

Looking at Gail Jones's "The Man in the Moon" in Aestheticized Darkness

ABSTRACT

When the first astronauts landed on the moon, they left unfading bootprints on its surface, testifying to our human violation of its aesthetic and symbolic autonomy. Starting from the premise that this lunar invasion has forever scarred the moon, making it a carrier of loss and an embodiment of grief, my article seeks to examine how Gail Jones, in her own fiction, aestheticizes the starry night sky in order to bring together the astronauts' human disfiguration of the moon's face with the human figuration by writers and artists of this very defacement. Through art's redemptive function in the face of loss and destruction, I argue, Jones has found a way to reinstate a sense of the moon's autonomy. In particular, this article will focus on how her short story "The Man in the Moon" addresses the possibility of creating alternative cosmologies through art. Both her essay "Without Stars", which discusses Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* to investigate the metaphysics of suffering and the poetics of grief, and her essay "Five Meditations on a Moonlit Night", which looks at nature writing to examine the aesthetics of grief and the ethics of the gift, will form the backdrop of this exploration.

Gail Jones's short story "The Man in the Moon" (1997)¹ opens with a doleful elegy: "Against the night-time of his death, I summon the light of his moon. Against darkness, this simple disc, this changeable bright emblem."² It soon turns out that this invocation of the moon is performed by the autodiegetic narrator of the story, as a means to resist the enfolding darkness of her grief for her father. However, what I wish to suggest, by way of introduction, is that this lunar invocation could also emanate from Jones herself in a type of meta-discursive and self-reflexive stance on the use of the poetic as a way of illuminating disastrous darkness. Likewise, when the narrator asserts that the moon, this "round-shaped screen, [which is] obligingly receptive, for any number of loony projections", draws "poetic impulses—just as it draws the heavy sad tides" and hence "invites metaphors"³—this sounds like a confession, an admission, by Jones, of her own propensity for lunar projections on a sky without stars. Taking its cue from Jones's 1998 essay "Without Stars", and drawing upon her 2016 essay "Five Meditations on a Moonlit Night",⁴ this article will therefore look into the metaphors of the moon and the metaphysics of grief in "The Man in the Moon". What I hope to demonstrate is that this short story constitutes Jones's own contribution to writings on grief.

In "Without Stars (A Small Essay on Grief)", Jones poses the following question: "For all that goes under, what is it that rises up?"⁵ Her essay reflects on the metaphysics of grief in Maurice Blanchot's famous treatise, *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986). Yet, while Jones vigorously condemns the purely "philosophical incitement"⁶ of Blanchot's theorizations of the concept of disaster, or dis-aster, a sky without stars (because it admits into mourning neither affect nor weeping), she nonetheless cherishes his employment of the poetic as a means to challenge the "bleak opacity" of grief and thus offer a space of affect; writing, after all, is a form of mourning.⁷ For Robert Dixon, the question of how to negotiate grief in the practice of writing is central to and constitutive of Jones's fictional and scholarly work,⁸ as

¹ Gail Jones, "The Man in the Moon," in *Fetish Lives* (South Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1997), 135–149.

² Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 135.

³ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 140–41.

⁴ Within two decades, Jones seems to have moved from a black sky without stars to one that is illuminated by the moon.

⁵ Gail Jones, "Without Stars (A Small Essay on Grief)," *Heat* 7, no. 7 (1998): 141.

⁶ Jones, "Without Stars," 146.

⁷ Jones, "Without Stars," 149.

⁸ Robert Dixon, "Ghosts in the Machine: Modernity and the Unmodern in Gail Jones's *Dreams of Speaking*," *Journal of the Association of the Study of Australian Literature* 8 (2008): 135.

indeed she once confessed in an interview.⁹ Likewise, for Tanya Dalziell, what distinguishes Jones's writing from other philosophical theorizations of grief is her preoccupation with searching for ways in which to write about all that up-rises in the face of "disastrous abjection"¹⁰—in other words, how to write about the physicality of grief.¹¹ Amy Prodromou, in the preface to her book *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir*, claims that Jones's small essay on grief "poses but leaves unanswered two questions that have fuelled [her] research since":¹² "How does one honour, in grief, all that up-rises? And how then does one write of it...?"¹³ As paradoxical though it may seem, however, Jones provides an answer to these questions, both in her small essay on grief (when she claims that what makes up "the co-efficient of grief" is "a cruel excess of memory, a haunting virtuality"¹⁴) and in her literary oeuvre, as encoded in her short story "The Man in the Moon", her most emblematic attempt to write the starry night¹⁵—and the "starry text",¹⁶ as it were—against dis-aster.

