

RESISTANCE AND SOVEREIGNTY IN SOME RECENT AUSTRALIAN INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S NOVELS

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Abstract

In Australia, powerful stories expressing resistance to a white, postcolonising hegemony continue to be told in Indigenous women's fictional texts, including those from the 1990s onwards that are discussed in this article. Their particular historically-distinctive mode of satire or irony challenges postcolonising regimes and institutions, the legacy of colonialism, and the persisting dominance of the white capitalist nation-state. These more recent texts include Doris Pilkington Garimari's *Caprice* (1991) and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996); Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* (2002); Larissa Behrendt's *Home* (2006) and *Legacy* (2009); Marie Munkara's *Every Secret Thing* (2009); Jeanine Leane's *Purple Threads* (2011); Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs* (1997) and *Mullumbimby* (2013); and Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013). All continue a central preoccupation of the earlier fiction by Indigenous women with struggling for the achievement of agency in contexts of unequal social and economic power; marginalised characters continue to engage with current questions and conditions. The article considers how these fictions have developed an Indigenous aesthetic to represent aspects of Aboriginal dislocation from land and place; separation from families; outsider and outcast identities; Indigenous people's epistemological relationships with their land and bodies of water, and the issue of sovereignty in relation to Country and environment.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal Fiction; Women; Sovereignty; Resistance; Indigeneity, Postcoloniality

Elliot visualised the hands of white people writhing with some kind of illogical intent to misuse and swallow up what was not on a map imprinted with the ancestry of their blood. Hands that hung limp when the land dried up. That buried dead children, set tables with no food to eat. Hands that tried to fight the fires that destroyed the crops and livestock they valued so much. The essences of their souls. He saw the same hands gesturing with self-centred righteousness, and backhand flick to explain hard times, without thought of the true explanations for disaster from the land itself. (Wright, *Plains of Promise* 75)

It is this idea that is relentlessly battered by international capital, as we are asked to forgo

belonging, and to accept that any place is the same as any other, that apart from purely functional aspects, the land has no personality, no infusion of spirit. Big stories are failing us as a nation and will probably not save our natural environment (i.e. us) from the greed and stupidity and indifference that assail it. (Lucashenko, "Not Quite" n.p.)

From the arrival of the first fleet in 1788, the environment of the landmass with its colonial states federated into "Australia" from 1901 has been increasingly impacted upon: the importation of various hooved animals required the clearing of native vegetation in large areas of bushland; the cattle and sheep industry, and then

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mining, led to particular exploitations of Indigenous labour, voluntary and involuntary work--poorly-paid, or paid for with alcohol and tobacco, opium or opium ash (as documented in Fiona Foley's art, Helmrich 52-67). Aboriginal resistance to being pushed from their land was followed by bloodshed; the first recorded major massacre, authorised by Governor Macquarie, took place at Appin in New South Wales, two hundred years ago in April 1816. As the colonisers spread from the coastal areas, some Indigenous people found a type of refuge in missions, but in them parents were separated from their children who were placed in dormitories, and subsequently sent to the cities to work as apprentices and housemaids. The 1997 *Bringing Them Home* report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission contains many testimonies in relation to this, and also reproduces historical research into the ideology underpinning the *modus operandi* of those responsible for the practice of the removal of Indigenous children from their parents from the late 1880s, in which the missions played a central role. Children with non-Aboriginal fathers were particularly targeted. The wholesale taking over of the land and its being put to various new purposes, along with the appropriation of the bodies of black women and the separation of their families, was accompanied by the suppression of Indigenous spiritual beliefs and cosmologies, and of the many hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages and dialects, and their enforced replacement with Christianity and European languages, with English dominant. Janine Leane has discussed how, in the fiction of earlier twentieth-century white novelists including Prichard and Herbert, "blood is a recurring motif [...] of course the shedding of blood literally but also [...] the blood that defines Aboriginality, and in the frontiers, borders or boundaries that are settler constructs there is also a mixing of blood, black and white" ("Tracking" 3). And Doris Pilkington Garimara writes in *Caprice* (1991) that, by the mid-twentieth century, "That invisible barrier—the gulf between the fullblooded Aborigine and the half-caste created by the colonials and widened by Christians was a permanent fixture" (70), or seemed to be.

These "postcolonising" practices (the term preferred by Aileen Moreton-Robinson for the condition of postcoloniality, in that it draws attention to the continuing legacies of the former history, "I Still Call" 23), have continued into processes in the present time. From Canberra in 2007, Liberal Prime Minister John Howard launched an "intervention" aimed at Indigenous people in the Northern Territory deploying the army, police and Community Services, in the context of producing a level of moral panic (see Chris Graham) that served other government agendas (Ferrier "Disappearing"). In Western Australia in 2015, the Liberal Premier announced the withdrawal of funding and services from half of the 270 Indigenous outstations; made necessary, it was said, by the Federal government's cutting their contribution for power, water and services in (so-called) remote communities in the State.¹ Liberal Prime Minister Tony Abbott, on ABC radio in Kalgoorlie on 10 March 2015, asserted: "What we can't do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have" (*Guardian* 18 March 2015).

The land occupied by Aboriginal people was taken over earlier to be used for European farming practices, especially cattle and sheep stations, or, in Queensland and northern New South Wales, sugar cane plantations with indentured South Sea Islander labour (see Ferrier "Never Forget"); more recently it is often for its potential for mining. One current example—being resisted by the Wangan and Jagalingu peoples—is Adani's proposed Carmichael mine in Queensland's Galilee Basin, the largest amongst several new huge coal mining projects. Paul Sharrad noted in 2009 that "mining has taken over from cattle-handling as the main point of contact between rural Aborigines and white systems, and the current boom in mineral exports seems to determine national decisions on everything" (60).

