

ENDRE HARVOLD KVANGRAVEN 

# Human–Bird Relations and Ethics of Care in Contemporary Norwegian Fiction

In literature as in life, the significance of birds for humans is contextual, subjective, and culturally constructed. Their role may be interpreted as ecological, spiritual, aesthetic, or symbolic, depending on one's preconceptions and capacity to be affected (Sax 15, 65, 149). Where birds figure as prominent motifs in twenty-first century Norwegian literary fiction, they tend to be associated with practices of care. More precisely, birds are often linked to relations between parents and children: mostly mothers, daughters, and grandmothers, women of different generations. Some texts deal with involuntary childlessness or the loss of a child, misfortunes that challenge the characters' capacity for care and, in turn, lead to care being directed at or projected onto birds. This article will focus on three novels in which these associations are particularly evident: Gøhril Gabrielsen's *Ankomst* (*Arrival*, 2017), Brit Bildøen's *Tre vegar til havet* (*Three Roads to the Sea*, 2018), and Merethe Lindstrøm's *Fuglenes anatomi* (*The Anatomy of Birds*, 2019). While contemporary Norwegian fiction is remarkably rich in examples of birds functioning as a motif linked to care, these three novels offer divergent approaches that, taken together, provide a representative overview.<sup>1</sup> Can the association of birds with care contribute toward fostering sustainable relations with nonhumans? How does it align with environmentalist aims?

Drawing on María Puig de la Bellacasa's work on the ethics of care, I argue that care can be problematic, and that "normative moralistic

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visions of care” are insufficient (“Nothing Comes without Its World” 198). Even though empathy and concomitant care, as presented in narratives, can be a motivating factor for environmental action, there is a risk of care being misdirected, such as when birds are held in captivity or when complex ecological factors such as invasive species come into play. While care for humans and care for nonhumans often go together, there is an obvious tendency to privilege humans at nonhumans’ expense. This might especially be true of narratives about parenthood and childrearing, as a pronatalist stance tends to be taken for granted but is not necessarily conducive to mitigating the ecological crisis. Here, Donna Haraway’s concept of “making kin” as a route toward “multispecies flourishing” (2) might provide a useful alternative.

The Norwegian psychologist, novelist, poet, and researcher Kjersti Ericsson has pointed out the significance of gender in human–bird relations, arguing that ornithology has been dominated by men and that this is reflected in how bird ringing and ornithological research are carried out (“Mitt fugleliv” 242–43). There is also a long-standing tendency among literary critics—especially male critics—to read birds as metaphors rather than fellow beings (241), to reduce birds to objects of contemplation or reflections of human concerns. Ericsson, for whom the birds on her feeder are like street children in need of help, notes that her view of birds is strongly influenced by the social heritage imparted by her mother, who saw them in the same way (242, 247).<sup>2</sup> She thereby anchors her interpretation of birds not only in care but in mother–daughter relations. Based on her own experience with bird feeding and ornithology, and drawing on Martin Buber, she makes a case for an ethics of care and for I–thou relations with the nonhuman world (247). Where ornithologists tend to focus on species, populations, and ecosystems, Ericsson shows that care can also be directed at individuals or flocks (241–42), in a line of argument that resonates with the tenets of the emerging field of compassionate conservation (Ramp and Bekoff). According to Thom van Dooren, conservation biologists are rarely emotionally detached from their work; on the contrary, despite pursuing objectives that are allegedly scientific rather than personal, they tend to be driven by care for the species they work with, if not always for individual animals (*Flight Ways* 108).

Gøhril Gabrielsen, Brit Bildøen, and Merethe Lindstrøm are all award-winning literary authors, widely recognized for exploring sensitive topics, including issues of gender, with keen psychological insight. Though none of them cite ecofeminist thinkers or make explicit ethical claims about human–nonhuman animal relations, the recurrent theme of motherhood, along with female first-person narrators whose attachment to birds can be interpreted as an expression of sublimated

parental care, calls for further investigation. As stated by Karen J. Warren in a seminal article, “[e]cofeminists insist that the sort of logic of domination used to justify the domination of humans by gender, racial or ethnic, or class status is also used to justify the domination of nature” (132). Since an end to “sexist oppression” would entail an end to “the logic of domination which conceptually grounds it,” this would in turn have consequences for human–nonhuman animal relations (132). Warren argues that first-person narratives are ideal for ethical argumentation because they place the narrator “in relationship with” other characters, including nonhuman animals (135), opening up the possibility of “an emergent caring-type relationship” which “grows out of, and is faithful to, felt, lived experience” (136). Considering that *Arrival*, *Three Roads to the Sea*, and *The Anatomy of Birds* are all first-person narratives told from a woman’s perspective, with an autodiegetic narrator who is also the focal character, Warren’s notion of ecofeminism seems particularly apt as a framework with which to analyze them. I will begin with an analysis of *Arrival*, followed by analyses of *Three Roads to the Sea* and *The Anatomy of Birds*, before concluding with a comparative discussion of the three novels.

