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"The Interconnectedness and Spiritual Equality of All Things": Recovering Indigenous Ecological Imagination in Postcolonial Australian Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Following the 1992 Mabo Decision which overturned the historical myth of *terra nullius* and its declaration that Australia was "nobody's land," Indigenous Australian literature has been concerned with recovering both the sidelined historical of colonial dispossession and traditional ecological knowledge. Inspired by their own storytelling traditions, First Nations writers Kim Scott and Alexis Wright reveal these Indigenous histories and cultures through their explorations of "Country": an Aboriginal English word encompassing the belief that all things, human and non-human, are equally and spiritually connected across time in an ecological web of stories. By examining the interrelationship of postcolonialism and ecocriticism, I argue that Scott and Wright, through their respective novels *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*, promote diverse, Indigenous understandings of the environment, challenging the dominance of Anglo-American writing in ecocriticism. Alongside its capacity to interrogate the way we read and analyze nature and history, I also argue that Indigenous writing has the capacity to challenge the novel form itself by moving away from Western conceptions of linear temporality, casual development, and action or character driven plot, and instead incorporating traditional storytelling modes (oral stories, music, and dance) that are all framed by the rhythmed events of ecological time and place.

The present cultural moment of the twenty-first century appears to be defined by several crises. On one hand, the effects of climate change are more palpable than ever before, prompting environmental and ecocritical studies to identify a divide between humanity and nature, and thus a need to re-orient the seemingly anthropocentric focus of literary criticism, albeit from a rather universalized, Anglo-American perspective. On the other, social justice movements have illuminated widespread, systematic racism and the prevailing impacts of colonialism, driving postcolonial studies to focus on recovering anthropocentric, human histories of dispossession, cultural erasure, and the divides between colonizers and colonized peoples. Despite the predominant critical assumption that these areas of study are seemingly in conflict, in Australia particularly, these issues are not as distinct as one might suppose them to be. It was only in 1992 that the High Court of Australia overturned the foundational myth of *terra nullius* and its declaration that Australia was "nobody's land": an historical narrative that erased the complex cultural and ecological networks of the oldest civilization in the world. Since then, Indigenous Australian literature has been concerned with recovering the sidelined histories of dispossession and colonial violence, responsible for ongoing inequalities, *and* traditional ecological knowledge, embodied in oral stories and the land, by reconciling them with familiar historical and Western narratives. Perhaps then, an examination of contemporary Australian literature – an area neglected in critical studies – and its efforts to overcome the

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dominant, dichotomizing tendencies of Western epistemology and ontology, can offer new approaches to ecocriticism and postcolonialism by transforming our understanding of the way we read nature *and* history. Indeed, exploration of the works of Kim Scott and Alexis Wright can perhaps even serve as a case study for the ways in which a new methodology for literary analysis – outside the Western ontological frameworks of anthropocentrism, language, and time – might be forged and applied.

Revealing the mutual concern with recovering Indigenous histories and ecological cultures, Tyson Yunkaporta outlines that there are "sentient totemic entities all over Australia" which "follow the songlines of their creation: maps of story carrying knowledge" and histories that manifest "in the mind and land as one, webbed throughout the traditional lands of the First Peoples" (1–2). Echoing Bruce Pascoe, Deborah Bird Rose, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson, he captures the deep spiritual connections and custodial relationships between Aboriginal Australians and sentient landscapes, grounded and preserved within narrative traditions of oral storytelling.[1] This scholarly drive toward recovering Indigenous knowledge and history, embodied in environmental epistemology and ontology, was prompted by the 1992 High Court decision as, according to Tony Birch, the "sovereign right to land and the interpretation of the past" became "inextricably linked" (110). This recovery is particularly exemplified in postcolonial Australian literature following 1992. Indeed, writers such as Scott and Wright mimetically incorporate their respective traditional storytelling modes and narratives – the primary means of communicating relationships with land and ancestry – to simultaneously confront the historical and prevailing colonial violence against Indigenous Australians (physical, epistemological, and ontological), and recover Indigenous connections to "Country": an Aboriginal English word encompassing the conscious, "ecological web" in which all natural things – human, animal, environmental – are interconnected, existing throughout time in eternal cycles of creation that are materialized through stories and land (Rose 1).

Resonating with Rose's suggestion that, in Australia, "one cannot speak in a holistic way about human rights without speaking also of ecological rights, and vice versa," there appears to be an inextricable connection between postcolonialism and ecocriticism in contemporary Australian literature (86). Although such terms are contested, this connection is premised on Lawrence Buell's seminal claim that ecocriticism reads nature as an independent and autonomous agent rather than a framing device for human activity, focusing on texts where "human accountability to the environment" is central to its "ethical orientation" (7), and Edward Said's argument that for indigenous peoples, the history of colonialism "is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider" and their "geographical identity must thereafter be searched for and somehow restored" in postcolonial studies (77). Yet in major studies of postcolonial ecocriticism, Australian literature remains on the periphery, mentioned in passing or entirely absent. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's study even incorrectly assumes that "in pre-invasion Australia, the nature of the environment had dictated nomadism as the only way of life" (9): an assumption Pascoe, through evidence of complex agricultural systems that indicate a grounded sense of place, not only refutes, but suggests reinforces *terra nullius*, demonstrating how it continues to haunt academic and societal consciousness (11). Perhaps this lack of engagement is symptomatic of the issue highlighted by Susie O'Brien, Pablo Mukherjee, Rob Nixon, Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George Handley, that ecocriticism is dominated by Anglo-American writers and critics, resulting in universalizing approaches to the environment that marginalize world literatures and perspectives, and erase political realities.[2] Indeed, it is such tendencies toward universalized criticism that are paralleled in colonial epistemology – driven, according to DeLoughrey, by Enlightenment rationalism, objectivity, and a desire to intellectually conquer both land and native peoples (321) – and the self-involved perception of *terra nullius*, which Scott and Wright seek to fragment by imagining alternative historical perspectives. Thus, these studies posit a need to diversify ecocriticism through the study of postcolonial ecocriticism, bringing marginalized perspectives to the forefront. By extension, they also implicitly indicate a need for Australian literature to further diversify such studies.