Melissa Lucashenko commented in 2005 that she could not perceive (on the part of those in charge) "a belief that the land matters as we do" ("Not Quite" n.p.). Customary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural habitus is in tune with the land, water, and natural environment of their Country. Anne Brewster

suggests of Alexis Wright's second novel, *Carpentaria* (2006), that it "contrasts the crisis of whiteness—its desperation—with the plenitude of indigenous spiritual, cosmological and historical connectedness with the land and the sea, that is, with Indigenous sovereignty" (86), and aspects of this contrast are drawn out through various narrative strategies in the texts that I discuss in this article. Brewster also cites the observation by the lawyer and author, Larissa Behrendt, that "Indigenous people's sovereignty derives from the fact that they have never ceded their land" (Brewster 90), and argues that to represent "sovereignty as lying with the Indigenes also has the effect of removing whiteness as the default setting"; that, in imaginatively normalising Indigeneity, it "concomitantly 'others' Australian whiteness" (93). *Carpentaria's* representation of Indigenous cosmology and sovereignty as normative impacts upon, and problematises, whiteness "because indigeneity and whiteness are intersubjectively constituted" (Brewster 93).

Whiteness studies has offered critical tools from the 1990s for interpretations of Indigenous literature in Australia, particularly with the work of Alison Ravenscroft, along with Brewster's. Debates have also arisen regarding whether whiteness studies could potentially contribute to a restoration of the central focus upon the perspective of the white, middle class, ostensibly heterosexual, male that dominated fields of intellectual and academic inquiry prior to the 1960s. For example, the Australian Critical Race And Whiteness Studies Association conference of December 2014, in Brisbane, was organised around the question of whether critical race and whiteness studies had been "enlisted in the service of recuperating white virtue" and how far a consequence of this had been "an attendant elision of Indigenous sovereignties and the ontological relationship to land through which Indigenous people harbour their sovereignty" (Conference description).

Certainly "white virtue" is not much in evidence in the work of most of the recent Aboriginal women writers, and a good deal can be read there in relation to "Indigenous sovereignties and the ontological relationship to land." Much of the writing distances itself from a notion of any particular virtue in, or even the possibility of, the continuation of white postcolonising

rule—or, of capitalism more generally, in relation to planetary (see Spivak) survival. Of Wright's third novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), Jessica White suggests, "From one perspective, the [...] Europeans could be seen to have fallen foul of their own anthropocentrism, with the colonisation of nature precipitating climate change and exile" (149).

Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, writing in 2008, identify "the nexus between the literary and the political" as "one of the persistent and now characteristic elements of Aboriginal literature" ("Introduction" 2), and it is certainly the case that powerfully expressed critiques of race relations, in the past and the present, can be read in the texts I discuss. A critical shift from the 1990s towards reading literature in relation to both the global (or, even, the "planetary,") and the local—or perhaps in relation to a notion of, or an aspiration towards, belonging to "world literatures" has created new audiences for Indigenous writing, and some new ways of reading it to progressive ends. The Native American theorist, Chadwick Allen, argues for transnational readings "informed by understandings of multiple systems of indigenous aesthetics" and "including highly knowledgeable audiences of indigenous peoples themselves" ("Engaging" 148). Vilashini Cooppan argues for the value, even necessity, of being able "to learn from history and to change it":

to read the past for its differences from, as well as its similarities to, the present; to locate our ghostly forefathers within their own historical and ideological moment, and to discern in them the skeleton of a method that might visit us again in the uncanny form of something at once old and new, familiar and strange. (16)

These approaches can also encourage new styles of relational readings with regard to both politically liberatory concerns and the kinds of literary representation that can be produced. Many of the recent women's works of fiction trace the family histories of generations of Aboriginal people to better understand the present or, sometimes, prefigure a future that might be more cataclysmic than the apparent distance of Australia from other parts of the world might

suggest. Substantially, the cataclysms are produced, or intensified, by imperialist and postcolonising practices of production for profit rather than need. "Apocalyptic themes" in Aboriginal writing, Roslyn Weaver suggests, can "function as a protest, as a critical voice for minorities to speak against dominant powers and prophesy their overthrow [...] the apocalyptic paradigm of revelation and disaster can work effectively to interrogate the history of colonisation and relations between white and Indigenous Australians" (100). Apocalypse in these texts, she says, "functions as revelation, uncovering the truth, disclosing hidden things": representations of apocalyptic events in the writing (particularly those connected to dangerous—to some—rivers and floods) have "strong associations with [...] new beginnings, utilizing the imagery of life, death, disaster and renewal," and offer "a transforming perspective that the end was not part of the natural order, but was in fact caused by white people." Naomi Klein has also recently argued this in relation to the contribution to global warming made by the careless consumption, enormous waste and military expenditure of the First World West, and in *This Changes Everything* she offers a sustained critique of neoliberal economic approaches: she calls for a People's Shock that would help "get to the root of why we are facing serial crises in the first place, and would leave us with both a more habitable climate than the one we are headed for and a far more just economy than the one we have right now" (10). Weaver suggests that, in fiction, "the apocalyptic paradigm of renewal following disaster" can be used "to suggest new ways forward" (101), to "propose spaces of hope for the future" (100).

Apocalypse can be an empowering tool for indigenous authors because the revelation and disclosure of new perspectives and hidden truths show the writers to be in possession of a greater knowledge than their readers[...]. Apocalypse offers an opportunity for Indigenous writers to reinscribe the unwritten future with themselves as a significant part of the landscape. The authors position Aboriginal characters as central and vital to the future. (Weaver 102)

Australian Aboriginal peoples have struggled for cultural (or even simply physical) survival in a colonised and, now, postcolonising society, amid an official disregard for their distinctive knowledge systems (Graham). Literature by Aboriginal people had earlier often focused upon the speaking of a silenced history; as Ruby Langford put it in 1994: "I'm not interested in fiction. Don't need to be, because I'm too busy with the truth about my people [...]. Although the history of the whole of white Australia is one of the biggest fictions, aye?" (Little 109, 102). This meant that a central concern was with the retrieval of the "true" history, in an "authentic" voice, albeit marginalised in a hostile or indifferent cultural context. Much of the earlier (often autobiographical, or semi-autobiographical) fiction by Aboriginal women from the 1970s and 1980s involved the retelling of past history from an Indigenous standpoint, often spanning several generations, or recalling the past with its impact of occupation by colonising capitalism. Langford saw herself as writing for both non-Indigenous readers and for "my mob" (Ferrier 2006).