### The Weather Station: Arrival and Absence

In *Arrival*, a psychological thriller by Gøhril Gabrielsen, the autodiegetic narrator is working on a PhD dissertation about the impact of climate change on seabird populations, combining biology with meteorology (46–47). In the dark of winter, a boat captain drops her off on a remote peninsula in Northern Norway where she is planning to do her fieldwork. With an old cabin as her base, she is cut off from the outside world, anticipating the arrival of migratory seabirds while hoping that her lover Jo will be coming to join her there soon.

Narrative tension in *Arrival* springs from unresolved conflicts between people but also from discord between scientific rationality and the uncanny. Through her work, the narrator finds refuge in science and in scientific language, where everything is quantifiable, objective, and precise, in contrast to emotions, which are subjective and unpredictable (e.g., 14, 26, 85, 100, 151). When she is overcome by fear and anxiety, forced to question her own mental faculties, phenomena such as temperature, wind, and cloud cover “befester verden på et vis” (“fortify the world in a way”; my trans.; 39). Finding no solid ground in psychology or history, she clings to her research as a bastion of scientific rationality to stave off the personal tragedy that haunts her. Trying to think about seabirds and their breeding rates instead of the people—especially the daughter—she has left behind (61), she makes a list of

the birds and people in her life, incorporating birds into her personal story (159).<sup>3</sup> Drawing up a Red List, she places herself in the same category as the most threatened seabirds (159), her status having changed from Vulnerable to Critically Endangered (115).

This dialectic between science and psychology, rationality and emotion, is also reflected in the novel's structure. Though the language is literary, Gabrielsen includes a reference list at the end where all the sources cited are from the natural sciences (172). This is fairly unusual in fiction, but Carl Frode Tiller does the same in his novel *Begynnelser* (*Beginnings* 2017, 341–42), which was published the same year as *Arrival*, as does Arild Vange in his cross-genre novel *Livet i luftene: Fortelling. Sang* (*Life in the Airs: Narrative. Song* 2018, 243–44). Karl Ove Knausgård makes a comparable move in his novella *Fuglene under himmelen* (*The Birds Beneath the Sky* 2019), not citing references but including a list of Norwegian and scientific names of the species that are illustrated, using square brackets to indicate that one is juvenile (64). In the Norwegian context, *Arrival* thereby reflects an apparent shift toward integrating natural science into literary fiction.

The narrator notes how parental care in black-legged kittiwakes is shared between males and females, with both sexes contributing toward incubating the eggs and bringing food for the young, while in common murrelets and razorbills the young, upon leaving the nest, leave the mother behind and follow their father out to sea (Gabrielsen 61). She recalls seeing a breeding colony of kittiwakes surprised by a spring snowstorm, how the birds remained on their nests, only visible by their bills sticking out of the snow (61). This is presented as an example of the fierce dedication of breeding birds, held up as exemplary parenthood, almost as an ideal for human parents to strive for. It stands in contrast to the narrator, who is ridden with guilt for abandoning her daughter, Lina, in the hands of her abusive and apparently unstable ex-husband, S, whom she is deadly afraid of and recently separated from. Nevertheless, she figures that he will take adequate care of Lina, if only to cast himself in a good light. She reckons that for seabirds, care is instinctive, but for humans, it can be “et middel, en metode, . . . en maktutøvelse” (“a means, a method, . . . an exercise of power”; my trans.; 106); that care can be a gift, but also a performance. During a Skype conversation, Jo tells the narrator that he has to delay coming to join her out of concern for the well-being of his daughter from a previous marriage, at which the narrator feels a pang of guilt, as if he is implying that her “evne til omsorg er svakere, av en simplere sort enn hans” (“capacity for care is weaker, of a baser kind than his”; my trans.; 21).

For the narrator, traveling here seemed like a way of taking back control over her life, but having arrived, she is torn as to whether or not it was the right decision. Her research seems like an attempt to compensate for something, almost a form of penance. She is obsessively dedicated to her PhD project, seeing it not only as being of vital consequence for the seabirds she studies but as a path to personal redemption. Although she is dismayed to discover that the effects of climate change on seabirds will be even more severe than previously predicted, she sees the situation in a more positive light when she thinks of how her dissertation will contribute toward explaining those effects (Gabrielsen 92). She envisages that, in addition to revealing incontrovertible truths about the physical world, her work will give her own life “en ny, og kanskje uventet retning” (“a new, and perhaps unexpected direction”; my trans.; 44).

In the cabin, she finds a booklet about local history and reads that a family once lived there but experienced a fatal fire during the winter of 1870 and an unspecified tragedy the following year (Gabrielsen 23). She imagines that the couple lost their son in the fire, which resonates with how she has had to abandon her daughter, and tries to tear herself away from the text, realizing that it is only making the solitude harder to endure. Nevertheless, imagining what life might have been like for that family, especially for the woman, Borghild, becomes a form of escape from the narrator’s present circumstances (24–25, 30–32, 41–42, 51–54, 62–64). She becomes so engrossed in that family’s story that she experiences dreams, thoughts, and visions that verge on hallucinations, which begin to merge with her own memories (41–42).