What then makes Australian literature distinctive within postcolonial ecocriticism? In one sense, writers such as Scott and Wright exemplify Huggan's argument that postcolonial ecocriticism exposes the mutual othering and exploitation of people and land, revealing the imposition of European ideals through institutionalized assimilation and the introduction of foreign species and agricultural methods which have devastated traditional cultures and native ecological systems. More importantly, Australian literature offers new ways of thinking about the environment – reshaping the dominance of Anglo-American perspectives – through the mode in which they were intended to be communicated: the narratives of the "Story-mind" and metaphors of the "Dreaming-mind" (Yunkaporta 169). Similar to other indigenous cultures around the world, Indigenous Australian spirituality is founded on a "totemic system" which "insists on the interconnectedness and spiritual equality of all things" (Pascoe 143). Whilst this resonates with German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt's seemingly "bold new vision of nature" as an interconnected "web" in the eighteenth-century (Wulf 3–5), Indigenous ecological "interconnectedness," existing before Humboldt, is deeply spiritual – all sharing the same spirit and soul – rather than purely biological. Furthermore, it is founded on the belief that all things, rather than being inanimate, have a consciousness that is materialized through ancestral stories, rather than empirical science. Scott and Wright in particular explore the complexities of specific totemic relationships between individuals and natural entities, revealing deep, embodied connections that cannot fit conventional, written language or Western conceptions of linear temporality. Instead, unique to Aboriginal philosophy, these totemic relationships exist within a continuously unfolding process of connection and creation, based on what Rose has described as "ecological time": a "communicative system of Country," founded on the rhythms, events, and cycles of nature, that connects past, present and future and cannot be reduced to circles and lines (45). By incorporating these fragmented, ecological temporalities, Australian literature also serves as a reminder that the events of history – including first encounters and colonial violence – are not fixed and continue to shape and haunt the present. Therefore, it undermines the seemingly schismatic pre-occupations, identified by Nixon, of postcolonialism with "hybridity," historicity and "displacement" and ecocriticism with "purity," "timelessness" and a "grounded sense of place" (236), by recovering the multitude of Aboriginal identities deeply grounded in the eternal patterns of Country that have been displaced by histories of colonialism.[3]

However, there is something problematic about the assumption made by studies of postcolonial ecocriticism that postcolonial perspectives can challenge universalizing ecocritical impulses by historicizing nature, and that ecocriticism can interrogate anthropocentrism, particularly within postcolonialism. It seems the premise of ecocriticism, offering a new way of reading nature by reversing the anthropocentric ideals that have been inherent to narratives of human progression and Enlightenment rationalism, is inherently Eurocentric, facilitating the dominance of Anglo-American writing. Indeed, it seems to enable the very division between anthropocentric postcolonialism and Anglocentric ecocriticism which is refuted in Indigenous spirituality as knowledge of nature (Indigenous epistemology) is intimately tied to being and existing with nature (Indigenous ontology). As Rose exemplifies, because Indigenous Australians "understand their own lives are part of the life of Country, they do not conceptualize a fundamental opposition between human interests and the interests of living things" (93). Thus, Australian postcolonialism is inherently environmental and resists anthropocentrism. Furthermore, Nixon suggests that the preoccupation of ecocriticism with nature's timelessness "buries histories postcolonialists sought to unearth," therefore finding a need to historicize nature (236). Such a reading could be productive when examining works such as Dereck Walcott's "The Sea is History," evoking how nature functions as a participant in historical processes and therefore can recover the histories of those uprooted by colonialism. However, not only is the suggestion that nature exists to record human history an anthropocentric perspective, to suppose that the relationships of postcolonialism and ecocriticism with time are incompatible or even detrimental assumes a Western conception of linear or cyclical time and limits the ability for Indigenous spirituality to enter the critical conversation. Indeed, the prevalent academic assumption that nature is "timeless," according to Tony Swain, is an assertion of Western ontological heritage, contrasting to Aboriginal ontology that

"does not allow time or history philosophical determination because this is incompatible with an uncompromising insistence on the immutability of place" and Country: the hermeneutic framework used in the novels of Scott and Wright, rather than temporality (35).

These problematic assumptions are indicative of what Yunkaporta has identified as the tendency for "decolonizing movements," intent on "rejecting western systems of thought," to focus more on "ways of knowing than ways of being" (69). Even when an ontological focus is undertaken, it is often from colonial perspectives or Western hierarchical ontology, conceiving the equivalence of colonized peoples to animals – from an anthropocentric perspective – as "dehumanizing": evinced in DeLoughrey and Handley's only mention of Indigenous Australians as an example of the institutionalized perception of colonized peoples as fauna (12). Thus, there is a need to bring Australian literature into postcolonial and ecocritical discourses to interrogate the fundamental problems with their frameworks. Furthermore, although work has been done to demonstrate how processes of colonialism differ depending on place, examination of Australian literature reveals that there is a prevailing ecocritical tendency to address "nature" and "environment" universally, reducing geographical specificity. Indeed, Nixon assumes ecocriticism is interested in purity whilst postcolonialism is interested in hybridity (236). By contrast, Australia is uniquely made up of hundreds of Indigenous cultures with distinct ecological relationships that are defined by specific regionalities; Scott's *That Deadman Dance* materializes Noongar people, culture and storytelling methods through the ecological networks of the coastal regions of Albany, south-western Western Australia, and Wright's *Carpentaria* embodies Waanyi people, stories and culture through the tropical, low-lying woodlands and coastal areas of the Gulf of Carpentaria, subject to erratic weather and cyclones.