A greater emphasis upon paying attention to the patriarchal dividend (and not always only exercised by dominant whites), present in colonial times and persisting into today, can also be seen in some of the Aboriginal women's writing from the 1990s-on that I discuss. Marie Munkara's *Every Secret Thing* recalls the past of the Catholic missions, especially the sexual exploitation of black girls and women; Wright's *Plains of Promise* does this too, and traces four generations of women, as did Hyllus Maris and Sonia Borg's earlier *Women of the Sun*; Vivienne Cleven's *Her Sister's Eye* has a type of alliance between an oppressed white wife, Caroline Drysdale, and her Aboriginal servant, Marilla Salte and her younger relation Sofie; in *Purple Threads* Janine Leane writes from the standpoint of a young girl the story of her upbringing in a female household, the recalled resistance to masculine domination that had formed their present, and the solidarity they show towards an abused white woman and her children. Tomoko Ichitani has provided a thoughtful discussion of the situation of two younger women characters as depicted in Wright's *Plains* and Lucashenko's *Steam*

Pigs, both published in 1997. Mary Nelson and Sue Wilson live in large cities and are both “seeking [their] Aboriginality” (194):

They both meet Aboriginal men, and through relationships with them, they become conscious of how their gender identity is formed as well as how their racial identity is experienced. Their respective partners, Buddy and Roger, are both keen on racial liberation but are sexually exploitative and ignorant of gender problems. Mary and Sue confront not only racial but also sexual hierarchy. (195)

Ichitani suggests that the intersectionality of sexism with a pervasive racism in economic and institutional policies and practices contributes to holding women back from resistance, and that the two writers “carefully deploy a narrative tactic that enables their female characters to explicitly assert their Aboriginality through a relationship to a specific Indigenous land and ‘truth’ that form an integral part of a proud emergent identity” (198).

Every Secret Thing (2009) is explicit about the European men’s sexual predatoriness, including that of the priests. “Even though I didn’t want to focus too much on the sexual politics and the influence of the church in the book, it was there, and it is a real fact of life for my family and it was a very sad part of their lives,” Munkara has commented (Interview, n.p.). Father Macredie, in charge of the mission, is the only one among the priests who “had resisted satisfying his carnal urges with the local women” (79). The Spanish brothers, Mingo and Gringo, the only plumber and electrician in the area, have also been having an impact upon the female mission population—“it was obvious by the big aquiline nose that was appearing on the little newborn faces with alarming regularity that a good proportion of the coloured babies were the offspring of these busy and very productive brothers” (77). The mission produces domestic servants for the white community, including the teenager, Perpetua, whose four bosses had all had sexual relations with her, “so it must be something that bosses did. The trick was, [her friend Tapalinga] now learnt, to use salt and plenty of it

if you didn’t want to end up pregnant and tossed out on your ear” (100-01).

The two groups of Aboriginal people in the area, the Bush Mob and the Mission Mob, are treated satirically—though the harshest satire is reserved for Europeans, the Catholic priests and nuns who run the mission. Brother Brian, for example, never removes his glasses even when sleeping:

Supposedly when it was time to die an angel – or if you were especially good, Jesus himself – would appear and show you the way to heaven. So if he wasn’t wearing his glasses and a celestial being turned up unexpectedly, he’d hate to mistake it for Epiphany or one of the other cleaning ladies and order it to give him a head job. (26)

The sometimes carnivalesque humour with which her novel communicates the brutality and sexual violence of the mission regime is commented upon by Munkara: “I didn’t actually set out to make it funny—I just wanted it to be sarcastic” (Interview, n.p.). But the authority of her writing is drawn from oral history, and an Indigenous resistant subjectivity. Munkara herself, born in Central Arnhem Land, was taken away from her mother at the age of three, and “sent down south” from the Tiwi Islands (Interview n.p.). She describes how: “Initially the material in *Every Secret Thing* came from things I would hear my family talk about while we were sitting around yarning. We would be laughing about what so and so did and remember when this or that happened” (Interview, n.p.). That subjectivity involved ridicule as “the weapon of the weak,” (the young boy, Jeremiah, at one point asks the visiting Bishop, “Why did Eve eat the apple? Wouldn’t the snake have tasted better?”) but also an ever-present awareness of the violence of the colonisers: the taking of the land was accompanied by the “taking of the forks” (Bunda 77) of Indigenous girls and women, and then the taking away of their “half-caste” children in the march of “assimilation”:

But time has a way of covering all wounds with scar tissue, and the little abductees eventually settled down into their new life away from their

homes and their families. And as more time passed new abductees bearing new wounds came from near and far to join the ever-growing family with their abundant scar tissue. Some [...] was hidden deep inside their hearts [...] some was in their eyes and it caused them to cry as they waited day after day for the ones they had lost to come and take them home. (80)

It has often been noted that an ironic or satiric humour (accompanied by a deep empathy for suffering) is characteristic of Aboriginal writing. The irony in the narration here is very “dry and wry” (Holt, “Aboriginal Humour” 83). Lillian Holt suggests that “Aboriginal humour is [...] taking the seriousness out of the situation, helping them to survive [...] that communal humour is healing and it takes the sting out of it” (Holt, Interview n.p.). Alison Ravenscroft comments that texts such as these can be read as “‘deadly’ in the dual Aboriginal sense of the term: strong and dangerous, or humorous” (189).