Aestheticising Darkness and the Gift of Wonderment

Jones's essay "Five Meditations on a Moonlit Night"¹⁷ invites us to reflect on "how we aestheticize darkness":¹⁸

Astronomers tell us that the world came into existence, in a big bang, about 15 billion years ago. Stars, planets, entire whirling galaxies, all swept into being. The universe is expanding, getting thinner and thinner, and apparently is 90 to 99 per cent composed (depending on estimates) of what has been called "missing" or "dark" matter, an inexplicable form of mass which includes, among other things, the black hole remnants of dead stars. In this context human existence is incredibly tiny, but also magnificently implausible, and the idea that a kind of darkness is the main substance of the universe is almost too strange for one person to consider.¹⁹

Notably, one aspect of Jones's own creative protocol—her endeavour to "entertain the darkneses" in a way that is "not pathological but somehow creative and intrinsically resistant",²⁰ or to put it differently still, "to place patterns over the darkness, to praise in the face of emptiness, and to trade certitude for faith"—is that she literally sets out to turn the night sky into a poetic object. As John Berger, one of her favourite authors, writes:

Lying on our backs, we look up at the night sky. This is where stories began, under the aegis of that multitude of stars which at night filch certitudes and sometimes return them as faith. Those who first invented and then named the constellations were storytellers. Tracing an imaginary

⁹ Jones explains: "I recognise that writing has helped me move through grief... We have all lost a childhood, we have all lost friends and lovers, we have all loved someone who has died. To me, that has always been what has generated writing, that wish to reclaim something against loss." (Gail Jones, "On Intimate Terms," *Age*, 19 February 2006, <https://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/books/on-intimate-terms-20060219-ge1sbb.html>.)

¹⁰ Blanchot calls this particular suffering of grief *le subissement* (from *subir*, to undergo, and *subitement*, suddenly).

¹¹ Tanya Dalziell, *Gail Jones: Word, Image, Ethics* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2020), 15.

¹² Amy Prodromou, *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), vi.

¹³ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 149.

¹⁴ Jones, "Without Stars," 141. Likewise, Dixon has found the answer to her question about what it is that rises up in the face of all that goes under in "the memory of the dead in the living" (Dixon, "Ghosts in the Machine," 135).

¹⁵ I am here referring to Van Gogh's eponymous painting. Jones also alludes to it in her short story "Touch (the Births of Walt Whitman)" (Jones, *Fetish Lives*, 126–34). Notice that the latter directly precedes "The Man in the Moon" in the short story collection *Fetish Lives*.

¹⁶ Jones, "Without Stars," 149.

¹⁷ Her essay was initially written as a talk to be presented in 2000 at the Toji Cultural Centre in South Korea, where she was invited at the last minute to speak on "the very general topic of 'Nature and Art'" (Jones, "Five Meditations," 16), so I will from now on refer to it as her essay on nature and art.

¹⁸ Jones, "Five Meditations," 18.

¹⁹ Jones, "Five Meditations," 18.

²⁰ Gail Jones, "Speaking Shadows: Justice and the Poetic," in *Just Words? Australian Authors Writing for Justice*, ed. Bernadette Brennan (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2008), 83.

line between a cluster of stars gave them an image and an identity. The stars threaded on that line were like events threaded on a narrative. Imagining the constellations did not of course change the stars, nor did it change the black emptiness that surrounds them. What it changed was the way people read the night sky.²¹

Drawing upon this observation, Jones argues that while “stories change nothing in our relation to eternity, [our] human capacity to design is a loving return of the gift”²² of night and wonderment at the stars and constellations, at the moon and the Milky Way.²³ The night, in her view, offers “an alternative poetics” for writers: it is “mythic”, she argues, and “a space of fantasy, mediation, desire, romance, yearning—the promissory state, that is to say, of many stories.”²⁴ Her own fascination for the night sky, as well as for science, which she thinks of “as a great resource for metaphor, the way the metaphysical poets did”, leads me to the contention that, in her short story “The Man in the Moon”, Jones uses astrophysical metaphors to acknowledge the existence of creative metaphysical epistemologies, specific to the writerly imagination. In fact, the story “attempts to understand the metaphor of the moon as a face”,²⁵ thereby gesturing towards a celestial and cosmic artistry.