Such specificity indubitably prompts the recognition that the generalized delineation of "Australian literature" or "Indigenous culture" is problematic, and that the cultural practices of all First Nations peoples cannot be encompassed within a few texts. Nonetheless, careful examination of a range of Australian literature can open up critical conversations around diverse Indigenous encounters with and contests over equally diverse environments through their content and stylistic forms which draw on and formulate cultural narratives. Aligning with the work done by Yunkaporta, rather than examining Aboriginal knowledge systems from postcolonial, ecocritical and global perspectives, I want to examine the currently divisive frameworks of postcolonial ecocriticism from Indigenous Australian perspectives to not only develop and advance its studies, but to reveal fundamental gaps in its premise. Although to cover all aspects of Indigenous knowledge would be impossible, a focus on the entanglement of totemic relationships with Western epistemology in the recovery of Indigenous history and culture – through the literary means in which that knowledge was intended to be transmitted – allows for the redefining of colonial narratives *and* studies of postcolonial ecocriticism.

The first issue that must be confronted is whether there is a divide between humanity and nature that warrants a need to reorient the relationship in literary studies. From a Western perspective, perhaps so, and thus the emergence of Anglo-American ecocriticism seems justified. However, Indigenous Australian scholarship seems aware that whilst this view exists, it is not a universal truth, exposing the skewed perspective upon which ecocriticism is founded. Indeed, rather than a relationship of imbalance, Henrietta Marrie writes that Indigenous Australians have "evolved complex relationships" of "eco-kinship" with the natural world as expressed through "totemic relationships" (48–49). In Indigenous cultures, such relationships go beyond the purely symbolic or aesthetic. As encapsulated in *Deadman* in the ongoing spiritual relationship between the whales and the Noongar boy, Bobby, that emerges from the traditional story "Mamang," a totem is a natural entity that, materialized through ancestral stories and land, is ontologically connected to an individual, defining their custodial responsibilities with the natural world. Hence, each person is an embodiment of knowledge, connected to nature through the "Kinship-mind" as a custodian rather than authority over Country (Yunkaporta 168): overcoming the predicament encountered by DeLoughrey and Handley over who can speak for nature without naturalizing human and nonhuman hierarchies

(25). Indeed, such a dilemma reinforces ecofeminist Val Plumwood's identification that the "anthropocentric culture" that dominates Western epistemology "conceives nature and animals as all alike in their lack of consciousness, which is assumed to be exclusive to the human" (55).

Both Scott and Wright recover Indigenous ecological kinships by consciously reacting against Western literary and historical precedents that have established this familiar, ecocritical divide between human and nature. Indeed, both Scott and Wright exhibit a kind of "double-consciousness" – coined by W.E.B. Du Bois (4) – in their awareness that the majority of their audience are non-Indigenous readers with little understanding of Aboriginal cultures and a consciousness that has been shaped by Australian literary precedents such as Henry Lawson's influential and frequently adapted short story, "The Drover's Wife" (1892). Left alone with her children as her husband is supposedly out droving, the story follows a woman and her struggle against nature, embodied in the black snake that invades her isolated home within the bush. Encapsulated in the repeated language of conflict – "she fought a bush-fire once," 'she fought a flood, "she also fights the crows and eagles" (Lawson 23–24) – this antagonistic relationship captures the Australian myth that colonization and early settler narratives were centered on battling and conquering nature. Indeed, by overcoming the barriers imposed by nature, these legendary "battlers" – a popular term coined by Lawson – became heroic figures in cultural imagination and thus the seemingly rightful owners of their conquered land, exemplified in the wife's victory in killing the snake and protecting her home: a subversion of the Genesis narrative.[4] Thus, foundational stories that have defined Australian literary traditions, such as "Drover's Wife," aesthetically materialize *terra nullius*: nature presented as the only antagonistic force to colonial enterprise whilst Indigenous figures remain on the periphery, absent or passive to colonial occupation. In many ways, it seems reminiscent of the ecocritical tendency to obfuscate politics and history in focusing on nature alone.

It is such a narrative and perception of nature that Scott, in *Deadman*, consciously grapples with in his re-imagining of encounters between settlers and Noongar people in south-west Australia during the early nineteenth-century. As the settlers are guided through the dense thicket by Noongar leaders, the focalized perspective of the settler, Geordie Chaine, observes how the distant "mountains stood like a stage prop" and the "leaves were like needles, or small saws" with "flowering spears" that "bristled with spikes" (Scott 46). Through similes of weaponry, Scott presents the perception of nature – shaped by the Lawson literary tradition – not only as dangerous and threatening, but also as inanimate tools to be utilized for human purposes or, later, grazing land. Indeed, the comparison of the mountain to a theatrical prop materializes Buell's concern that nature – from a Anglocentric perspective – has conventionally functioned as an insignificant, two-dimensional, or aesthetic backdrop for human activity. However, unlike Buell, the re-orientation of this perspective, along with *terra nullius*, does not take place by reading with an ecocritical lens; instead, Scott contrasts this Anglocentric view with Noongar perspectives as "Wooral addressed the bush as if he were walking through a crowd of diverse personalities, his tone variously playful, scolding, reverential, affectionate. It was most confusing. Did he see something else?" (46). Here, the source of the fear and antagonism felt by the colonialists is characterized as a blind unfamiliarity with a foreign landscape that challenges Western empirical frameworks in its unique ecosystems. By contrast, Wooral perceives and treats all elements of nature as distinct, living and feeling entities, not only because of his familiarity with Country, but also because Indigenous ontological frameworks position humans within a familial and totemic web with nature. Through the seeming anthropomorphosis of nature, readers can comprehend Indigenous models of eco-kinship that, rather than foregrounding or backgrounding nature, intimately connects all things as sentient equals.