Jeanine Leane’s *Purple Threads*, structured like Munkara’s as a story sequence, is no exception to this. It is written through the eyes of Sunshine, who lives in a household with her Nan; two unmarried Aunts, Beulah (Boo) and Lily (Bubby); her younger sister, Star, and her mother, Petal (some of the time). The book’s action takes place in the 1960s and 1970s, but memories from the 1940s are recalled. Nan was taken away to the city as a child to become a domestic, and later married a white man (a Boer War veteran, and “a jingo,” 43) who took her back to Murrumbah, “brought me home,” she recalls. “Tol’ me every day I was lucky ta be farmin’ the virgin land an’ turnin’ this empty country into a nation” (44). He hectored her with an unwitting irony, telling her that she was now “*a respectable farmer’s wife, and there’ll be no talk of the past or heathen talk or superstitious mumbo-jumbo or I’ll send you back to where you came from*” (43-4 italics in original)—this latter being the church-run home to which she had been removed, away from her childhood Country.

Auntie Boo says she has “stayed single for ninety-six years” just “to prove all marriage was for the worse.” Boo had been a domestic for a Mrs O’Brien who bequeathed her a German piano and a pile of Roman history books, and profited, she tells Sunshine and Star, from reading about powerful women in Roman

patriarchal societies, in particular Empress Livia, who had recourse to poisoning people. “Mind youse, I wouldna been above doin’ likewise to some o’ the men I met, but I knew I wouldna’ get away with it an’ they ain’t worth hangin’ fer” (26). But, Mrs O’Brien had taught her “how ta make something real deadly [...] outta fox-gloves wouldya believe? Who’d o’ thought something so pretty could be that deadly? They call ‘em *digitalis* in them herb books she used to have” (26). Having passed on some other knowledge about how to survive living on your own land (and how she schemed and used forgery to keep their house and paddock from being sold by male relations), Boo concludes these confidences with: “But ya never give away ya best secrets—‘member that, youse girls, I never tol’ that to anyone” (26).

Nan and the Aunts live in fear of the children being taken away because their mother is not skilled at maintaining a respectable image in a small town.² Petal is in a relationship with Dinny (a white Catholic rodeo rider, who is the father of her two children), but when he takes her up to visit the cattle station he is to inherit, she returns to her family before long. Dinny’s family referred to Petal as “an Abo,” but his sister, a Catholic nun named Bernadette, had reassured his mother: “I can already see how we could do something with the children. They are only young and they can be educated” (78). Nan and the Aunties had been anxious about Petal going there alone with the children: “Ya know what can happen to the kids if the authorities think they bein’ neglected” (64), Boo reminds Petal. Boo is aware that they have to keep “the Welfare” away from the children (10), or they might be taken. Nan checks that they look “respectable” when they go to Sunday school—“Gotta make sure ya look like somebody owns ya,” in response to which Sunshine thinks, “Everyone in the district should know who owned us but I knew better than to ask” (11). But she does question Boo about why they have to go to church when the elder relations do not—to which she grumpily replies, “Big people can’t get taken” (12-13). Encountering discrimination at school, Sunshine dreams of going to the city: “Stupid bloody land ... we could go to town an’ have a flash house with all the money ... An’ I could ‘ave friends ... an’ ... people would think we were *normal*” (131).

The Aunties also help their white neighbour, Milli, whose husband is habitually violent. During a big storm and flood, he returns from the pub late at night, and bashes her: Milli retaliates and then arrives, splashed with blood, with the children at their house. Nan washes her clothes and Boo and Bubby go on an errand, in gumboots and raincoats, with a wheelbarrow, a spade, and a snake stick. There is a question, unanswered at the time, about the stick, “Why d’ya think she took the snake stick with ‘er on a wet winter night?” Sunshine asks her sister (122). Most likely Boo thought of finishing him off if Milli had not; at any rate, they dispose of the body. More detail of the story of how the Aunties helped a white woman keep her children is initially withheld for the reader until later. When Sunshine has come home from University to visit, she finds out more. Alfi’s car had bogged “on the slushy road when the river broke its banks,” and he was drunk and angry. “He bashed Milli and she hit him with the iron fire stoker. When Milli ran to us ... she wanted Nana and my Aunties to take her children. She was going to turn herself in. But the women had other plans. The wild, wet weather served them well” (154). Boo simply tells the police when they arrive, that Alfi “never come home from the pub the night the flood come down the river” (126).

Helena Kadmos points out that Leane’s narrative in *Purple Threads* “alerts the reader to the material and symbolic significance of the land and its changes, and to attend closely to the interactions between people and the land” (n.p.). Early in the book, Sunshine recalls being told: “The big floods didn’t happen much any more. Nan said the country was drying up” (3). Boo shows Sunshine some of the earth, and tells her it should be “black an’ beautiful jus’ like ya could eat it!” (3). But it is “tired and brown” (3). The town of Gundegai itself “had been built three times. The first two times, the settlers ignored the advice of the Wiradjuri people and built on the river flats. It was washed away twice” (2). After Milli comes to stay with them, following the death of her husband, the flood rises much higher: “Centuries-old eucalyptus on the river flats fell like skittles as the huge snake of water flooded the land. And just as Nan predicted, the worker’s hut on the creekflats washed away” (124). Nan tells Milli not to cry or worry, “Time

this flood’s gone be a lotta things washed away an’ gone f’ever, jus’ you wait an’ see. River’s a powerful thing, jus’ swallows up some things an’ prob’ly for the betta” (124).

