevance could be explored through further research. In this sense, the framework is heuristic: it generates new questions about how gender, social exclusion, artistic development and ecological attachment interact in different literary texts. Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972), for example, may offer a productive comparison because its female protagonist is an illustrator whose artistic and psychological struggles unfold during her return to the Canadian wilderness. A comparative study could examine whether this relationship between female creativity and the natural environment supports a reading of the novel as another eco-Künstlerinroman.

The present study also points towards opportunities for further research on the broader Künstlerinroman. As Hankins (1991) observes, narratives about female artists are frequently classified under other genres, particularly autobiography, without being recognised as Künstlerinromane. Huf (1985) draws particular attention to the limited recognition given to Black female artists within scholarship on the genre. Maya Angelou's *Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) for example, could be reconsidered as an autobiographical account of a Black woman's development as a writer and artist.

Other possible texts include Pam Jenoff's *The Orphan's Tale* (2017), in which Noa develops as a trapeze artist, and Isabel Allende's *Eva Luna* (1989), whose protagonist becomes a storyteller. These works are not necessarily eco-Künstlerinromane, but they demonstrate how

expanding the artistic forms recognised within the Künstlerinroman may bring previously overlooked female artists into discussions of the genre. Future research could examine how race, class, culture, trauma and different forms of artistic practice reshape the conventions of the female artist's novel.

Ultimately, this study has shown that *Where the Crawdads Sing* is not simply a coming-of-age narrative about an isolated young woman who becomes a successful naturalist. It can be read more specifically as an eco-Künstlerinroman, where artistic awakening is inseparable from ecological consciousness. Kya does not become an artist despite her life in the marsh, but through it: the marsh is not merely the setting of her story, but the foundation of her identity and creative work.

Appendix

Kya's Poems under the Pseudonym Amanda Hamilton (Owens 2018):

Trapped inside,
Love is a caged beast,
Eating its own flesh.
Love must be free to wander,
To land upon its chosen shore
And breathe. (80)

I must let go now.
Let you go.
Love is too often
The answer for staying.
Too seldom the reason
For going.
I drop the line
And watch you drift away.

All along
You thought
The fiery current
Of your lover's breast
Pulled you to the deep.
But it was my heart-tide
Releasing you
To float adrift
With seaweed. (107)

Fading moon, follow
My footsteps
Through light unbroken
By land shadows,
And share my senses
That feel the cool
Shoulders of silence.

Only you know
How one side of a moment
Is stretched by loneliness
For miles
To the other edge,
And how much sky
Is in one breath
When time slides backward

From the sand. (108)

Child to child
Eye to eye
We grew as one,
Sharing souls.
Wing by wing,
Leaf by leaf
You left this world,
You died before the child.
My friend, the Wild. (110)

Sunsets are never simple.
Twilight is refracted and reflected
But never true.
Eventide is a disguise
Covering tracks,
Covering lies.

We don't care
That dusk deceives.
We see brilliant colors,
And never learn
The sun has dropped
Beneath the earth
By the time we see the burn.

Sunsets are in disguise,
Covering truths, covering lies. (126)

Broken Gull of Brandon Beach

Winged soul, you danced the skies,
And startled dawn with shrilling cries.
You followed sails and braved the sea,
Then caught the wind back to me.
You broke your wing; it dragged the land
And etched your mark upon the sand.
When feathers break, you cannot fly,
But who decides the time to die?
...
You disappeared, I know not where.
But your wing-marks still linger there.
A broken heart cannot fly,
But who decides the time to die? (141)

Never underrate
the heart,
Capable of deeds
The mind cannot conceive.
The heart dictates as well as feels.
How else can you explain
The path I have taken,
That you have taken
The long way through this pass? (158)

You came again,
Blinding my eyes
Like the shimmer of sun upon the sea.
Just as I feel free
The moon casts your face upon the sill.
Each time I forget you
Your eyes haunt my heart and it falls still.
And so farewell
Until the next time you come,
Until at last I do not see you.” (178)

The Firefly

Luring him was as easy
As flashing valentines.
But like a lady firefly
They hid a secret call to die.
A final touch,
Unfinished;
The last step, a trap.
Down, down he falls,
His eyes still holding mine
Until they see another world.
I saw them change.
First a question,
Then an answer,
Finally an end.
And love itself passing
To whatever it was before it began. (185)