Conversely, Wright reacts against these literary and historical precedents by setting her text, within ecological temporalities, in a defamiliarised present: exhibiting the ongoing effects of Australia's colonial past through the land conflict between the traditional owners of the fictionalized town, "Desperance," and a transnational mining company. Wright grapples with *terra nullius* and "battler" myths through the legend, created by the white occupants of Desperance, of "The Great Bat Drive." During its migration from river to coast, a Little Red Flying Fox is attacked by a domesticated dog. The

dog then falls ill and dies shortly after. However, rather than being an issue of an introduced animal disrupting the ecological processes of a native species, "all kinds of legends jumped out of the woodwork about bad bat bites. Elaborate stories circulated on paper from Council," prompting the mass destruction of "poor old … magnificent trees, decades in the making" to eradicate the bats (Wright 462–63). Despite being founded on a misunderstanding of both the story and the Gulf ecosystems, Wright reveals that – similar to colonizing myths created to justify the invasion of Indigenous lands – it is the circulation of such institutionalized myths that bolsters perceptions of nature as dangerous or hostile, fosters ignorance of established ecological and Indigenous civilizations "decades in the making," and justifies habitat destruction.

Thus, like Scott, Wright undermines prevailing cultural assumptions that nature exists in an antagonistic relationship to humanity; instead, Wright presents the antagonism as existing within and between natural, ancestral forces. Differing from the calm coastal regions of Albany in *Deadman*, the Waanyi people of *Carpentaria* have distinctive ecological relationships with their erratic, tropical ecosystems, based not only on custodianship, but an equal sense of powerlessness with all entities in relation to powerful ancestral beings:

> [Will] heard the spirit waves being rolled in by the ancestral sea water creatures of the currents, and conspiring with the spirits of the sky and winds to crash into the land … The earth murmured, the underground serpent … responded with hostile growls. This was the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another (Wright 470).

Through vivid, anthropomorphic verbs, Wright not only portrays natural forces as sentiment and superhuman, but she also evokes the Indigenous conception of ecological time, representing the ancestral Dreaming stories as unfolding and renewing in a "constant state of motion" in this present setting (Yunkaporta 44). Thus, human endeavors, from the documentation of linear history to empirical pursuits of knowledge, are insignificant in comparison, prompting Will, a Waanyi man, to realize "how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history, rolled, reshaped, undone" by nature in this appropriated biblical flood and symbolic cleansing of anthropocentric human activity (Wright 491–92). However, humanity is not entirely helpless; through the sensory verbs that draw attention to sound – 'heard, "growls," "murmured" – Wright presents a need to listen to natural forces, themselves storytellers and communicators of knowledge, to survive and coexist. Not only is it Will who reads the "cyclone bird" – the "spiritual messenger of the ancestral creation serpent" – to understand that a "big rain was coming," but even the "Bureau of Meteorology … translated the message from the ancestral spirits" (465–66). Through this emphasis on reading and translating nature, Wright exhibits her desire for the reader to "believe in the energy of the Gulf Country" and "stay with the story as a welcomed stranger as if the land was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories to the land" (87). In this way, totemic relationships between nature and Indigenous peoples are materialized and connected through a mutual dialogue of stories, creating a web of communication that demands to be listened to, rather than ignored or sidelined by colonial myths.

Of course, these Indigenous philosophies become inevitably entangled with colonial history and language, raising the question as to whether they can be effectively transmitted through Western forms and cultures of writing. However, rather than replicating the conventional Western novel, Scott and Wright disrupt formal expectations by blending Western and Indigenous modes of storytelling and language. At first, this may appear to be a problematic instance of double-consciousness within postcolonial mimesis, faced with a similar dilemma to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* of paradoxically communicating a diverse or even erased oral language and history in the language of colonizers responsible for their eradication. Indeed, Scott expresses his initial sense of "postcolonial angst" in attempting to imaginatively untangle the history and culture of his ancestors in the "tongue" of those responsible for their geographical and linguistic displacement (3). Likewise, Wright is conscious that the stories she wants to tell are not delineated by Western models of linear time, and thus would not "fit into an English, and therefore Australian tradition of creating boundaries and

fences which encode the development of thinking," particularly in "the containment of thought and idea in the novel" (81). Along with the parallel Wright finds with colonial relationships to land and Western relationships to the novel, Wright's concerns over temporality are echoed by other post-colonial thinkers such Édouard Glissant – finding the dialectics of Caribbean writing, in which all time is mingled, incompatible with Western mimesis (162–63) – and Carlos Fuentes, finding that Mexican conceptions of "suspended times" oppose European writers whose linear conception of time "directs and assimilates the past" (13).

However, Scott and Wright resist arguments that translations of Indigenous languages and stories into English language and literary forms are inherently reductive, or that Indigenous writing should function as "overt polemical weapons" (Scott 19); instead, they write to create art that fuses literary forms, overcoming divides outlined in postcolonial studies between Western and colonized languages and narratives, to produce something new, dynamic and innovative that accommodates, rather than limits, their desire to reconcile histories and knowledge. Through Bobby's totemic relationship with the native Southern Right Whales in *Deadman* – materialized through recurring performances of the traditional story "Mamang" – Scott seeks to formally reproduce the entanglement of Noongar oral storytelling and dance with Western cultures of reading and writing that emerged from first contact. Contrastingly, appropriating the "epic" form familiar to Western audiences, Wright follows "the original pattern of the great ancient sagas" of Waanyi culture to create "a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories" – reflecting Indigenous "racial diaspora" – that cannot be contained in a "time or incident specific" capsule (81–84). Although incorporating distinct oral cultures, both resonate with Mukherjee's call to not only focus on the sociological position of postcolonial and ecocritical literature in its content, but also its formal strategies, as such writing is not simply a tool for social justice, but a "performance of its own fictionality" and ecological spirituality (11). Thus, rather than being trapped by the mimetic problem of double-consciousness, Scott and Wright materialize the argument Achebe posits that writing in English not only allows their work to extend the restrictive boundaries of English to accommodate traditional storytelling modes and knowledge, but also reaches a much larger audience (347–48): fostering cross-cultural empathy within the historically divisive relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and nature.[5]