Cleven’s *Her Sister’s Eye* shows an individual nemesis coming upon some of the oppressive white rednecks in the town, through water and also fire. In the remembered past of the novel, a vigilante group of whites was in control; they shot dead Belle, sister of the main Aboriginal male character, Archie, and beat him with a gun barrel leaving permanent scars and amnesia from stress disorder. The young Aboriginal woman, Sofie Salte, leads Donald Drysdale (grandson of Edward, who shot Belle), who has molested her, into the Stewart River. There, with the guidance of its “old ones,” and its fish (“Only one thing to do ... Cut his water off ... Bring him this way, 57), Donald is taken to his death by drowning after “the secret thing” (58) occurs. Katrin Althans finds embodied in such narrative, “the power and strength found in an indigenous identity”: they are “stories of indigenous maban powers derived from nature” (Althans 131). As argued by Alison Ravenscroft for Cleven’s first novel *Bitin’ Back*, the narrative “puts the white reader into the position of the subject who does not know. It unsettles the white reading position, as much by what it refuses to tell—by the gaps in its narrative—as by what it does tell [...] ‘unsettl[ing]’ white readers from their assumed position as knowers [...] [W]hite ways of knowing ... are shown to be partial only, and not the universals they are taken to be in many prevailing discourses” (Ravenscroft 188).

So in some of the more recent writing, physical fightbacks are described that are sometimes, it is suggested, aided by other forces—a feature of the magical realism employed by many resistant literatures, including Indigenous ones. Sofie in *Her Sister’s Eye*, in an alliance with the river, produces the castration and drowning of her white rapist; in Leane’s *Purple Threads*, “the Murumbidgee River [...] as much a character in the story as people are themselves [...] has a very strong undertow and what appears on the surface to be calm and benign tells nothing of the turbulence and dangers lurking, ever present, just below the surface” (Leane, Lecture 2014). At the end of Wright’s *Carpentaria*, a tidal wave called up by Normal Phantom sweeps away

the coastal settlement, and his son, Will Phantom, is saved by drifting away on an island of floating rubbish.

Rubbish and rubbish dumps take on a tropic quality in the light of the widespread wastage of material consumption that the dominant, postcolonising society lives by, and the charity/welfare handed out by the well-off. So, for example, Munkara describes how the “bush mob,” a community living in poverty, were initially attracted to the discarded goods of the hegemonic white society and its whiteman dreaming:

And so to appease some of this strange new hunger for the new age the mission mob organised regular barge loads of cast-offs from the outside world so the bush mob could have a little piece of muruntani Dreaming for themselves. [...] The bags of flotsam and jetsam continued to stream in from the Big Joint and the bush mob became quite skilled at scrounging and fighting their way through the mountain of discarded goods. (92)

After a while, the things ceased to be of interest to most of the bush mob: they “didn’t care about their discarded possessions, the cast-offs of cast-offs which now lay all around the place. And so a rubbish tip had to be built to accommodate this new phenomenon called littering” (94). An exception to the boredom was Fatima, who,

resplendent in a tweed hunting jacket with the sleeves cut off over an ankle-length powder-blue ball gown ... took it upon herself to teach Judy [her daughter-in-law] some very important life-skills, such as how to find the best cast-offs when the new barge load arrived. Maybe it was her impish sense of humour or perhaps she had been born with really bad taste, but whatever the reason Judy became quite renowned for her bizarre outfits. (95)

Aboriginal settlements on the fringes of towns from which they were in earlier days excluded were quite frequently in the vicinity of rubbish dumps,³ and scavenging there for things that might be of use was a frequent activity. In the early sections of Wright’s *Carpentaria*, the arrival of a load of green bags every day at the dump was watched out for—and Angel Day has furnished much of her house, “the rubbish dump

palace” (17), from the tip, in particular with a Madonna, recoloured with the art materials of her husband, Normal Phantom, to become “an Aboriginal woman who lived by the sea” (38). Another treasure Angel has found is the discarded clock from the Mayor’s office that means, the ironic narrative informs us, that “the Phantom family would be marching off to bed at the correct time, just like the school thought was really desirable, then they would march off to school on time to do their school work” (22), without any need to rely upon “where the sun sat in the sky” (22). These objects displace the excitement of an earlier find of a pile of books of fairy tales. But, like Aunt Boo, Angel thinks that white people are not generally to be taken seriously: “She called them gammon” (21).

In Wright’s first novel, *Plains of Promise*, the character Ivy is living, along with a huge herd of feral goats, near the rubbish dump, sleeping in an old refrigerator box.⁴ Fear of infection from the goats, perhaps TB, spreads through the town, and an early morning raid is organised by the Council that has “deployed every bulldozer in the vicinity into action, and marshalled every man with a Gun Licence into the Town Hall for instructions and bullets” (201). Over a long day, the humans are dealt with first and, after that, the goats:

At dawn, every Aboriginal camp on the edge of town was flattened. The bulldozers came roaring in, almost on top of sleeping families. The drivers made short work of all that those people had in life. [...] The doctor and medical staff from the hospital were on standby to give injections after the police force rounded up everyone there, separating anyone who showed signs of illness. They would be sent to a remote quarantine island established by the State for Aborigines with diseases. (201)

The use of the term “remote” here is loaded with satiric force, as is the label “Aborigines with diseases”, used to categorise the population for removal to a camp. The bullets are notionally only for the goats:

Back in town, people heard the sound of bullets ricocheting over the dump for hours on end

[...]. The fingers that fired the bullets were red-raw when the last goat, with her kid, fell on top of the pile of corpses. At this point the bulldozers came in again. The tip was ripped to pieces from edge to centre, with the gunmen still in position for any final strays. (201-02)

The only living thing left there is Ivy; one of the gunmen, taking aim, realises he is looking at “a woman’s face through the white, burr-tangled hair that surrounded it.”