In the story, the narrator’s means of overcoming her grief for her father consists in writing about him, and that implies writing about the moon, a gesture that not only mimics her father’s selenographic passion²⁶ but also parallels Jones’s writing about the moon: selenography should not only be understood as a descriptive science but, more literally, as moon-writing. In “The Man in the Moon”, the way in which she entertains the darkneses of grief is all the more inventive as she figures it literally, by using outer-space darkness and lunar brightness as metaphors. Her aestheticization of astrophysical phenomena to acknowledge the existence of phenomenological alternatives is, at times, so literal (outer-space darkness stands for inner-grief darkness, and the moon symbolises creativity) that it nearly becomes meta-discursive; in other words, it is as if the moonlit night almost literally embodies Jones’s meta-commentary on the creative-writerly entertainment of darkneses.

Creative Resistance and Artistic Redemption

In a similar vein, I believe that Jones's essay on nature and art constitutes her scholarly attempt to write against all that goes under, by writing about that which rises up—or, more specifically, by writing about the moon. The essay indeed investigates the dualism opposing our human fascination, since the dawn of time, for the moon's inscrutability to our human obsession, over the last several centuries, for the moon's exploration. As Jones puts it, if “we have gazed at the moon for millennia”, it is because “its enchantment was in part its utter remoteness”;²⁷ and if we have landed on the moon in recent decades, it is because its enchantment now also lies in the possibility of its conquest. In the same vein, Jones begins her essay with a “small” but particular detail: when human beings landed on the moon for the first time, they impressed its dusty surface with their ridged boots, leaving traces that would neither fade nor diminish, since there has never been any form of erosion (by wind or rain or anything else) on the moon.²⁸ Our millennia-old fascination for the satellite’s “utter remoteness”, our love for “what evades our grasp”, and our admiration for “radical otherness” were all of a sudden trampled on—both literally and figuratively—and our adoration for “the sublimity of natural phenomena that imply a

²¹ John Berger, *And our Faces, my Heart, Brief as Photos*, First Vintage International Edition (New York: Vintage International, 1984), 8, quoted in Jones, “Five Meditations,” 18–19.

²² Jones, “Five Meditations,” 19.

²³ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 17.

²⁴ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 17.

²⁵ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 19.

²⁶ Her father had been a geologist by day (mapping the surface of the earth) and a selenographer by night (mapping the surface of the moon).

²⁷ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16.

²⁸ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16.

completely separate scale of being” had succumbed to our craving for human domination and terrestrial conquest.²⁹ This act amounted to a desecration, of sorts, encoded in those footprints.

However “small” this detail (this literal step for man) may be, its symbolic meaning is of great significance (for mankind—or “humankind”, as I would rather term it). Resuming her metonymical account of the first moon landing, Jones argues that the ineradicable footprints epitomise “the imperial gestures by which we try to claim the earth and the sky, the persisting contest between tradition and modernity, the scientific aspiration to capture the natural as a material resource”.³⁰ In articulating this, Jones denounces the trans-historical footprints for their “violation of the aesthetic and symbolic autonomy of the moon, and beyond that...the subordination of mystery to instrumentality”.³¹ This rather recent propensity for instrumentalisation is the result of modernity’s subordination of the natural to material imperatives and an achievement of modern inventions and technologies. Consequently, the human traces on the moon (a figurative pattern of absence, whose literal presence nevertheless testifies to our human presence on the lunar surface) exemplify our penetration and conquest of cosmic space/s and demonstrate the loss of the satellite’s mystery and inscrutability.

To counter this violation of the moon’s aesthetic and symbolic autonomy, Jones, who elsewhere in her essay discloses a particular interest in metaphor,³² imparts a new metaphorical quality to the scarred moon by making it a carrier of loss and an embodiment of grief. When she claims that “now, at the beginning of the 21st century, the natural world carries loss, just as it carries renewal and redemption”, in the shape of a human footprint,³³ what she actually does is that—in what appears to be a meta-commentary on art—she brings together the astronauts’ human disfiguration of the moon’s face with the human figuration by writers and artists of this very defacement, thereby pointing to art’s redemptive function in the face of loss and destruction. Jones also writes: “While art strives to register our forms of interconnection and correspondence, it also seeks, I think, to affirm this separateness—that humanity is not, after all, the measure of all things, but that we exist in local, planetary and cosmic contexts that require our humility and our awe. Something in the technical markings left on the moon offend this principle, this link between correspondence and separation. And since we often speak of the face of the moon, these everlasting marks can be read as a kind of defacement, as a persistent scarring.”³⁴ To put it another way, when figured in art, our humility and awe of the natural world’s inscrutability allow for alternative cosmologies to exist not only on a macrocosmic (“cosmic”) level, but also on a mesocosmic (“planetary”) and microcosmic (“local”) level. Our physical disfiguration and epistemological debunking of the moon, however, has violated this principle of art that brings alternative cosmologies close and provides them with a space to coexist alongside one another while still acknowledging their separateness. Not surprisingly, then, Jones associates these footprints, which have caused the permanent loss of the moon’s aesthetic and symbolic autonomy, with grief.³⁵

Jones’s essay may denote a form of scholarly fatalism, but, when read alongside her fiction, it also offers creative resistance in response. In other words, what I wish to suggest, here, is that, through her meta-discursive meditation the footprints’ symbolic impact, and further through her narrativisation, in “The Man in the Moon”, of the first moon landing and other lunar stories by means of astrophysical metaphors, Jones has found a way to reinstate a sense of the moon’s aesthetic and symbolic autonomy.