References

- Abrams, M. H. and Harpham, G. G. 2012. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Boston: Thomson Wadsworth Publishing.
- Allende, I. 1989. *Eva Luna*. London: Hamilton.
- Alter, A. 2019. 'The Long Tail of 'Where the Crawdads Sing''. *The New York Times*. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/21/books/where-the-crawdads-sing-delia-owens.html> [Accessed: 4 July 2026]
- Ananthi, M. and Vanitha, S. 2022. 'The Amalgamation of Human and Natural World: A Study of Delia Owen's Novel 'Where the Crawdads Sing''. *ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts*, 3(2SE), 55-61 [Online]. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v3.i2SE.2022.257>. [Accessed 01 August 2025].
- Angelou, M. 1969. *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Atwood, M. 1988. *Cat's Eye*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Belsey, C. 1980. *Critical Practice*. London: Methuen.
- . 2003. 'Reading and Critical Practice'. *Critical Quarterly*, 45(3), 22-31 [Online]. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-8705.00503>. [Accessed 24 October 2024].
- Browning, E. B. and Reynolds, M. 1857. *Aurora Leigh*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Buckley, J. H. 1974. *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Caruth, C. 1991. 'Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History'. *Yale French Studies*(79), 181 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930251>. [Accessed 20 September 2024].
- . 1996. *Unclaimed Experience Trauma, Narrative and History*. Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- . 2001. 'Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival'. *Cultural Values*, 5(1), 7-26 [Online]. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14797580109367218>. [Accessed 20 September 2024].
- Cather, W. 1915. *The Song of the Lark*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Chopin, K. 1899. *The Awakening*. Cambridge: Harvard University.
- Cornelius, B. J. and Rossmann, J. 2024. 'Rekindling Eco-Ubuntu in Sicelo Mbatha's Black Lion: Alive in the Wilderness'. *Scrutiny*2, 28(2), 142-157 [Online]. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/18125441.2024.2389437>. [Accessed 24 January 2026].

- Crenshaw, K. W. 2006. 'Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color'. *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning*(2-3) [Online]. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i2-3.28090>
- d'Eaubonne, F. 1974. *Le Feminisme ou La Mort*. Paris: Pierre Horay.
- Dickinson, E. 2016. *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing Group.
- Dziak, M. 2023. 'Dixie (song)'. *EBSCO Research Starters: Music* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/music/dixie-song>. [Accessed 24 August 2026].
- Ettinger, B. L. 2001. 'Wit(h)nessing Trauma and the Matrixial Gaze: From Phantasm to Trauma, from Phallic Structure to Matrixial Sphere'. *Parallax*, 7(4), 89-114 [Online]. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13534640110089276>. [Accessed 18 July 2025].
- . 2006a. *The Matrixial Borderspace*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- . 2006b. 'Matrixial Trans-subjectivity'. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3), 218-222 [Online]. Available at: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1177/026327640602300247>. [Accessed 9 August 2025].
- . 2016. 'Art as the Transport-Station of Trauma' in *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture* Switzerland: Springer.
- Felman, S. and Laub, D. 1992. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Fern, F. 1986. *Ruth Hall*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Freud, S. 1974. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press.
- . 2014. *On the Universal Tendency to Debasement in the Sphere of Love*. Redditch: Read Books Limited.
- Gaard, G. C. and Murphy, P. D. 1998. *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism: Theory, Interpretation, and Pedagogy*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Gardner, H. 2011. *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*. New York: Basic Books.
- Garrard, P. 2009. *Avoiding the Archetype: Reading and Writing the Female Artist*. Melbourne: RMIT University.
- Gaut, B. N. and Lopes, D. 2013. *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*. New York: Routledge.