‘There’s a woman!’ he yelled, trying to be heard over the roar of the bulldozers. He dropped the gun and raced between the nearest bulldozer and the woman, risking his life to try to drag her to safety. (202)

Towards the end of Weight’s *Carpentaria*, a further strand of irony is provided by the motif of refuse. After the town of Desperance has been entirely swept away by a cyclonic storm, Will Phantom finds himself “dumped onto an extraordinary floating island of rubbish” (493), much of it plastic, “a kilometre long” (495), on which he survives alone for a long time—as long as, at least, it takes for plants and trees to grow from the seeds of rotting fruit. Frances Devlin-Glass suggests that this is a whole “island of Western debris,” that “challenges European hubris and ecological ignorance” (83). Such floating “islands” are an actually existing phenomenon, but Demelza Hall suggests that the island of refuse can be read as a Foucauldian heterotopic space:

While the floating island is, on the one hand, an alien terrain—adrift on the world’s seas—it is also, for Will, a space constructed from elements that are familiar to him, the detrital topography of his childhood home, and can therefore be celebrated as a space which celebrates fringe dwelling. (18)

Struggles against mining in *Carpentaria* by the Phantom family in the North involve sabotage and, eventually, the conjuring up by Normal Phantom of a huge tidal wave. The resistance in Lucashenko’s *Mullumbimby* (2013) appears on the face of it to be through more mainstream channels. The central character Jo has, like Nan and Boo in *Purple Threads*,

attained ownership of a small piece of land according to white legality. With her brother Stevo, she has “bought back a patch of Bundjalung land, reclaimed a fragment of their country” (30), and is attempting to set up a farm with her teenaged daughter, Ellen. Jo reflects: “She had her twenty acres and her version of culture safely tucked into her back pocket. There’s no choke-cherry tree on my back,” she tells herself, and in an image that recalls the scars on the back of the African American woman, Sethe, in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, she is “a free enterprise, freehold blackfella,” who could be seen as having “circled right around the hideous politics of colonial fallout, and bought back the ancestral land herself” (42). This approach is challenged by Caroline, Stevo’s white girlfriend, who asserts that all the land there belongs to the Bundjalung—but Jo defends her survival strategy with the reply that Stevo “can *talk* Mabo all he wants, but they took our grandparents and the rest of em away” to assimilate their families and destroy their connections to the land. “And it nearly worked” (50). Her attempt at being comfortable in her own situation is also challenged even more powerfully by some unfamiliar faces: “The Goories were down from Brisbane, and not only new in town, but claiming Native Title over Tin Wagon Road and the surrounding valley. Twoboy and his brother Lazarus were here to prove their claim with books and family trees and argument by any means necessary” (32-3), in another recall of African American history. When Jo is told by her white friend, Therese, about the arrival of the activists, she suggests cynically that there could be a “war between all the blackfellas around here for the next fifty years too, while they work the native title out” (33). We find out later that Twoboy had held back in a fistfight with Johnny, a leader of another rival group of young men in the area, so as not to increase the divisions among the black families; Jo is aware, nonetheless, that “The idea that the Bullockheads were a part of his country had never once entered his head” (224).

Twoboy is searching for evidence to advance his Land Rights claim. In his own family history, his great-grandfather had been “kidnapped’ into the Native Police, but “because he didn’t have any interest in murdering Goories for the benefit of white men and

their bullang (cattle),”⁵ he escaped. Twoboy tells Jo he thinks the old people are buried on Bottlebrush Hill, waiting for the later generation to find “the tiniest little crack in the dugai law, to get a little bit of it back, and look after our budheram jagan (sacred land)” (165). He goes up there later to “seek out the talga (music) of the dead” (230). Jo is cynical about the prospects: “Maybe a wild-eyed anthro or two might agree that the ancestors were talking to him. Everybody else would sling him in the Lismore clinic onetime, and throw away the key” (230-31). Jo tells her friend, Kym, “He thinks if he can just get them old fellas singing on his little recorder, he can learn it and sing it in language at the tribunal, and that’ll prove the connection he needs” (234); and Kim suggests this will not be effective, “unless it’s been written down somewhere by anthros” (234). But Twoboy tells Jo, “this might look like a fight with lawyers in a fancy courtroom, but really it’s a war ... over the same thing that war’s always been over anywhere in the world—country” (222). In Wright’s *Plains*, we can recall, Elliot reflected, in an earlier generation: “No one was able to look after the land any more, not all of the time, the way they used to in the olden days. Life was so different now that the white man had taken the lot. It was like a war, an undeclared war” (74).

Jo’s daughter Ellen is a talented artist, and (like Sofie Salte in *Her Sister’s Eye*, Ivy Koopundi Andrews and Jessie Doolan in *Plains*, and Oblivia Ethylene in *The Swan Book*) is in closer than “normal” psychic touch with the physical, natural world. Anne Brewster makes reference to this central aspect of Indigenous ontology: “What I am describing as Indigenous sovereignty accommodates non-human forces as actors” (88). When Twoboy and Jo take Ellen to the sacred lake she makes a map of ancient pathways on the land, but she is afraid of her affinity with Country and the parallel paths she sees in lines on her hands. She performs what Jo interprets as an attempt to “burn away the evidence on her palms” (265)—their correspondence to the map that Jo fears will lead to Ellen “being dragged inexorably in the direction of the psych ward or DOCS or both [...]” (266). Despite Jo’s relatively middle-class status, her education and being a landowner, she remains nervous, in the way

much older people were habitually accustomed to being, about white institutions of surveillance or “protection,” such as the Department of Community Services. Nonetheless, Ellen is one of the characters who embody a continuing, different relationship to the land, handed on by her Aboriginal forebears.

In Wright’s *The Swan Book*, the young woman Oblivia, living in the latest (the book begins in 2078) style of internment camps for Aboriginal people, is mute following a sexual attack by some young men in the settlement, but she has heard many stories from a European refugee, Bella Donna, who, as part of “countless stateless millions of sea gypsies looking for somewhere to live” (23), has fled from the collapsing society in Europe, inspired to survive by a white Mute Swan on a mountain on which they had taken refuge (30), and found her way to the Swamp People living on Swan Lake, which is filled with rusting broken boats that the Defence force has taken to the lake and abandoned (23). Bella Donna of the Champions has “adopted” (my inverted commas) Oblivia; though as a refugee she has little of her former privilege, she talks to her for hours, about her own past life and culture, recreating the world that she has lost.