Moonwalking with the Man in the Moon

²⁹ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16, emphasis added.

³⁰ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16.

³¹ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16.

³² Jones, “Five Meditations,” 21.

³³ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 17.

³⁴ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16.

³⁵ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 16.

Together with its sombre and restrained tone, the short story's division into seven sections—each comprising a paragraph (or two) that deals with an astrophysical particularity of the moon³⁶—serves to “link scientific discourse with the emotional territory of grieving and the complexity of memory”.³⁷ As each particularity is brought into resonance with the narrator's familial story and Jones's own artistic purposes—they are, in other words, aestheticised and given some symbolic autonomy—Jones offers the moon, in some gesture of return, precisely what our landing on its face had violated in 1969.

Jones further confirms her propensity to use the night sky's aesthetic suggestiveness for her own writerly purposes through the symbolic representation of the first moon landing in her own short story.³⁸ In the seventh (and last) section, entitled “Moonwalking on the sea of tranquillity”, the astronauts' moonwalking is indeed brought into resonance with the father's fantasy of moonwalking in spirit form after his death by suicide. The father had been fascinated by the night sky all his life, so much so that, even in death, when he cuts his veins open, he offers his body up to the stars.³⁹ While the narrator claims that her father committed suicide because he felt desolate and estranged, the story seems to suggest something quite different: “When in July 1969 Apollo 11 landed on the moon, depositing itself, flagrantly, in the Sea of Tranquillity, my father was unexcited. He was already by then living permanently in the desert, away from television, away from cities, away from western community, and already imagining ... alternative cosmologies. Nevertheless, for all his denunciations and disavowals, he mentioned the moon landing often: it seemed his preoccupation.”⁴⁰ For all his alleged lack of excitement and reclusiveness, the father had remained obsessed by the moon landing. It was fear for the moon's integrity (which he considers threatened by human erosion) that led him to literally and spiritually offer his bodily face up for his totemic face,⁴¹ thereby sending his spirit moonwalking upon the Sea of Tranquillity to protect the moon from human spoliation. The irony is that, in exchange, his terrestrial face was “eroded by ants and the depredations of scavengers and weather” and the face of the moon, “even magnified [by writing, by *poesis*], returned no reciprocating intensity”.⁴² What I want to suggest, however, is that the father offered his body to the land and the sky *as a gift*. Jones's model of the gift undoubtedly draws upon a logic that is closer to that advocated by Rauna Kuokkanen, who argues that giving, in many Indigenous world views, “entails an active relationship between the human and natural worlds, one characterized by reciprocity, a sense of collective responsibility, and reverence toward the gifts of the land”.⁴³ For Kuokkanen, the logic of the gift engages an understanding of the world that relies upon a system of intricate relationships and instills in us values of reciprocation and responsibility.⁴⁴ It constitutes an alternative paradigm to the West's neoliberal, capitalist and patriarchal hegemony, as the gift itself offers us “possibilities of reciprocation at the level of different ontological understandings”.⁴⁵ Likewise, for Jones, one central aspect of the gift is “the obligation of respect and preservation”,⁴⁶ and in the Australian political context, with its contentions for land claims, she argues, “it would seem fruitful to insist that many meanings are possible, and that in any case Western imperial

³⁶ These are, in order of appearance, “Apparent magnitude”, “Librations and the far side”, “The seas of the moon”, “Journeys to the moon”, “Reasons for craters”, “Lunar illusions”, and “Moonwalking on the sea of tranquillity”.

³⁷ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 19.

³⁸ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 149. Similarly, Alice Black, the Australian protagonist in Jones's third novel, *Dreams of Speaking* (2006), invites her Japanese friend Hiroshi Sakamoto to think about the moon and the “footprints by the thousand on the Sea of Tranquillity” (Jones, *Dreams of Speaking*, 144). She confesses: “Did you know that since Apollo 11 the moon is covered with footprints? And because there is no wind on the moon, no rain, no erosion, no kind of agitation, the footprints will stay there, undisturbed, for millennia to come. It troubles me, this defacement. The surface of the moon, the *face* of the moon, trampled, stamped by ridged boots” (Jones, *Dreams of Speaking*, 143).