Looking at the meteorological data and photographs she has collected, the narrator is shocked to realize that they all appear to date from 1871, the year the tragedy struck (Gabrielsen 152–53). Unable to explain her findings scientifically, she considers whether it might have something to do with the place itself; after all, she well knows that there are phenomena humans are unable to detect, “for eksempel jordas magnetfelt, som enkelte fugler, fisker og insekter kan navigere etter” (“for instance the earth’s magnetic field, which certain birds, fish, and insects can navigate by”; my trans.; 155). Cooped up in a cabin through swirling winter storms, hoping that Jo will eventually make it up there, it is unclear whether her increasing sense of unreality is due to paranoia resulting from protracted anxiety and solitude or to the actual place exerting its influence. Having settled for the security science can offer, she is horrified to realize that science is coming up short, and casts about for ways out of her logical and emotional quandary.

Fourteen species of bird are known to occur in the area (Gabrielsen 159), and it is mentioned at the beginning that “[i] mai vil støyen være

intens, fylt av skrikene til tusenvis av krykkjer, skarver, alker, teister og lomvier" ("[i]n May the noise will be intense, filled with the shrieks of thousands of kittiwakes, cormorants, razorbills, black guillemots, and common murre"; my trans.; 6). Birds are a central motif, yet the only birds that are actually seen by the narrator over the course of the novel are a flock of king eiders (49–50) and some great black-backed gulls (73) quite early on. Mostly, birds elude her, and perhaps this is part of what draws her to them in the first place: their ability to fly, to disappear across vast seas to faraway wintering areas, only to return and breed on these rocky, inhospitable shores. In contrast to these birds, the narrator is trapped, not only in place but also in relationships and memories. Most of *Arrival* is a drawn-out process of expectancy, where she is waiting for the birds to arrive so that her work can gather momentum, but at the end, when the air has gotten warmer and the ice and snow are melting away, it is implicit that breeding season is near and that the birds are about to return (170). The narrator then hears footsteps approaching and a knock on the door (168–70), but the reader is left in the dark as to who it is and whether this is the moment of arrival that the plot has been building up to. It could be Jo (deliverance), S (disaster), or the captain come to check on her (continuance), if not a ghost from 1871; on a metaphorical plane, it could refer to birds, climate change, or the past catching up with her. The ending is open, the plot abruptly interrupted, so that readers can draw their own conclusions about what kind of peripeteia might be at hand or whether the narrator has lost touch with reality.

Considering that the narrator has made it her purpose in life to document and expose the effects of climate change on seabirds, to raise the alarm, there is no doubt that she is concerned about the ecological crisis. At the same time, however, she is obviously driven by vanity, aiming to make her mark, to prove herself to the scientific community. She is dedicated, determined, and stubborn, yet she misses her daughter and fears her ex-husband; eventually, her failure to assert control over interpersonal relations overshadows her commitment to conservation biology. While her goals may be noble, her motivations are ambiguous, and her engagement with the local ecology is more akin to what Warren calls "an imposed conqueror-type relationship" (135) than an "emergent caring-type relationship" (136). Having imagined that she might be able to escape or transcend her personal history through total dedication to her research, she arrives at the site of her fieldwork only to find a mismatch between her expectations and reality. She amasses data, but when they subvert scientific explicability, her worldview collapses, so that the narrative she tells herself hardly corresponds with "felt, lived experience" (136). If she is motivated by care, it

is a problematic kind of care, seemingly ineffectual but potentially validated by future achievements; even if she achieves her research objectives, chances are that she will have sacrificed her family to do so.

### The Ringing Station: Recovery and Loss

In Brit Bildøen's *Three Roads to the Sea*, the plot is based on personal experience of an intimate kind, as Bildøen, much like the novel's narrator, was denied the right to adopt a child, took the government to court and won, but was then barred from adoption on the grounds that she had gotten too old ("Å skrive om det vondaste"). The narrative present plays out on the coast of Norway, but much further south than *Arrival*, in a more tranquil environment, a landscape of windswept beaches. Bildøen's own involvement in birding is recounted in her later nonfiction book *Over land og hav: eit år med trekkfuglar* (*Over Land and Sea: A Year with Migratory Birds*, 2020), a work of nature writing in which she mentions that the setting of *Three Roads to the Sea* bears resemblance to Lista Bird Observatory in Southern Norway (62).