The swamp’s natural sounds of protest were often mixed with lamenting ceremonies. Haunting chants rose and fell on the water like a beating drum, and sounds of clap sticks oriented thoughts, while the droning didgeridoos blended all sounds into the surreal experience of a background listening, which had become normal listening. Listen! That’s what music sounds like! The woman once explained to the girl that the music of epic stories normally sounded like this. (53)

An Aboriginal man, Warren Finch, has become the Deputy President of the now collapsing Australian polis. Overshadowing the romance narrative of Warren returning to claim his “promised wife,” Oblivia, is the spectral history of John Howard’s 2007 Northern Territory military intervention, for as soon as he has taken her away in his car, he orders the army’s evacuation of the Swamp, since he knew, as he tells her later, ignoring the irony: “There will be no Army

looking after anybody anymore” (231). He also tells her: “*You will never be going back to where you came from.... It no longer exists*” (230). Warren provides a rationalisation for her removal and the destruction of the community by condemning the inadequacy of other people at Swan Lake. Uttered by an Aboriginal national leader at the beginning of the twenty-second century (in the book’s setting), it uncannily resembles twentieth-century governmental rhetoric:

Their job was to protect you.... That was the law. Anyone would understand that places like that cannot exist. ... They had two choices. Either being moved into the nearest town where they would have to learn to live just like anyone else. Or, being returned to homelands where their real laws and government still exist. (231)

Warren takes Oblivia to a large town, called the City of Refugees (246), where he has a suite in the People’s Palace, which is surrounded by homeless people sleeping on the ground. The lift symbolises the technologies brought to Australia by the civilising mission of colonialism:

He led her to a wire cage that belonged to another century ... *A bloody marvel that still works perfectly even after practically two-and-a-half centuries*, he claimed. *It must have been the pride of the city when it was first built.* He pressed the dirt-and-grease-coated brass button that shone on the mark where fingers had been pressing it forever. *Bloody impressive!* (236)

The wire cage lift is driven by a man called Machine, who will guard Oblivia in her madwoman’s attic, until, after Warren’s death, she escapes to make her journey, guided by black swans, back to the Swamp where, living on one of the broken ships again, with her old Stranger swan dozing on her lap (330), “Her mind was only a lonely mansion for the stories of extinction” (333).

This is not necessarily the end of everything: *The Swan Book* concludes: “Maybe the Rainbow Serpent will start bringing in those cyclones and funnelling sand mountains into the place. Swans might come back. Who knows what madness will be calling them in the end?” (334).

* * * *

The Labor Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, in the Australian parliament on 13 February 2008 made a formal Apology to Australian Indigenous people (see Shoemaker), but there was no compensation proposed for the stolen land or the stolen children. In Queensland, a campaign, drawing upon historian Ros Kidd’s research, for the payment of stolen wages never given to workers on reserves controlled by the Queensland government, encountered many obstacles. Communities are still being broken up and dis-located, notably recently in Western Australia, but elsewhere as well, and this is often related to the continuing development of mining, especially of fossil fuels.

Ten years ago, Sara Ahmed wrote, in “The Politics of Bad Feeling,” that “the national subject, by witnessing its own history of injustice towards others—can, in its shame be reconciled to itself.” She also argued that “shame about the theft of children might be more easily expressed than shame about the theft of land, as such shame would ‘unsettle’ or ‘un-house’ non-Indigenous Australians” (77). She suggested, further, that “to claim solidarity through declarations of bad feeling is problematic insofar as it takes the declaration as ‘sufficient grounds’ for solidarity [...]. Perhaps solidarity only works when sentiments solidify into actions. Indeed, it is the premature claim to solidarity, as if it is something we already have, that can block the recognition that there is much harder work left to do” (81).

Central to much of the writing produced by Australian Indigenous women writers remain the stories of the theft of children and theft of land. Alexis Wright told Jean Claude Vernay, when he interviewed her in 2004, that she wanted to write in *Carpentaria* about “how far people can be pushed and still reach for hope.” When he asked: “How do you perceive the reconciliation issue?” Wright responded: “I don’t perceive it!” (Vernay 121).

Indigenous peoples internationally have been coming together and making common cause in relation to organising as regards postcolonising oppressions where these exist. In many cases, they have similarities, also “documented” in fictional writing (see, for

example, Anita Heiss's 2003 book, *Dhuulu-Yalaa*, which gave a comparative account of Aboriginal, Maori and Canadian First Nation literatures). Jonathan Rudin, head of the Aboriginal Legal Services of Canada, visiting Sydney in February 2016, noted, for example, that Aboriginal people in Australia and Canada had very similar statistics for over-representation in prisons (Canada 4% of overall population, 25% of prison population; Australia 3% of overall population, 27% of prison population). Aboriginal women in both countries make up a third of the prison population. Youth detention was far higher in Australia with 59% of those incarcerated being Indigenous, and 40% in Canada (Wahlquist n.p.).

Indigenous peoples are being heard internationally in a more widespread way in the context of the huge upsurge of concern about climate change and carbon pollution, expressed in the December 2015 UN Climate Change Summit in Paris, at which 196 out of the 200 nations present agreed to limit activities that produce global warming and to transition from fossil fuels. Customary ontologies and epistemologies about the relationship of humans to the environment still pervade Indigenous communities, as is witnessed by the worldwide incidence of their continuing struggles against huge companies that control agriculture, such as Monsanto, or the miners of fuels the consumption of which destroys the atmosphere and accelerates climate change.