Deadman is formally centered around the entanglement of Australia's colonial history with "Mamang": a traditional story that Scott himself recovered and translated through the Wirlomin Project. Serving as a textual parallel to Bobby's totemic relationship with the Southern Right Whales, the story possesses a tangible quality in *Deadman*: reshaped with each retelling and enacting the fluidity of physical performance. First presented as a metatextual moment in which Bobby attempts to transcribe, in English, his first interaction with the whales as an infant clinging onto his mother, it is prefaced by the assertion that "Unlike that Bible man, Jonah, Bobby wasn't frightened because he carried a story deep inside himself, a story Menak gave him wrapped around the memory of a fiery, pulsing whale heart" (Scott 2). Here, Scott establishes the spiritual connection between Bobby and the whale. Not only is it a personal, formative memory for Bobby – symbolically embedded "deep" in his mind – it also functions, in its layered textuality, as a larger, tangibly "wrapped" and shared cultural memory and foundational story. Parallel to the alluded biblical narrative of Jonah, it holds spiritual codes and is passed down, from his uncle Menak, through generations. Furthermore, the wrapping of the story within the whale's heart is extremely visceral. In one sense, it indicates need to "unwrap" foundational cultural stories that materialize Indigenous relationships with Country, counteracting foundational imperial narratives that frame colonial arrival as the beginning of Australian history and, as Martin Puchner argues, justify conquest (xv). In another, it gestures to the embodiment of the story within what Swain identifies as the "totemic nucleus" of place: an "ontology of life" which connects Indigenous Australians to local ecosystems (36). Embodying this nucleus, the whale's heart establishes an embodied, symbiotic intersection between human and whale – "pulsing" and co-existing together – within Noongar spirituality that is held together by the story. Not only does this resist the ecological element of Jonah's narrative, transforming fear of the whale as the embodiment of reckoning to a familial figure connected by blood, but it also evokes Swain's theory of Indigenous temporality as

measured by the "rhythmed events" of nature rather than the "unfounded ontological autonomy" of Western linear time or even Henri Bergson's theories of the subjective multiplicity of *human* conceptions of time (19).[6]

It is this ontological conception of rhythmed events that Scott incorporates into his form. Along with Yunkaporta's conceptualization of Indigenous totemism as a "Symbiotic dance" (82), it seems fitting that Bobby transforms "Mamang" into a performative dance, with the narrative shifting into second person imperatives:

> You take one step and the whale is underfoot. Two steps more and you are sliding . . . deep into a dark and breathing cave that resonates with whale song . . . Plunge your hands into that whale heart, lean into it and squeeze and let your voice join the whale's roar. Sing that song your father taught you as the whale dives, down, deep (Scott 2).

This retrieval of the whale heart is not destructive, nor does it foreground human action; rather, it metaphorically encapsulates the "intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land" in Indigenous spirituality through the multi-sensory dance (Moreton-Robinson 2). Scott resists the tendency ecocritics have identified for Western literature and epistemology to construct nature as two-dimensional, aestheticised backdrops by transforming it into an embodied, dancing entity. As Susan Jones suggests dance brings to literature, Scott creates a "three-dimensionality of bodily presence" that joins human, whale, and the anthropomorphized cave by a shared choreography, musical harmony, and creative consciousness, preserved within the symbolic, ancestral depths of story and Country (2). Whilst *Deadman* refuses Western conceptions of linear temporality and plot by disrupting the order of historical events, this particular moment seems suspended from linear time altogether, framed instead by ecological rhythms and patterns. Thus, *Deadman* does not simply "[perform] an advocacy function" by transforming environmental perspectives and counteracting *terra nullius*, as postcolonial ecocriticism might suggest (Huggan and Tiffin 13); it also literally "performs" this knowledge in its dynamic form, balancing the phenomenological perspectives of ecocriticism with the socio-political perspectives of postcolonialism in this dance and in later performances "Old Bobby" gives to an audience as the intradiegetic narrator. Indeed, it dissolves the backgrounding and foregrounding of things that not only divides relationships between human and nature in Western epistemology, but also unproductively separates ecocriticism and postcolonialism. Thus, to use Achebe's terminology, *Deadman* extends the "frontiers" of English and ecocritical studies by retrospectively reversing the efforts to extend imperial frontiers in Australia's colonial history: revealing the depths of Indigenous culture embedded in Country that existed long before colonial arrival.

Although Wright similarly extends the "frontiers" of the novel to recover Indigenous ecological knowledge in *Carpentaria*, she does not do so through performances of a single cultural story; instead, made up of many episodic moments that – like Indigenous ecological spirituality – are interconnected, Wright creates a Waanyi epic in which the epic hero is not a heroic person, but natural beings who perform epic deeds. As such, she refuses the haunting, incorporeal, national "chant" – "*WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*" – by undermining expectations of time, history, and narrative sequence, framing *Carpentaria* as an ongoing Dreaming story as the "creative enormity" of the Waanyi ancestral serpent shapes the Gulf:

> Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into . . . the slippery underground mudflats . . . where the giant serpent continues to live . . . it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin . . . Imagine the serpent's breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland . . . (Wright 1-2).

Reflecting Waanyi ecological imagination and animistic spirituality, all aspects of nature are not only animate, but are collectively energized by the creatively conscious Serpent as its movements and breath shape the landscape and nature's rhythmed events. Through the tactile simile comparing the Serpent to their "skin," each Waanyi person embodies their totem in a visceral relationship that connects them, by extension, to all natural elements that are beholden to the ancestral spirit. However, there is a conspicuous absence of human characters in the opening pages: sidelined and insignificant in

comparison to the actions of nature. As the repeated imperatives indicate, not only does this present a need to listen to the natural world that, through Dreaming perspectives, continues to create in the present, but it also characterizes humanity as passive readers, observing the actions of nature that they are helpless to. Even colonial history becomes a passing thought, the river spurning "human endeavor in one dramatic gesture . . . as it did to the frontier town built on its banks" (3). In doing so, Wright resists the reductive critical assumption that nature – in its supposed mutual alterity to colonized peoples – is a passive victim of colonialism, and undermines the tendency established by *terra nullius* to foreground colonial arrival as the defining moment in Australian history. Instead, like in *Deadman*, it is supplanted by nature's foundational, Creation story – and the Indigenous cultural history it represents – that existed "long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time" (1).