³⁹ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 148.

⁴⁰ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 149, emphasis added.

⁴¹ Note that the moon is the father's “own and particular totem” (Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 149).

⁴² Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 148.

⁴³ Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008), 23.

⁴⁴ Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, 7.

⁴⁵ Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University*, 11.

⁴⁶ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 21.

meaning should not take automatic precedence".⁴⁷ Thus, when the father offers his spiritual face to the sky and his terrestrial face to the earth, he makes a reciprocating gesture: he literally gives his body back to the land, thereby expressing gratitude for the gifts of the land and sky as well as recognition of the existence of an alternative paradigm.

This gesture poses the question, then, of whether the man in the title's moon could be the narrator's father. In the course of his life, the father has gradually moved from a Western system of belief to a totemic one, symbolised by his shift from pencil drawings of the moon to sand drawings he has been taught on his weekly visits to Indigenous Elders of the Walbiri people. As Jones aptly observes about this shift: "When the father says that the moon is his own and particular totem, he is indicating how far he has moved from Western science: the totemic is a belief in sympathetic magic; it is an essentially spiritual and symbolic connection."⁴⁸ It therefore looks as if, by dint of moving away from Western modernity, the father has found in the totemic an alternative cosmology, which resonates with Jones's claim that "highly technological societies everywhere can learn from traditional cultures, and the uncanny other-side to secular Australia is Aboriginal meaning".⁴⁹ Accordingly, the title of the short story could also evoke the man in the moon of the Northern Territory story she drew upon to write her own story. She confesses: "I wanted to take this idea as a sort of emblem for imagining relations between people across vast lonely spaces, and to try to speak of the estrangements that exist between families. There are as many cosmologies as there are people."⁵⁰

Nature Writing and Approximation

In Jones's view, poetry, and art more generally, allows us to approximate alternative cosmologies most humbly and truthfully. Artists, consequently, might well configure or transfigure (as opposed to disfigure) things in their artworks, but they "do not figure out meaning".⁵¹ Quite the contrary: what they figure are illusions and suggestions. Thus, in the first moon landing and the astronauts' defacement of the lunar surface through footprints, Jones has found the perfect image for her aesthetic claims because it figures both the moon's literal disfiguration (it aestheticizes the ineffaceable bootprints) and its figurative disfiguration (it aestheticizes the spoliation of the moon's aesthetic autonomy). In addition to being interested in metaphor, Jones confesses to being concerned with "the idea that art is a kind of longing for completion"⁵²—an idea she juxtaposes with American philosopher and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson's concept of approximation. In the 1844 revised version of his essay on nature, Emerson wrote: "There is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere, keeps no faith with us. All promise outruns the performance. *We live in a system of approximations ... Our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions.*"⁵³ In the section of her essay on nature and art entitled "Approximations", Jones quotes from Emerson (the italics in the above-cited quotation) to support her claim that "art is not an act of completion or replication", but that "it is like a *suggestion*".⁵⁴ The idea of approximation, she adds, "instills in us the humility of any attempt at meaning. Since our meanings are provisional and not absolute, art too is the expression of our honourable contingency and incompleteness. No artist would claim perfection: this is truly inhuman".⁵⁵ What both Jones and Emerson seem to imply is that it is the purpose neither of art nor of nature to reach any ultimate truth, but to *suggest* the coexistence of multiple truths.

⁴⁷ Jones, "Five Meditations," 21–22.

⁴⁸ Jones, "Five Meditations," 21.

⁴⁹ Jones, "Five Meditations," 21.

⁵⁰ Jones, "Five Meditations," 21.

⁵¹ Jones, "Five Meditations," 18.

⁵² Jones, "Five Meditations," 21.

⁵³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature (1844)," in *Nature and Other Essays* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2009), 44.

⁵⁴ Jones, "Five Meditations," 18.

⁵⁵ Jones, "Five Meditations," 18.