- Glotfelty, C. and Fromm, H. 1996. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Goethe, J. W. v. 1989. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. New York: Suhrkamp Publishers.
- Gruesser, J. 2020. 'The Crawdads Sing in Poe Country: Delia Owens's Bestseller and "The Gold-Bug"'. *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, 21(1), 109-115 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5325/edgallpoerev.21.1.0109>. [Accessed 3 July 2025].
- Gustaman, F. I. and Lolowang, I. S. 2022. 'Struggle as Seen in Owen's "Where the Crawdads Sing"'. *SoCul: International Journal of Research in Social Cultural Issues*, 1(3), 163-171 [Online]. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53682/soculijrccsscli.v1i3.2636>. [Accessed 20 September 2024].
- Hankins, L. K. 1991. 'Alas, Alack! or A Lass, a Lack? Quarrels of Gender and Genre in the Revisionist "Künstlerroman": Eudora Welty's "The Golden Apples"'. *The Mississippi Quarterly*, 44(4), 391-409 [Online]. [Accessed 21 December 2025].
- Haraway, D. 2016. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Herman, J. L. 1997. *Trauma and Recovery*. London: Pandora.
- Huf, L. 1985. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: The Writer as Heroine in American Literature*. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing.
- Jenoff, P. 2017. *The Orphans Tale*. Ontario: Harlequin Books S.A.
- Joyce, J. 2015. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. New York: Open Road Media.
- Kane, E. W. and Schippers, M. 1996. 'Men's and Women's Beliefs about Gender and Sexuality'. *Gender and Society*, 10(5), 650-665 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189887>. [Accessed 2 May 2026].
- Kinnell, G. 1982. *Selected Poems*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Kraft, C. 2021. 'An Ecocritical Reading of the Marsh as a Liminal Space in Delia Owens's "Where the Crawdads Sing"'. *The Southern Quarterly*, 58(3), 131-150 [Online]. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/277/article/884448/pdf>. [Accessed 3 July 2025].
- Kristeva, J. and Roudiez, L. S. 1982. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kurtz, J. R. 2018. *Trauma and Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leopold, A. 2025. 'Who Was Aldo Leopold?'. *The Aldo Leopold Foundation*. Available at: <https://www.aldoleopold.org/about/aldo-leopold> [Accessed: 04 January 2026]

- Leopold, A. and Schwartz, C. W. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McCullers, C. 1940. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Miller, D. C. 1990. *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press
- Morrissey, T. 2021. *Trauma Theory As an Approach to Analyzing Literary Texts*. Illinois: Twelve Winters Press.
- Witherspoon, R. & Newman, O. 2022. *Where the Crawdads Sing* [Motion Picture]. United States: Sony Pictures.
- Owens, D. 2018. *Where the Crawdads Sing*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- . 2021a. 'About the Author'. *Delia Owens*. Available at: <https://www.deliaowens.com/> [Accessed: 11 July 2025]
- . 2021b. 'Crawdads Wins Bestseller Award in Japan'. *Delia Owens*. Available at: <https://www.deliaowens.com/news-reviews/2021/6/9/crawdads-wins-bestseller-award-in-japan> [Accessed: 26 December 2025]
- . 2021c. 'Crawdads Wins British Book of the Year: Page Turner Award'. *Delia Owens*. Available at: <https://www.deliaowens.com/news-reviews/2021/5/16/crawdads-wins-british-book-of-the-year-award> [Accessed: 26 December 2025]
- . 2021d. 'Other Books'. *Delia Owens*. Available at: <https://www.deliaowens.com/> [Accessed: 16 June 2026]
- Owens, D. and Owens, M. 1984. *Cry of the Kalahari*. London: Fontana.
- 1992. *Eye of the Elephant*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- 2006. *Secrets of the Savannah*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Plath, S. 1963. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Rich, A. 1986. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Stasio, M. 2018. 'From a Marsh to a Mountain: Crime Fiction Heads Outdoors'. *New York Book Review* [Online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/17/books/review/where-the-crawdads-sing-delia-owens.html>. [Accessed 9 August 2025].
- Stuart Phelps, E. 1877. *The Story of Avis*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Tedeschi, R. G. and Calhoun, L. G. 2004. 'Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence'. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18 [Online]. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20447194>. [Accessed 11 October 2024].

- Tieck, L. 2012. *Franz Sternbalds Wanderungen*. Tredition Classics
- Varsamopoulou, E. 2019. *The Poetics of the Künstlerinroman and the Aesthetics of the Sublime*. London: Routledge.
- Vickroy, L. 2015. *Reading Trauma Narratives*. Charlottesville: University Of Virginia Press.
- Visser, I. 2015. 'Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects'. *Humanities*, 4(2), 250-265 [Online]. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/h4020250>. [Accessed 24 August 2026].
- Welly, E. 1949. *The Golden Apples*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- Wilson, A. 2006. *Shadow and Shelter: The Swamp in Southern Culture*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Woolf, V. 1936. *To the Lighthouse*. London: David Campbell.
- 1966. *Collected Essays*. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Wray, M. 2006. *Not Quite White: White Trash and the Boundaries of Whiteness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Wright, J., et al. 2011. *Collected Poems*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.