Like *Arrival*, *Three Roads to the Sea* features an autodiegetic narrator, but here she refers to her past self in the third person, as a means of establishing distance from actions she can no longer think of as her own. "Det var ikkje eg" ("It wasn't me"; my trans.; 11), reads the text, and then switches to the third person. There is a parallel with *Arrival* in that the narrator loses control of herself, but in *Three Roads to the Sea* the crisis is situated in the past rather than the present. Having gone into "exile" at a bird ringing station by the coast, the narrator looks back on the darkest period of her life, which she claims not to remember clearly, when she lived in Oslo and was "ei anna, ei slettare utgåve av meg sjølv" ("someone else, a lousier version of myself"; my trans.; 7). She visualizes "kvinna, denne andre, sitje i bilen utanfor heimen sin mens ei politikvinne er inne og snakkar med mannen hennar, får den nødvendige underskrifta" ("the woman, this other, sitting in the car outside her home while a policewoman is inside talking to her husband, getting the required signature"; my trans.; 143) but is unable to identify with the things that person did. Her struggle calls attention to the dehumanizing effects of rigid institutions, how the encounter between a citizen and a faceless bureaucracy can result in I–it relations that are toxic to all involved.

*Three Roads to the Sea* takes the form of three alternating stories that refer to (1) the narrator's present, (2) her past struggle against government bureaucracy, and (3), the period in between, the dark days when she was driven to desperation. After battling government bureaucracy for years, she suffered a breakdown, and, as her home life and

professional life alike unraveled, compulsively sought revenge, turning into a stalker. Convicted of breaking into the house of one of the bureaucrats, then of violating a restraining order issued against her, she had to do some time. Later, she started a new life working at the ringing station, and here she finds a constructive outlet for the care she would otherwise have manifested for children, projecting it onto non-human animals and eventually also her colleagues. In addition to working with birds, she adopts an abandoned, aging dog that she seems to identify with, perhaps because she, like the dog, feels expendable, in need of a home; this is highlighted by how the narrator and the dog both appear to be suffering from old hip injuries (146–47). Where the narrator of *Arrival* seeks redemption through her PhD dissertation, the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* becomes a carer, looking out for her fellow beings on a day-to-day level. In this sense, her activities and concerns correlate with Puig de la Bellacasa's assertion that "a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence" (*Matters of Care* 4).

From the outset, birds are established as integral to the narrator's daily surroundings: "Synet av ei vipe, helst eit vipepar, er teiknet på at det blir ein god dag" ("The sight of a lapwing, preferably a lapwing pair, is the sign that it will be a good day"; my trans.; *Three Roads to the Sea* 8). She notes that the lapwings in the area have not bred successfully in the past two years (8), reflecting how northern lapwings have recently suffered a precipitous population decline on the Lista peninsula and been categorized as Critically Endangered on the Norwegian Red List (Stokke et al.). This situates the narrator as a character who is attentive to and concerned about birds, while the lapwings' failure to breed echoes her own childlessness. Sitting with the dog in a sheltered spot by the coast, watching seabirds, she figures that the gannet is her favorite but then remembers how severely affected they all are by plastic pollution (*Three Roads to the Sea* 89–90). Rather than romanticizing her surroundings, she acknowledges that the view is deceptive, that things are neither as pure nor as clean as they might appear.

The practice of ringing birds is analogous to naming, a means of assigning them an identifier. It renders individuals traceable in datasets but can also foster recognition and even connection; recovering a ringed bird can be an affective experience, rendering birds' life stories narratively intelligible and potentially strengthening bonds of care. While bird ringing generally leads to clear conservation benefits that arguably outweigh the occasional mortality incurred in connection with it (Busse and Meissner 166, 168), it is nevertheless an intrusive form of care and reinforces a hierarchy that positions humans as

managers or stewards. Problematic yet in some sense necessary, it is a form of what Puig de la Bellacasa describes as “material engagement in labours to sustain interdependent worlds” (“Nothing Comes without Its World” 198).

While mornings at the ringing station revolve around the comings and goings of migratory birds, the narrator spends her afternoons working from home as a translator. In the narrative present, she is working on a translation of Haitian Canadian novelist Dany Lafférière’s *L’énigme du retour*, which she finds deeply moving (*Three Roads to the Sea* 9–10, 42, 106–07). As Lafférière was exiled in Canada, the narrator is exiled by the coast, and they have both found it necessary to reinvent themselves, to look for meaning in new places and relations. Furthermore, in translation, Lafférière’s book is about to find a new home, or at least a foothold, in Norway. There is a resonance between migration and translation; while migratory birds pour into Norway along the coastal flyway, the narrator is preparing to bring a foreign novel into the Norwegian cultural sphere. The breaching of boundaries—psychological, linguistic, cultural, and geographical—is a major theme in *Three Roads to the Sea*, where the complexities of interspecies relations have their counterpart in intertextuality. Against this background, bird ringing can be read as a metaphor for writing or translation, for inscribing one’s mark upon the world, deciphering it, opening it to interpretation.