Apparent Illusion and Celestial Inscrutability

“Error and illusion are central to art,” Jones argues, yet “we do not cherish the idea of approximation, even the idea of failure, as we should”.⁵⁶ In “Lunar illusions”, the sixth section of the short story, the father takes an interest in issues of illusions. He develops a fascination for the illusion of the moon’s varying size but also for William Herschel’s illusion of the eruption of three volcanoes on the moon.⁵⁷ However, his daughter, the narrator, so the title suggests, is most fascinated by the illusion of the man in the moon—indeed she confesses: “Something in the marbled aspect of the lunar surface leads people, cross-culturally, to detect the apparition of a face. My father always claimed this was the most banal of lunar imaginings; yet for me, seeing unmistakably its dusky blemished features, it was instead the most true.”⁵⁸ The anthropomorphic illusion of the lunar face has turned the moon into one of the most universal, inspirational and emblematic personifications of the natural world. In the motif of the man in the moon, Jones has then found a way to aestheticize her almost fetishistic belief in the night sky’s promissory⁵⁹ and “narractivistic”⁶⁰ potential. Equally, it also exemplifies her deep interest in and meta-reflexive approach to nature writing—and more particularly to moon writing, selenography. Jones, then, not only writes about nature, she also ponders over nature writing as a writerly construct that, as it mimicks nature, figures or suggest things through illusions and approximations. Nature writing, in other words, not only imagines other cosmologies and allows their existence, but it also acknowledges (the subjectivity of) their veracity. There is indeed something that is both elusive and illusive about nature that Jones is especially interested in.

Illusiveness characterises Jones’s short story more globally, but “Apparent magnitude”, the first section, deals more substantially with “the apparent brightness of an object”.⁶¹ The narrator refers to this astrophysical phenomenon in her account to compare her sister’s grieving for their father to her own: “Stella, who weeps and wails, appears to have magnitude, but I am really the one burning away in the distance, the Canopus, the dazzler, shadowed by bleak outer space.”⁶² In this description, “apparent magnitude” is used as both a unit of measurement and a comparator of grief. Explicit in these two analogous comparisons (Stella’s grief is comparable to Sirius’s apparent magnitude; the narrator’s grief is comparable to Canopus’s actual luminosity) is a movement of transposition from an astrophysical level to a phenomenological, and even affective, one. In this way, the metaphor of apparent magnitude lends itself to an astrophysical representation of the physicality of grief and its deceptiveness: while Stella appears to be the one grieving most, it is in fact the narrator whose sorrow is deepest—at least that is what she, perhaps quite selfishly or ostentatiously, claims. The apparent magnitude of celestial bodies, in other words, captures the opposition between illusion and truth and comes to stand for the inscrutability of nature and of the human heart since time immemorial.

By the same token, in the second section, entitled “Librations and the far side of the moon”, the narrator wonders what she knew of her parents, who, to her, had always remained “*eclipsed* in their different dark ways, incalculably shadowed”, thereby making it difficult for her “to believe in any *margins of libration*”.⁶³ Here again, through her use of astrophysical vocabulary, the narrator proceeds metaphorically to describe her parents as literary objects. Still, while the lunar margins of libration, these slight oscillations in space, have allowed selenographers to catch a partial glimpse of the far side of the

⁵⁶ Jones, “Five Meditations,” 18.

⁵⁷ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 147–48.

⁵⁸ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 148–49.

⁵⁹ I am using this precise word in reference to Jones’s above-quoted statement according to which “night is mythic, it is a space of fantasy, mediation, desire, romance, yearning—the promissory state, that is to say, of many stories” (“Five Meditations,” 17, emphasis added).

⁶⁰ *Narractivistic* is a personal contraction of the adjectives “narrative” and “activistic”.

⁶¹ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 136.

⁶² Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 136.

⁶³ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 138, emphasis added.

moon⁶⁴—that which is otherwise invisible and hence ungraspable—they do not help the narrator to grasp who her parents truly were.

Alternative Stories and Indigenous Cosmologies

Ironically, perhaps, while the narrator in “The Man in the Moon” claims not to know who her father truly was, the story she tells is still about him and his presumed inscrutability. Indeed, right from the start, the father, who is “by disposition, by passion and by avocation extraterrestrial”,⁶⁵ is marked out as a singular person. In “The seas of the moon”, the short story’s third section, this singularity is linked to his ability to imagine and believe in alternative stories and cosmologies: he believes, for instance, that the desert used to be an ocean, and when he comes back from geological excursions in the desert, his pockets are filled with sea fossils—“a complete ancient fish, a sea star missing one limb, ammonites, pretty cockleshells, odds and ends prehistoric”.⁶⁶ He then invites his daughters to “imagine this place totally oceanic”, what it would be like, to live “beneath ghost waves”, in a kind of time warp.⁶⁷ Like an anthropologist or a historian, he collects past evidence. However, the inference is that he does not do so in order to seek explanations for our present times; rather, he tries to imagine how things could have evolved differently, even counterfactually, immersing himself in a world where the desert place we know could have been an ocean, like “someone’s imagined sea”.⁶⁸ It is his imagination that allows him to consider alternative stories about the desert.