Hence, ancestral forces are presented as the architects of natural processes. However, such a framing is not simply about establishing a setting to "frame" human action or highlight the connection between Waanyi Australians and Country. Rather, it is this epic force of nature that shapes the trajectory of *Carpentaria* and drives the action, literally and symbolically carrying characters such as Normal Phantom in his journey through the Gulf, and his son, Will, in his rebellious pursuits. This is epitomized in the climactic episode in which Will leads the sabotage of the Gurfurrit International mine that had destructively exploited the ecological systems of Desperance: representing the neo-colonialist tendencies of contemporary transnationalism which fosters ecopiracy and the exploitation of natural resources by offshore companies for privatized profit. Amongst the action, one of the guards suspected of murdering Will's wife is killed by tripping on a "rock that had, up to that moment, lain on the ground, embedded in soil that was thousands of seasons old, untouched by humankind since the ancestor had placed it in this spot, as if it had planned to do this incredible thing . . . Will had no idea a rock could rob him of his revenge" (Wright 405–6). The fast-paced action sequence cinematically slows in pace to focus – in a kind of close-up shot – on the anthropomorphized rock: its act of murder representing the Indigenous belief that all natural entities have a consciousness. Therefore, displacing Will's revenge, the rock is an active, autonomous agent that executes the epic deed, saving itself from further exploitation rather than relying on human activity. Furthermore, in replacing "years old" with "seasons old," Wright normalizes Indigenous temporality and ecological time within her phrasing. She appropriates classical epic ideas of predestiny to reinforce the actions of the Serpent in the opening story which continue to take effect and connect all time – and all textual episodes – in an ongoing process of Dreaming, materialized by the form of *Carpentaria*.

Wright's characterization of the Gulf's natural systems subverts Western ontological expectations of nature as inanimate and helpless to human activity. Not only does nature voice its own history and temporality through Wright's form, but it also acts on its own volition as the hero of her Waanyi saga, instead of functioning as background or controlled by distant Gods (rather like the Gurfurrit headquarters in the emblematic skyscrapers of New York: detached and lacking any grounded connection to Australia). The anthropomorphized fire – "pausing, looking around, as if deciding what to do" – actively destroys "the white man's very important places," as they become "dispossessed of all they owned" (Wright 408–10). Evoking Indigenous back-burning practices, the fire actively cleanses Country, nourishing fire-adapted ecosystems *and* destroying gold-rush era fantasies of obtaining wealth through mineral exploitation to allow for the rebuilding of land and national narratives. However, this inversion of colonial invasion is also a sardonic reminder of the continual, mutual dispossession of Indigenous land and culture from first encounters to the present.

This inevitably raises the question of whether these entangled histories, languages and cultures can be entirely reconciled, and whether criticism, as it exists, can evolve to accommodate Indigenous ontology. *Deadman* is not simply about Noongar relationships with their ecological networks; although the story of Country is emphasized, it also confronts the entangled narratives of Indigenous dispossession and *terra nullius*. Throughout *Deadman*, Bobby exhibits what Scott

conceives as Noongar literary tradition's "confidence . . . to appropriate and play with new forms," differing from other postcolonial works "where 'resistance' is foregrounded" (10). Indeed, like his confidence with the whale, Bobby similarly "dives" into learning English and its literary cultures:

> . . . you can dive deep into a book and not know just how deep until you return gasping to the surface, and are surprised at yourself, your new and so very sensitive skin. As if you're someone else altogether, some new self trying on new words (Scott 86).

In this tactile description, encounters with language are presented, like encounters with nature, as fundamentally phenomenological experiences; words take on a material quality through Western writing cultures, implicitly functioning as clothes that superficially transform Bobby's identity as he becomes – in his curiosity – a culturally amphibious figure. Indeed, it self-reflexively evokes Scott's cross-cultural text which takes on the identities, forms and languages of colonists and Noongar figures throughout history. However, this superficial transformation and absorption of different epistemologies reaches a deeper, more dangerous ontological level when Bobby realizes that he "was born, reborn, took on new shapes . . . then that one name stuck" and soon "he was thinking in letters" and "MENAK and MANIT did not fit . . . memories would not come, and the letters broke . . . like a boat hit by the whale's tail" (302). Rather than a performed costume, language is presented as directly responsible for shaping individual thinking and perceptions of reality. The simile correlates the colonial whaling that takes place with Western language and epistemology – rigid and unaccommodating – that has destructive effects on both the environment and internalized, Indigenous knowledge and memories. Indeed, overridden by the permanence of written language, this internalized traditional knowledge becomes, like Indigenous sovereignty, fractured and lost in processes of individual and collective amnesia. This has a transformative effect on Bobby, enacting a violent erasure of his Indigenous self and relationships as the "Mamang" story that previously shaped his identity is replaced by biblical grand narratives of rebirth, exemplified in the permanence of his Anglicized identification as "Bobby." In many ways, Scott reflects his own anxieties as a novelist in English: confronted with the paradox of mastering English – to rebuild and extend it as writers such as Achebe have championed – or being mastered *by* English.