Birds aside, a conspicuous feature of the landscape is the *marehalm* (marram grass) that binds the coastal dunes, holding them together. Speculating on its etymology, the narrator links it to *mare*, as in *mareritt* (nightmare), which in various Germanic folk traditions is described as a state of being ridden by a malevolent entity. Looking it up in an unspecified online encyclopedia—a direct quote, in quotation marks, reveals it to be *Allkunne*, a now-defunct encyclopedia in Nynorsk (Ohrvik)<sup>4</sup>—the narrator ascertains that this entity tends to take the form of a female demon that strangles her victim, and that it can be the ghost of a spinster but in some cases resembles a nonhuman animal (*Three Roads to the Sea* 147). She links this to a male fear of the female, of what “dei både vil ha og ikkje vil ha” (“they both want and don’t want”; my trans.; 147–48), offering a feminist interpretation of marram grass as something that “tvingar seg inn og bind saman, fordi det skapar nytt liv. Og som er sterkt. Fordi det har djupe røter” (“forces its way in and binds together, because it creates new life. And which is strong. Because it has deep roots”; my trans.; 148). If Bildøen is aware of the more obvious etymological origin—*mare* being the Latin word for sea—she doesn’t let on, but the association of marram grass with female strength is compelling. Besides, the notion of the mare as a

female entity that can have nonhuman features suggests a link between the oppression of women and the oppression of nonhuman animals, though Bildøen does not explore this point. Incorporating marram grass into her self-narrative, the narrator establishes a personal relation to the local ecology that—along with her familiarity with birds—can contribute toward a sense of belonging. She hopes that her own roots might prove as strong as those of the marram grass.

Toward the end of the novel, Emma, one of the narrator's colleagues, becomes pregnant, and the narrator, shocked to hear that she is contemplating abortion, offers to share in the responsibility for the child, to be a help and support (*Three Roads to the Sea* 145–46, 148). The narrator calls it “fuglestasjonens barn” (“the ringing station's child”; my trans.; 146), and it becomes yet another surrogate for a child of her own. Birds, dogs, even the marram grass, are placed in relation to the narrator's personal tragedy; but even if they might alleviate her longing for children to some extent, nonhumans do not assuage it entirely. The narrator's breakdown happened because—for a while—she was barred from exercising her caring capacities. Since care for another, as van Dooren points out, is reliant on being “emotionally at stake in them in some way” (“Care”), it always entails the risk of loss and grief (*Flight Ways* 139), but it is also essential for “being meaningfully with others” (40), for being able to inhabit a “meaningfully shared world” (139–40, emphasis in original). Puig de la Bellacasa suggests that

a world's degree of liveability might well depend on the caring accomplished within it. In that sense, standing by the vital necessity of care means standing for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumental ones. (“Nothing Comes without Its World” 198)

The narrator seeks to contribute toward others' flourishing, not despite the risk involved but because care makes life worth living.

As the narrator of *Arrival* deduces that seabirds are even more threatened than previously thought and intends to incorporate her analysis into her dissertation, the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* rounds up the spring ringing season by noting that migratory birds are in continuing decline and decides to write an article about it to inform the general public (151). In both of these novels, a sense of loss is pervasive—personal defeats appearing to mirror the ecological crisis—yet the narrators do not abandon hope that their caring practices may bear fruit, that meaningful remnants can still be salvaged. Near the end of *Three Roads to the Sea* the narrator observes a lapwing behaving as if it has young nearby—presumably giving an alarm call or swooping

toward an intruder—which suggests that, despite the pressures of modern agriculture, lapwings in the area might still be able to persist (151).

### The Aviary: Care and Captivity

Merethe Lindstrøm's *The Anatomy of Birds* is arguably the darkest of the three novels, dealing with depression, abuse, and neglect. It is also set in a more domestic sphere, at first in a Norwegian city and later in an English village. Again, the autodiegetic narrator is drawn to the beauty of birds, but in contrast to *Arrival* and *Three Roads to the Sea*, where the focus is on wild birds, many of the birds in *The Anatomy of Birds* are captive. This reflects the characters' experiences of being trapped, imprisoned in dark thoughts, stuck in places they want to escape from. Coming to terms with trauma, as well as betrayal and loneliness, the narrator, her mother, and her daughter are able neither to live nor love well; suffering birds become a symbol of their misery but also a potential light in the darkness.

*The Anatomy of Birds* begins with the narrator remembering the drive through Flanders in Belgium the autumn she and her partner moved from Norway to England. She was on the lookout for *de vinkniers*: men who would sit lined up along the roadside, each with a chaffinch in a box in front of him, participating in traditional bird-call contests. Though the notion of keeping finches in captivity strikes the narrator as sad, her interest in the tradition suggests a fascination with the practice (7). Finches are thereby established as objects of desire, but also as victims. When the narrator was a child, her mother gave her a pair of zebra finches, but they languished, neglected in their cage, and soon began attacking each other. Placed there in the hope that they would brighten the human characters' surroundings, they had the opposite effect, only accentuating how miserable the narrator's mother's apartment was (22, 46–47, 134–35).