Consequently, when the narrator asks “How can I tell you about the desert?”,⁶⁹ it is as though Jones, too, were wondering how to tell about a place as ancient as the desert, that seems to have remained untouched by Western modernity. The answer is immediately provided in the story, albeit implicitly and by means of different techniques. Consider, for instance, how the desert is depicted by the narrator in terms of huge spaces, in which she and her sister “felt suspended, as though dangling from silk parachutes, between earth and sky”.⁷⁰ To tell about the desert is therefore like telling about outer space: both natural, hostile and lonely places offer an expressive space for the narrator—and Jones, for that matter. This is especially true in the desert at night-time, the narrator recounts, when “outer space [is] altogether everywhere” and “great patterns of white stars slid[e]”.⁷¹ In this way, it seems that, for Jones, desert and outer space may serve a common writerly purpose, namely that of providing metaphors for grief.

Another way to read the desert is through spiritualisation. In fact, the narrator—and Jones at the same time—describes the desert as follows: “Wind blew up from the gulf, carrying the fragrance of sea water, and thin grasses quivered, and heat cracked open granite stones, and the umber earth shifted and stirred and rose in small restless spirals. Light was bent in the wind so that the look of things distorted: trees hung upside down and figures floated towards us in trembling dark verticals. Distance of any sort was impossible to calculate. We lived, that is to say, in a field of abstraction.”⁷² Here the landscape appears to be alive with movement, as if animated by some spiritual force. While this suggested analogy may well be contentious in the Australian context, Jones may also wish to acknowledge the existence and legitimacy of Indigenous cosmologies and the Indigenous animist system of belief by insisting on its

⁶⁴ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 138.

⁶⁵ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 135.

⁶⁶ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 141.

⁶⁷ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 141.

⁶⁸ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 141.

⁶⁹ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 139.

⁷⁰ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 139. I am reminded here of Alice’s meditation on grief in *Dreams of Speaking*, which “felt like a suspension of the rarest kind, and she saw herself a floaty astronaut, strung in airless dark, supernatural, abstract, buoyed on who-knows-what force to *dangle* heroically meaningless” (3, emphasis added).

⁷¹ Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 140.

⁷² Jones, “The Man in the Moon,” 139.

undecipherability to the narrator's Western eyes. The desert is indeed a place that offers a completely different cosmology. Like outer space, it is a site in which the traditional Western rational means of measurement do not apply but where other types of readings, such as Indigenous songlines, for example, do apply. In addition, there is "a strange sound in the air, like the after-echo of a bell, like the memory of a sound".⁷³ In this way, to tell about the desert is also to tell the haunting story of its traumatic past, marked by foreign settlement, brutal massacres, child removals and forced religious conversion. It is to tell the story of a violated place and its immeasurable grief and to remember the past, acknowledging its after-effects, its ghostly present-ness. Although the Indigenous belief in nature's spirits, the story suggests, remains stronger in the desert, the impact of Christianity is literally still ringing a bell.

Both the desert and the cosmos are further united in the father's imagining of alternative cosmologies through Indigenous sand drawings.⁷⁴ As the fifth section, entitled "Reasons for craters", discloses, he had been taught these by the Walbiri people: "Father spoke the local language much better than any of us, and was systematically enquiring about Aboriginal cosmologies. The old men drew spots, galaxy shapes and hieroglyphs in the sand, blew on them, wiped them clean, and whispered secrets in confidential tones."⁷⁵ Next to the cosmic sand drawings, he also inherited from the Walbiri people an alternative story to those of Beard, Fauth of Germany, and Sixto Ocampo as to what was responsible for the creation of lunar craters.⁷⁶ However, when asked by his daughter for an explanation, he counters: "It's men's knowledge, he said. And untranslatable."⁷⁷ Unlike her father, whose lunar totem is indicative of his estrangement from Western science,⁷⁸ the narrator cannot access Walbiri cosmologies. Even in her dreams, in which she is repeatedly told by her father about the Walbiri reasons for craters, she cannot decipher their meanings—after all, it would be presumptuous (for her, but also for Jones) to claim such a thing as "sympathetic magic" between her and the Walbiri people.