Scott appears ultimately hopeful that the blended forms of postcolonial writing can effectively recover Indigenous ecological imagination and foster cross-cultural understanding: evident in the reciprocal exchange of songs and stories between Bobby's uncle, Wunyeran, and the settler, Dr Cross, that facilitates cross-cultural respect and recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. However, he is also conscious that written language, if not kept in balance, can be a powerful tool with which to erase Indigenous oral languages and identities, resonating with Brian Friel's *Translations* in which the creation of anglicized maps of Gaelic place names in the nineteenth-century similarly erodes Irish cultural identities and fosters colonial eviction. Indeed, it is Bobby's confident curiosity to learn the colonists' language and share his environmental knowledge with a culture unwilling to reciprocate that, like Owen in *Translations*, makes him vulnerable to their manipulation: co-opted into participating in whaling and the endangerment of his totemic animal, and by extension his own culture and identity:

> Bobby groaned, thinking he heard a whale groan, too, and thick hot blood rained upon the boat and upon the men, and in the water a red stain grew larger. The young whale, the mother: each had a flag flying from its spout (Scott 250).

Inverting the opening story of Bobby with his mother and alluding to the biblical and classical omen of blood rain, this visceral image captures the mutual violence against the natural world *and* Indigenous Australians that occurs because of a distinction in perception. Indeed, the empathetic, totemic kinships and Noongar ecological spirituality materialized in "Mamang" are aggressively supplanted and destroyed by the unfeeling, exploitative, colonial violence against the whales: their bodily suffering shared by the water, environment and Bobby, whose echoed groan expresses both his emotional and ontological connection with the whales and the loss of his own Noongar identity,

people, and culture. Furthermore, unlike Anglo-Australian postcolonial writers such as Kate Grenville, Richard Flanagan, and Thomas Keneally, Scott does not confront readers with the horrific violence perpetrated by colonists against Indigenous Australians.[7] Whilst this is partially because it is an Indigenous tradition not to depict those who have died, it also seems to be a desire not to turn colonial violence or Indigenous suffering into a superficial, gratuitous spectacle that reduces them to a bodily status. Instead, Scott embodies Indigenous ecological ontology both to prompt sympathy for the violence against the whales – humanized by the intimate mother-child bond – and to serve as a metonym for the impending, cruel massacre of Indigenous Australians that, along with ecological destruction, "stains" Australian history and land.

Furthermore, this image evokes Algernon Talmage's iconic painting *The Founding of Australia 1788* (1937), depicting the hoisting of the Union Jack on cleared land. Its aesthetic representation of *terra nullius* and the aggressive assertion of British rule on nature is projected onto the whales' bodies and, by extension, Noongar culture. Indeed, the spouts become transformed from the access point of Noongar ecological connection in "Mamang" into a violently objectified placeholder for the British flag and its symbolic declaration of colonial possession. Thus, the three-dimensionality of nature in Bobby's "Mamang" dance is transformed into a two-dimensional painting, a two-dimensional view of history, and a symbolic object: made inanimate by the insensitive violence that drives the whales, and Indigenous spirituality, to near extinction. Thus, without urgent and fundamental dismantling of colonial institutions, it seems social and ecological co-existence is impossible.

However, set in the present, the entanglement with colonialism is more nuanced in *Carpentaria*. Indubitably, Wright acknowledges how Western epistemology is pre-occupied with divisions in their "dreams of stone walls, big locked gates, barred windows . . . to lock out the menace of the black demon" (59). Such segregation reflects the social division – an ongoing product of colonialism – between the wealthy, non-Indigenous Uptown, where children live innocently with "white man spirits like fairies," and the poverty-stricken rubbish dumps of Westend and Eastend, where antithetical "black demon" children, a "world apart," are "slaughtered" by the police (321). However, such division is also symbolic: revealing a desire for ownership in the security of possessed space and land, a haunting continuation of *terra nullius*; a desire for categorizing and defining knowledge, emphasized in the repeated reminder of the Western need to, in Aboriginal English, "scientify" and conquer through empirical rationalism; and the ontological desire to self-preserve racial identity in the exclusive delineation of "normal" and "other," inside and outside. However, this desire for ontological self-preservation is not solely held by colonizing forces. Indeed, *Carpentaria* also focuses on the internal conflict of the aptly named "Normal" Phantom, patriarch of his family and Westend mob, whose traditional idealism, arrogance, and attempted self-preservation in reaction to colonial entanglement – exemplified in his unnatural preservation of dead fish that, "much like himself," are symbolically "stranded" (205) – isolates him from the political realities of post-colonial Australia and the institutionalized suffering faced by his community. In doing so, his actions reinforce the very boundaries established by Western epistemology.

Rather than ancestral forces, Norm initially sees himself as the heroic, "supernatural master" of nature in his ocean journey: the only man "who lived in the world of marine splendor, riding the troughs on God Almighty seas, surviving cyclones . . . once in a while, returning to port to check on the family . . . What a man! An asset to the town, an asset to his race" (Wright 95). Although the last exclamation is inflected with mocking sarcasm, this image constructs Norm's self-involved perception of himself as an Odysseus figure: conquering natural obstacles as the sole carrier of traditional ecological knowledge. Thus, he considers himself superior to others, particularly other Indigenous Australians: shunning the rival, Eastend group as "vacuum cleaners sucking up the wildlife" in succumbing to government bribes to breed pigs, cane toads, and other parasitic, introduced species (53). Of course, it is Norm's parochial arrogance and pride, isolating himself in his attempt at pre-invasion existence, that blinds him to their dire state of poverty, engendered by the ongoing effects of colonialism. It is this desperation, implied in "Desperance," that makes them vulnerable to local government manipulation: the vacuum metaphor exemplifying how they have become objectified

tools in environmental exploitation, co-opted into their own ontological erasure and suffering like Bobby. Norm is even blinded to the systematic violence faced by his ostracized family for whom "dream and reality blurred … standing on the foreshore watching their father fade over the sea horizon" as he becomes an intangible, incorporeal figure caught in his own illusory fantasy (201).

Hence, Norm appears to evoke Plumwood's ecofeminist argument that the dominant narrative of environmentalism – and ecocriticism – characterizes masculine-oriented empirical reason as the ultimate "hero and savior" in restoring the purity of the passive, feminized natural world (6). Although Norm does not embody "reason" per se, he is driven by a similar arrogance and superior entitlement in his self-perception as the hero and savior of nature, restoring it through his traditional knowledge. Thus, he inadvertently reinforces the divides established by Western epistemology between nature and humanity, between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and between himself and the political realities of his community.