Ben Holgate, in a recent article, considers how magical realism works, especially in Indigenous literature, and engages with Stephen Slemon's 1995 argument that he summarises as that "the narrative mode involves two oppositional systems locked in a continuous battle with one another, the magical and the real, usually taken to mean the colonizer and the colonized" (634). Holgate proposes that "magical realist fiction, which portrays ongoing colonization in a supposedly postcolonial nation incorporates, rather, three oppositional systems: the Indigenous colonized; the white settler colonizer; and global economic forces that help perpetuate the ongoing colonization" (635). This argument can be extended further into a global perspective which sees that colonisation, like

slavery, remains a key tool of power and domination, but the "global economic forces" are doing more than maintaining postcoloniality as such, given that capitalist globalised business, and warmaking, has decreasing connections to any specific nation. The interests of the postcolonising regime in Australia continue to be served by the maintenance of British colonial residues, and whiteness theory can be used for analysing British or some European practices of colonising domination. But the world outside Australia looks different now—especially in terms of how capitalist or state capitalist regimes, or systems with elements of feudalism or fascism, all participate in moving towards cataclysmic human produced disasters.

Plains of Promise prefigures in my Epigraph a point in the character Elliot's journey for enlightenment, a visionary view of a particular landscape being destroyed. Lucashenko writes: "Known indigenous country is healing, nurture, sanctuary, responsibility and safety. Unknown country is frightening, inhabited by dangerous spirits, liable to violent defence by its true people. Yet in an indigenous sensibility, there is (or was prior to the massacres and removals) no wilderness, no barren land and no dead heart. The land is not cursed and nor are its human inhabitants. Resurrection is not required where there has been no Fall" ("Not Quite" n.p.).

Towards the end of *Mullumbimby*, the reader is given an Aboriginal character's reflection upon what might be the future:

It gradually dawned upon Jo that to destroy the talga (music) of the rockhole, the dugai (whites) would have to kill every last Goorie who knew it. They would have to clear the World Heritage forest, and then they would need to destroy every lyrebird in the valley as well, probably every lyrebird for hundreds of miles around. But unless they did that, unless they went so far in their savagery and their madness, then the talga would always be sung in the nooks and crannies of the bush where it seemed like nobody at all was listening. (278)

In the Epilogue to *The Swan Book*, the voice of the narrator speaks directly about hearing the voices of the land: "Well! You had to hear these soothsaying creatures

creating glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land. Really listen hard to what they are saying” (329). A society in which there might no longer be a hegemony of English is conjured through the Myna birds, “All they will remember of the English language of those times will be the most commonly used words you would have heard to defeat lies in this part of the world. Just short words like *Not true*” (330). This, the narrative suggests, is a long way from the time when Indigenous people were required “to teach their children to speak English properly so the gap could be closed between Aboriginal people and Australia” (80). The opening words of *Carpentaria* are: “A nation chants, *but we know your story already*,” and as Laura Joseph notes, this makes that novel also “a challenge to and a refusal of the nation as a story,” presenting “stories outside what this nation knows of the region and its people” (3). These passages embody the juxtaposition of Indigenous sovereignty, which for Ann Brewster is “the plenitude of indigenous spiritual, cosmological and historical connectedness with the land” (86), with the worldviews that have historically animated imperialist and colonising regimes. Aboriginal women’s literature has been and remains a key part of the contestation of their postcolonising continuance.

Notes

1. The closing of these communities had already been happening. In 2011 the WA government evicted the remaining residents from Oombulgurri, Eastern Kimberley, and demolished all the houses, infrastructure and buildings. No compensation was paid for buildings or land, and the people were simply relocated (Solonec, *Guardian*, 2 April 2015 n.p.). In March 2015, the WA Police Commissioner supported the proposed closure of many more remote communities, and offered Oombulgurri as an example of a place that had been “too remote for the continuous attention that would have been needed to intervene in the cycle of abuse.” He asserted: “If we facilitate the existence of communities beset by substance abuse, family violence and child abuse hundreds of kilometres from support or intervention services, then we must accept the loss of another generation of Aboriginal children” (O’Callaghan, n.p.).
2. Another particularly witty representation of this, with complex levels of irony, is found in Clevens’s first novel,

Bitin’ Back: Mavis Dooley has to try to conceal the apparent homosexuality and cross-dressing of her star rugby-playing son, Nevil, in a small country town (see Ravenscroft “Curled Up”).

3. In Hyllus Maris and Sonia Borg’s *Women of the Sun* (1985), Granny Johnston (grandmother of Alice Wilson, a character born in the 1960s) is still “living on a shanty site, like forty years ago” (140), with water carried from a single tap in the nearby tourist park (139), and Alice has gone back there—“she taught Aboriginal culture to the kids” (144). Val, an activist from the city, comes to report that there are still delays with any housing, and that she has traced Alice’s daughter Lo-Arna, taken from her when she was a baby. In the background: “They could hear the bulldozer working on the garbage tip. It was a menacing sort of noise: like a monster that eats up everything in its path. It was a real gubbah tool, relentless and destructive” (144). Not long after this, the whole site is bulldozed on orders from the Health Department. “These constructions are against Council regulations for a start. You’ve turned this place into a rubbish dump!” (167), the Shire engineer tells the community.
4. There are four generations of women in *Plains*. Ivy was taken to St Dominic’s mission with her (unnamed) mother when she was very young. Her mother committed suicide, and Ivy was sexually preyed upon by the manager of the mission, Reverend Jipp. She has a baby at fourteen, Mary, who is taken for adoption by white people in Sydney. Ivy lives for twenty years in a church-owned mental hospital; after discharge, she spends some time with an aged Christian widow who has poisoned her husband; after that, she is homeless, living at a rubbish tip. After the goats there have been reduced to “a pile of corpses,” Ivy leaves and gets back to her ancestral land, that is visited by Mary, and her daughter Jessie. Mary encounters her mother but does not appear to recognise her, but Jessie’s connection to the land, the lake and the waterbirds is established.
5. Lucashenko provides these translations in the text.

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