Later in the novel, the narrator thinks of how the goldfinch famously painted by Carel Fabritius was bound to the wall by a chain, and of how people used to blind finches to make them better singers. The novel's title—*The Anatomy of Birds*—alludes to the narrator's daughter Klara, focalized through the narrator, reflecting on how the names of certain structures of human anatomy—such as the coracoid process, the pterygoid muscles, and the pes anserinus or “goose foot”—are derived from those of bird anatomy. Looking at her own body, Klara sees no resemblance and finds it surprising that it “kan forklares av de beskjedne strukturene til en annen art, noe sånt som en fugl” (“can be explained by the modest structures of another species,

something like a bird"; my trans.; 56). In contrast to birds, she feels heavy, weighted down, taking everything in yet incapable of gaining a view from above. Chained, blinded finches, living in darkness, become a trope linked to Klara's depression (56–59).<sup>5</sup>

In the narrative present, the narrator channels her energies into having an aviary built in her English country garden, in the hope that birds will thrive there.<sup>6</sup> She imagines the birds as thoughts, flapping, gathering, and dispersing, moving from one place to another, the aviary as "en kropp, for fuglene, tankene" ("a body, for the birds, the thoughts"; my trans.; Lindstrøm 167). Her determination to have the aviary built could be rooted in guilt over the two finches that died because she neglected them, or in projected hope that her own situation can be improved. An aviary, though no doubt preferable to a cage, is not the same as living free, yet the practice of keeping birds in captivity is so socially and culturally ingrained that she does not question it.<sup>7</sup> This inability to look beyond the framework of captivity, a delimited capacity for care, reflects Puig de la Bellacasa's contention that even though care is always necessary, the forms it takes are specific rather than universal, formed in response to situated relationships, and that good intentions do not necessarily equate to taking "good care" ("Ethical Doings in Naturecultures" 166). The assumption that captivity can be consistent with flourishing, and that humans are fit to care for captive birds, evinces problematic caring relations. Pointing out parallels between birds in cages and traumatized or depressed women in difficult life situations could be a means of questioning anthropocentric assumptions, but ultimately, the aviary project seems more likely to make the narrator feel better about herself than to provide good lives for birds.

The narrator of *The Anatomy of Birds* dreams or imagines that she is standing inside the aviary surrounded by birds that flock around her, perching on her shoulders, picking and pecking at her skin yet wholly benevolent, a dense mass of colors and feathers that almost conceals her from herself (103). More than a dream of escape, the birds signify a desire to disappear, to become invisible. Perhaps a longing to be part of a flock, to surrender individuality for the sake of a more communal form of personhood, is implicit. For Marco Caracciolo, such "embodied responses to nonhuman assemblages" amount to a form of "kinesthetic empathy" (239) where the collective functions as "a unit of embodied subjectivity that complements and extends the individual" (242). Nevertheless, this vision of swirling birds is immediately followed by a waking dream where the birds are her thoughts spinning out of control, independent and unpredictable yet fragile. She longs to contain them, to gather them together, and remembers a dream where her

neatly tended garden was ravaged by starlings, blackbirds, and sparrows, causing her to feel ashamed of the disorder (103). This preoccupation with neatness and order, with keeping captive birds in and wild birds out, seems old-fashioned, like some vestige of nineteenth-century England, and might suggest a fear of going feral, of losing self-control.

When the narrator and her partner almost run over what they believe to be a pheasant with their car, it leaves an impression on them: “vi tenkte på alt som lever fritt, det ville ved sånne ting, alt det som beveger seg inne i krattet, i buskene. Rev, ekorn, grevling, til og med en fasan” (“we thought of everything that lives free, the wildness of such things, everything that stirs inside the thickets, in the bushes. Foxes, squirrels, badgers, even a pheasant”; my trans.; Lindstrøm 190–91). This close encounter becomes a precious memory and, placed on the second-to-last page of the novel, functions as a ray of hope comparable to the lapwing at the end of *Three Roads to the Sea*. The characters are blissfully unaware that pheasants are introduced game birds, native neither to England nor to Norway but regularly released into the wild for hunting purposes, often descended from semi-domestic stock. This lack of familiarity with wildlife is arguably symptomatic of a form of alienation from wild nature, probably rooted in lack of exposure to it, and might contribute toward explaining the narrator’s fixation on captive birds. Unable to imagine freedom for herself, she can hardly imagine freedom for birds either.

From her childhood, the narrator remembers a great black-backed gull landing on her grandmother’s balcony while their family was having Sunday dinner. It became trapped, unable to spread its wings in the narrow enclosure, but her uncle rescued it by placing a long broom against the edge of the balcony so it could climb up and fly away. All who saw it were quiet, but later, the narrator’s mother recounts that the gull had made her, and the others, think of her younger brother who had disappeared at sea, that the bird was “en påminnelse, sjelen hans” (“a reminder, his soul”; my trans.; Lindstrøm 18) that wanted to spend some time with them. Again, a link is established between birds and parental care—for the narrator’s grandmother, the gull represents her lost son. It is referred to by the common name *havmåke*, “ocean gull”—rather than the more widely used *svartbak*, “blackback”—establishing a clear association with the ocean, with the high seas (which is also reflected in the species’ scientific name *Larus marinus*). Like the pheasant, the great black-backed gull is presented as a glimpse of something free, an extraordinary creature whose wildness stands in contrast to the characters’ mundane surroundings.