Wright counteracts such narratives of division, fostering the sexualization of nature as weak, vulnerable to exploitation, and thus requiring masculine intervention, in the emasculation of Norm during his unsuccessful sea voyage. Reversing the familiar, symbolic sexualization of nature from masculine, colonial perspectives – found in Kate Grenville's *The Secret River* where seemingly untouched land becomes a desirable body to be penetrated, dominated, and fertilized with Western seeds (121) – the "Sea Goddess" is presented as a powerful, heroic, ancestral force of nature as she "canvassed and corralled her armies" to form the cyclone in the war against the land goddess, "Gardajala" (Wright 276). Her sexuality becomes an extension of this empowerment, luring Norm in to satisfy herself: "embracing him, coaxing compliance to her desires … His wily stubbornness to fight against lust was exhausting" (261–62). Thus, Norm is rendered helpless and weak, succumbing to the cyclone he cannot defeat, as he proclaimed earlier, and confronted with his own insignificance in relation to natural forces. Indeed, he realizes he "had no idea where he was, except that he was as inconsequential as the millions of dead fish strewn with other decaying marine life" (270). In his symbolic and spiritual equivalence to fish, subverting his earlier preservation attempts, Norm is confronted with his own mortality and how, despite attempting to isolate himself from these realities, he has similarly fallen prey to the climate of pollution and exploitation of Indigenous natural resources and people. Indeed, it is revealed that it was his cultural knowledge that transformed Uptown's fear of the ocean into "dreams of seas … choking with fish," leading to an overfishing crisis (314). Norm's inconsequential status also has important significance to contemporary environmentalists; it indicates that they cannot become the "heroes" of the climate crisis by imposing parochial, anthropocentric ontologies, or by unproductively isolating other knowledges and perspectives, because all things – nature, humanity, history, language, colonialism, environmentalism, even feminism – are inherently interconnected and entangled. Otherwise, like Norm, they too will suffer under the weight of their hubris.

Although as it exists, ecocriticism is, like Norm early in *Carpentaria*, isolated in its approach and thus seemingly trapped in its parochial perspective, it does not mean it should be entirely rejected. However, it must confront and rebuild its problematic framework to accommodate for alternative understandings of what it means to be ecocritical and to think, and even read, ecocritically. Both Scott and Wright envisage this hope by shifting their retrospective lens – uncovering past histories and knowledge in recognition of Indigenous sovereignty – to the future. They gesture to a need for fusion, reconciliation, and the productive "rebirth" of history, language, criticism, and ecological knowledge: all of which, within dominant Western epistemological frameworks, have been predicated on hierarchy and isolation. In *Carpentaria*, the cyclone is characterized as a "journey of creation" and "watery birth," purging pollutants and unsustainable, anthropocentric, Western structures to allow for the healing of ecosystems and rebuilding of Australian society: its colonial institutions and narratives, fraught relationships with nature, and societal divisions (Wright 494). In *Deadman*, Wunyeran and Dr Cross's friendship represents a potential, productive union between colonial and colonized cultures, sharing stories in preparation "for the birth of a new world" (Scott 129). Such cross-cultural creation – and ongoing Dreaming – is reflected in their formal interventions: both utilize the mold of the Western novel but

enhance it with Indigenous storytelling modes; both refuse to be trapped by polemical language, but facilitate reconciliation within histories of colonialism, once narrow in perspective, that it untangles. Indeed, it is the Story-mind, shared around the world, that not only enables the recovery of the past, but has the power to transmit knowledge – shaping how we read nature and history – and envision possible futures for environmental, societal and intellectual sustainability that are integrated, not separated. Perhaps this interrogation can go beyond postcolonial and ecocritical approaches; perhaps, as I have shown through the textual analysis of writing that weaves dance, oral Dreaming stories, totemic cultures, and ecological time, a new way of reading literature can be forged: one that does not look for linearity, causal development, action-oriented or character-driven plot, but turns instead to under-explored literary cultures that undermine these very premises.

Notes

1. I refer here to their seminal works in Australian Aboriginal studies, particularly Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, Rose's *Country of the Heart*; Moreton-Robinson's *Sovereign Subjects*.
2. For further discussion on the need for an alliance between post-colonialism and eco-criticism to balance the prevailing dominance of American literature in eco-critical studies, see; O'Brien (186–194), Mukherjee (17–19), Nixon (233–261), Huggan and Tiffin (12–14), DeLoughrey and Handley (321–323).
3. Nixon also gestures to the need for further exploration into "Native studies" to "deepen and diversify the dialogue" he outlines in his study (261). It is this need that this paper responds to.
4. According to *The Australian National Dictionary*, "battler" sense 1.a. is defined as "A person who works doggedly and with little reward, who struggles for a livelihood", first cited in 1896 in Lawson's *While Billy Boils* (Moore 102).
5. Achebe's argument that the African writer should "aim at fashioning an English that is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience" resonates with Indigenous Australian writing (347). Indeed, the colonial erasure of indigenous African languages, replaced by centralized, colonial languages, mirrors the purposeful erasure of hundreds of Aboriginal languages in Australia by English colonists. However, like Scott and Wright, Achebe resists the suggestion that writing in English is "a dreadful betrayal", and that instead it can "carry the weight of [his] African experience", producing "new" and "exciting" writing (348–49).
6. Bergson posits that, unlike linear time, the complex and subjective nature of human conceptions of time results from our multiple "states of consciousness" that "permeate one another" and bind "past to the present" (121). See Guerlac for further discussion.
7. Kate Grenville's *The Secret River*, Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, and Thomas Keneally's *The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith* depict explicit and confronting acts of violence against Indigenous Australians by colonists. In doing so, they draw particular attention to the physical and bodily impact of such violence, often transforming Indigenous bodies into the site of narrative spectacle and historical guilt.

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