Journeying to Inverted Cosmoses

The fourth section, entitled "Journeys to the moon", differs from the other sections in two major ways. First, the particularity of the moon is neither a lunar phenomenon nor a loony theory: in fact, it is no particularity at all but a set of stories, narrating different journeys to the moon. Second, this time, the narrator tells us about her mother. By this token, while the narrator hears of various theories about the moon from her father, it is from her mother that she hears of journeys to the moon: her mother had been a writer and a fantasist; she had shared lessons and stories with her daughters before Alzheimer's disease—"this inner-space invasion"—afflicted her.⁷⁹ Afterwards, her body, like the moon, bore the traces of loss, making her look "mottled and vacant", "predisposed and distant, like a satellite of Death".⁸⁰

Two distinct stories, both of French authorship, are told to us. There is Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon*, a science-adventure novel about the preparations for a journey to the moon in which three men are eventually fired to the moon from a cannon. Then there is Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac's *A Voyage to the Moon*, a novel about imaginary voyages to the moon and the sun, a satire that offended 17th-century religious, astronomical and anthropocentric beliefs. Significantly, as they are "lay[ing] on their backs in the spinifex and enter[ing] the sky" in a manner that is reminiscent of Bergerac's account of the origins of storytelling, the narrator and her sister, Stella, imagine that they are the characters of

⁷³ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 139.

⁷⁴ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 149.

⁷⁵ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 146.

⁷⁶ See Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 145.

⁷⁷ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 146.

⁷⁸ Jones, "Five Meditations," 21.

⁷⁹ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 142.

⁸⁰ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 141.

Cyrano's story. The sky then offers the two girls the possibility to imagine a vision of paradise, and to invert the existing cosmic order by turning the moon into a heavenly place and the earth into its corrupted satellite. This celestial gift, in turn, is in line with Jones's more general advocacy of an inverted order of things, in which alternative cosmoses and cosmologies are inherently valorised.

What is more, thanks to the accounts given by their mother of the stories by Verne and Cyrano, the narrator and Stella, who "had seen no televisual images of astronauts in space" in their childhoods, "knew of shooting stars and comets, of whirling radiance and black holes".⁸¹ Much later, however, when they eventually saw images of the first moon landing, they were shocked to see the astronauts' paraphernalia, their helmets with their star-reflecting visors, their "cumbersome obesity".⁸² What is striking about this description of the astronauts is that, despite modern technical wizardry, the sisters are shocked to see the discrepancy between the possibilities offered by (their) imagination and real-life contingency. "Our mother, in all her narratives, had implied no such things,"⁸³ the narrator confesses, bewildered by this sudden revelation, the inference being that, like Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* and Cyrano's *A Voyage to the Moon*, Jones's "The Man in the Moon", as a narrative and a piece of fiction, offers more possibilities than, for instance, Patrick Moore's *Armchair Astronomy*, from which the story derives some of its facts and figures. Put another way, it is an ode to the night sky and to fiction, but also one to the creative imagination. In so doing, Jones then complicates the aesthetic and symbolic violation of the moon's autonomy by including diverse narratives about the moon in her own narrative to highlight our human wish to narrate the moon and thus make it familiar, while simultaneously pointing out its otherness.

Conclusion

In her essay on nature and art, Jones confesses a fascination for librations and what they reveal of the far side of the moon.⁸⁴ She invokes this anomaly as a "metaphor of our forgetting of the gift" (of nature) and explains: "It reminds us that behind every shiny visibility lies its dark elaboration, and that our scientific knowledge can never quite encompass the distance between seeing and knowing. It reminds us that the entirety of things is always hidden."⁸⁵ Indeed, we tend to forget that we do not possess but receive the gifts of nature.⁸⁶ This realisation brings her to consider an alternative "economy of the gift" — that is, one in which nature has an incalculable value and hence conceals an ethic of generosity and gratitude (as opposed to one of possession and profit based on trade and accumulation).⁸⁷ For her, this gift economy can best be promoted by art, because art "recognises metaphysical, not just physical forms of value" and encourages artists "to honour the gift by increasing its presence in essentially metaphoric forms".⁸⁸ It is no wonder, then, that in her own short story she employs astrophysical phenomena as metaphors to suggest that art offers multiple meanings in the face of loss. *This* is Jones's writerly gift to us: against all that goes under in grief, against our forgetting of the gift she offers us her lunar poetics as an affirmation, as "some sparky exclamation at the very fact of existence".⁸⁹

⁸¹ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 143.

⁸² Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 143–44.

⁸³ Jones, "The Man in the Moon," 144.

⁸⁴ She quotes, almost word for word, the passage she wrote about it in the second section of "The Man in the Moon".

⁸⁵ Jones, "Five Meditations," 17.

⁸⁶ Jones, "Five Meditations," 17.

⁸⁷ Jones, "Five Meditations," 17.

⁸⁸ Jones, "Five Meditations," 17.

⁸⁹ Jones, "Without Stars," 149.