*The Anatomy of Birds* is narrated in a cautious, deliberate tone, and it is evident throughout that care is a complicated matter, that there are

those who cannot be helped, and that acts of care can even cause harm. An elderly grey parrot in a pet shop is like “en innesperret mentalpatient fra attenhundretallet” (“a confined mental patient from the nineteenth century”; my trans.; 161), repeating snippets of conversation it has picked up from past owners but that make no sense removed from their original context. Even more poignant is an incident where some schoolgirls find an injured stock dove. Its wing has been cut clean off—perhaps it has been run over by a car—but still it tries to get away from the excited girls. They catch it, find its wing, and talk of bringing it to the vet, naively thinking of themselves as “snille hjælpere” (“kind helpers”; my trans.; 137), but are obviously excited about the news value of their find, the sensation it will create, the attention it will bring them. This kind of care recalls how, for the narrator of *Arrival*, raising awareness of the effects of climate change on seabirds becomes a way of boosting her ego, justified by the urgency of her message (Gabrielsen 92). As Puig de la Bellacasa points out, care is not innocent and does not refer to “a somehow wholesome or unpolluted pleasant ethical realm” (*Matters of Care* 7–8). On the contrary, those who express the most concern for the welfare of others often have something to gain from drawing attention to it.

### Forms of Care in Human–Bird Relations: Ecofeminism and Beyond

In all three of the novels discussed above, depictions of birds go beyond metaphor, pointing toward an affective ethic of care that includes nonhumans, even if that care has problematic aspects. In line with Warren’s approach to narrative and ecofeminism (135–36), these depictions are neither abstract nor reductionist, and rather than imposing ethical claims from some supposedly objective, external viewpoint, they allow ethical insights to emerge through interactions. The narrators navigate social, emotional, and ethical predicaments that cannot be dealt with through simple recourse to ethical norms but must be worked out in relation both to other people and to nonhuman animals within specific environmental conditions. Though the narrators strive for autonomy, and achieve it to varying degrees, their identities are formed in relation to multispecies communities, echoing Warren’s conception of ecofeminism as “a social ecology” where “[r]elationships of humans to the nonhuman environment are, in part, constitutive of what it is to be a human” (143). Rather than attempting to construct “a moral hierarchy of beings,” these narratives, while appreciating difference, are attentive to how beings stand in relation to each other (137), providing “a central place for values typically unnoticed, underplayed,

or misrepresented in traditional ethics, e.g., values of care, love, friendship, and appropriate trust” (140). Care is presented as essential and foundational, but also becomes a source of conflict and doubt.

In all these texts there is a conspicuous focus on the importance of children, which can be interpreted as a form of pronatalism. The narrators may empathize or identify with nonhuman others, but this is partly because they see their own care or longing for children reflected in them. Considering that human population growth is one of the main drivers of our current ecological crisis, this raises some tough ethical questions. For Donna Haraway, a shift away from pronatalism toward radical forms of care for the nonhuman world is not only desirable but necessary in the light of ongoing ecological catastrophe (209). Urging us to “make kin, not babies,” she argues that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages” (103). According to Haraway,

[w]e must find ways to celebrate low birth rates and personal, intimate decisions to make flourishing and generous lives . . . urgently and especially, but not only, in wealthy high-consumption and misery-exporting regions, nations, communities, families, and social classes. (209)

Though population density remains relatively low, Norway’s high standard of living and average carbon footprint per person, along with continued oil extraction and oil exports, certainly qualify it as a “wealthy high-consumption and misery-exporting” nation. Climate change denial is widespread in Norway, particularly among conservative men, and correlates strongly with xenoscepticism (Krange et al.). Nevertheless, many Norwegians are concerned about climate change to the extent that it influences their decision about whether or not to have children, and as Kristina Leganger Iversen points out, this is particularly true of women, who appear to be more prone to eco-guilt than men are.<sup>8</sup>

Here, *Three Roads to the Sea* seems to suggest a way forward: childless, the narrator has found other outlets for care, looking after an abandoned dog, seeking to raise awareness of ecological issues, and, through bird ringing, contributing to data collection that can lead to better conservation outcomes. Then again, making kin with nonhuman animals should not be predicated on involuntary childlessness. One of the policies Haraway suggests could facilitate a reduction in human population is “adoption practices for and by the elderly” (209), a proposal the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* would be likely to embrace.

In her analysis of ecofeminism in Nordic literature, Katarina Leppänen is guided by the themes of “intergenerational responsibility, alternatives to prevailing power dynamics,” and “new ecological sensibilities” (223), all of which are evident in these novels. Anxious about climate change and plastic pollution, the narrators of *Arrival* and *Three Roads to the Sea* are preoccupied with securing a future for declining bird populations. On an interpersonal level, the narrator of *Arrival* is haunted by her failure to assert responsibility for her daughter, whom she still hopes to be reunited with, while the narrator of *Three Roads to the Sea* is willing to take responsibility for Emma’s unborn child. Moreover, the latter’s struggle against government bureaucracy presents a challenge to “prevailing power dynamics” in that it exposes the dangers of I-it relations, whether these are grounded in legal clauses and paragraphs or in ruthless anthropocentrism. *Arrival* and *The Anatomy of Birds* also deal with how victims of psychological and sexual abuse tend to internalize their traumas; how their anger is turned inward, with disastrous personal consequences. In *The Anatomy of Birds*, burdens of trauma are carried across the generations, yet the narrator continues to hope that the burden can be alleviated. All three novels explore “new ecological sensibilities” in that they highlight the plights of nonhuman animals. Through a delicate interweaving of human and nonhuman stories, they reveal parallels between human tragedies and the ecological crisis, showing how injustice can breed solidarity with other victims across species lines. This weaving together of different forms of care reflects Puig de la Bellacasa’s contention that even though care is a “matter of struggle and a terrain of constant normative appropriation” it is “vital to the fabric of life,” and that, rather than trying to pin it down, it may make sense to “embrace its ambivalent character” (*Matters of Care* 8, 11). Despite their troubled circumstances, the narrators remain steadfast in the face of adversity, and look toward the future.

#### NOTES

1. Karl Ove Knausgård’s novella *Fuglene under himmelen* (*The Birds Beneath the Sky*, 2019), in particular, resonates with the texts mentioned here. In Aasne Linnestå’s *Krakow* (*Krakow*, 2007), Rannveig Leite Molven’s *Duelyktene* (*The Pigeon Lanterns*, 2020), and Lars Ramsli’s two *Liten fugl*-novels (*Little Bird* 2014 and 2016), the association of birds with care and mother–daughter relations is subtle yet central. Vidar Sundstøl’s short novel *Nattsang* (*Night Song*, 2023), in a somewhat different vein, engages with birding, care, and deep time perspectives within the framework of a father–son relationship. Birds are

also associated with care in Agnes Ravatn's *Fugletribunalet* (*The Bird Tribunal*, 2013).

2. This point is also reflected in Ericsson's semi-autobiographical novel *Far og mor* (*Father and Mother*, 1998), where the narrator recalls her mother feeding breadcrumbs to house sparrows in the backyard and how the helpless little birds "kalte på medynk og veldedighet" ("called for pity and charity"; my trans.; 117–18). For an in-depth, humorous, and incisive look at gender, breeding, and child-rearing in birds and people, see Ericsson's novel *Hekketid* (*Breeding Season*, 2001).

3. Where she lists the people with their individual names, however, she lists the birds as species, in keeping with the scientific tendency to reduce nonhuman animals to species and populations rather than individuals (Gabrielsen 159).

4. In contrast to *Arrival* and *The Anatomy of Birds*, which are written in the Norwegian language standard Bokmål, *Three Roads to the Sea* is in Nynorsk. Brit Bildøen is a former board member of *Allkunne*.

5. Later, however, the narrator relates that finches in Flanders that had their eyes burned shut were able to see again when their eyelids were gently pried open (Lindstrøm 152). In *The Anatomy of Birds*, the motif of finches—goldfinches, chaffinches, and zebra finches—signifies despair, as well as hope that despair can be overcome.

6. In the dilapidated barn, the boy she has tasked with building the aviary finds an old mark inscribed in the wood and claims to recognize it as a "heksetegn" ("witch mark"; my trans.; Lindstrøm 53), which the narrator believes was intended to protect the place (54). In Scandinavian tradition, a *marekors* or *drufefot* is a symbol—sometimes a pentagram, though other symbols were also used—intended to provide protection from witch-like entities of folklore. Similar marks appear to have been used in England, where this scene is set, but note that *bumerker* (house marks), used to indicate ownership, were often placed on buildings, as were builder's signatures, and that these could potentially be mistaken for pagan symbols.

7. See Sollund for an auto-ethnographic account, drawing on feminist care ethics, of how years of keeping parrots in captivity—observing them, interacting with them—can lead to the conclusion "that they should definitely *not* be in cages" (251–52). A former parrot owner can thus be compelled to "act on their behalf" based on insights gained through personal experience (251). Yet, when empathy clashes with "ingrained and widely socially embedded practices and denials" (256) or when care for nonhuman animals "is not a part of the cultural vocabulary," additional measures such as legislation are needed (257).

8. See Iversen for an in-depth analysis of two Norwegian novels that deal with the ethical dilemmas of motherhood in light of anthropogenic climate change.

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