

Contested land: Country and *terra nullius* in *Plains of Promise* and *Benang: From the heart*

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Alexis Wright's first novel *Plains of Promise* (1997) and Kim Scott's second, *Benang: From the heart* (1999), are concerned with contested land. But they have not yet been critically considered from the point of view of that land, nor have they been extensively considered together¹. They were written during the national inquiry into the 'Stolen Generations,'² and scholarship has focused on their traumatic human stories, and been conducted primarily in terms of postcolonial theory and discussions of genre (Byrne 2001; Uhlmann 2001; Renes 2002, 2010, 2011; Birch 2004; Slater 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Oost 2007; Althans 2010; Griffiths 2010; O'Reilly 2010; Ravenscroft 2012; Valenta 2012; Takolander 2014). In this article I seek to complicate and expand these predominantly anthropocentric readings by exploring the central role land plays in these novels. To do so, I draw on ecocriticism, which makes place a subject of literary analysis (DeLoughrey and Handley, 6). Adopting Greg Garrard's ecocritical method (2012), this paper examines the novels in terms of two environmental tropes—country and *terra nullius*—to argue that they work rhetorically to privilege an Indigenous understanding of two regions of the Australian continent over their conception as a blank canvas available for inscription by British property law and Christianity. The novels contest this mistaken designation of '*terra nullius*' by manifesting 'country': a vibrant, active land inextricably bound to its Indigenous people by ancient, enduring laws.

Land and its definition are particularly loaded subjects for Australia because the British colonial enterprise and modern nation were founded on a false definition of the continent as *terra nullius*, or 'empty land.' While landscape has been an ongoing preoccupation of its literature—even inspiring a literary trope so pervasive that epitomises the nation, the bush—there have been few ecocritical studies of it (Cranston 2000; Thomason 2001; Cranston and Zeller 2007; Hughes-D'Aeth 2009; Clark 2015) and only four works of ecocriticism that engage with country (Minter 2012; Gleeson-White 2013, 2016; Fonteyn 2014). Perhaps this critical field has been taken up hesitantly here because early discussions were caught up in debates about 'nature writing' and 'wilderness', ideas taken from founding North American ecocritics such as Lawrence Buell. These debates were launched in 1998 when Robert Zeller suggested that 'Nature Writing'—as practised in the belle letrist tradition of Thoreau and Aldo Leopold—did not exist in Australia. This prompted much heated discussion, including a reply from C.A. Cranston which teased out the difference between 'Natural History Writing' and 'Nature Writing' (Cranston 2001, 1). Acknowledging ecocriticism's slow emergence here, Tony Hughes-D'Aeth concluded his 2009 survey of the field by exhorting: 'There is much left to do in Australian ecocriticism. Please, go crazy' (114, 119)!

Australia's politically charged terrain is more suited to the rhetorical method used by Garrard in his landmark study *Ecocriticism* than considerations of nature writing. Citing Terry Eagleton, Garrard argues that because of its assumption that speech and writing are primarily persuasive

activities, rhetorical criticism is an appropriate tool for politically inflected literary analysis; and therefore that such an approach is suitable for the work of ecocriticism, ‘an avowedly political mode of analysis’ (3). In Garrard’s hands, a rhetorical approach becomes an investigation of metaphor. To address the ‘monolithic concepts’ such as ‘nature’ and ‘the environment’ that shape environmental debates, Garrard breaks them down into ‘key structuring metaphors, or tropes’ (16), such as pollution, pastoral and wilderness, which are all ‘in some sense, ways of imagining, constructing or presenting nature in a figure’ (ibid). To Garrard’s tropes I add country and *terra nullius*. Both are ways of figuring this land, which became particularly contested following the 1992 *Mabo* decision, which overturned the legal fiction of *terra nullius*. In terms of settler law, the High Court’s decision was revolutionary: it officially acknowledged for the first time that there was a diverse Indigenous culture on this continent in 1788. This was affirmed by the Commonwealth Native Title Act (1993), which established a form of native title, and the subsequent Wik Decision (1996). Significantly for this discussion, the Act allowed for native title only if the claimant could prove continuous customary connection to the land they claimed. These legal decisions sparked intense national debates between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians about rights and relationships to land, and inaugurated an era of unsettlement which Ken Gelder and Jane M. Jabobs call ‘uncanny’ (16), after Freud, because of the inversions they unleashed.

Into this charged zone, Wright and Scott launched their first works of fiction about their own ancestral lands: Wright’s Waanyi country in the Gulf of Carpentaria and Scott’s Noongar country in southwestern Western Australia³. For this reason alone, it is productive to consider them together. But there are further similarities: both are generically unstable; concern questions of law and the power of written records; portray children of the Stolen Generations who have continuing ties to their ancestral lands despite their severance from them; and feature bird-like protagonists who quest for their Aboriginal identities, families and connection to country. By asserting these erased histories and relationships over official records and literatures of white Australia, they imaginatively reclaim their connections to country and reinscribe it as black land. As Wright and Scott have themselves suggested, the complex realities they go to enormous lengths to write are emphatically rooted in their cherished actual lands. In 2004 Wright said:

Firstly, I develop my novels on ideas of seeing how the land might respond to different stories. The land is, I suppose, one of or even the central character. Most of the images and ideas relate to the land being alive and having important meaning, which is tied to the ancient roots of our continent (Wright, qtd in Vernay 2004, 121).

Scott has also expressed the place-centredness of his writing: ‘The narrator’s utterances are the sounds of the place in which they are made ... To my mind they are metaphors for Indigenous language ... directly related to a specific place in manifold ways’ (Scott 2007, 123). In 2012 he clearly stated the nature of this place: ‘This is an Aboriginal nation, you know. It’s black country, the continent’ (Scott, qtd in Brewster 2012, 243).

Here Scott alludes to the fact that for over 65,000 years this place has been inhabited, shaped and made sense of by its First People. While the native title legislation overturned *terra nullius*, it also highlighted the radical discrepancy between Anglo-Australian and Aboriginal conceptions

of land. Framed in terms of western property law, it reflects white propriety interests rather than Indigenous custodial relationships. As Indigenous lawyer Irene Watson explains, native title ‘is not a recognition of Nunga rights to land ... [and] does nothing to help us care for country’ (qtd in Dolin 2014, 3). Speaking of Aboriginal people’s profound connection to and identification with place, Watson says: ‘we are not merely on and in the land, we are of it, and we speak from this place of Creation, of land, of law’ (ibid). As she implies, the entire cosmology of Indigenous Australians derives from their land—or ‘country’, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Maggie Walter refer to it: ‘Indigenous people have developed their knowledge systems over millennia living on and alongside the land. Indigenous people’s knowledges are therefore predicated on societal relations with country’ (3). The word ‘country’ is used to describe conceptions of land and its complex interrelations with human and non-human beings which are central to Aboriginal law and very different from Anglo-Australian property law and capitalist notions of land. Anne Brewster notes that Kwini author Ambrose Chalarimeri’s Indigenous ontology of land ‘reverses several western binaries, perhaps the most widely recognised instance of which is the notion that the land belongs to the people; in his formulation the land is primary and people “belong” to it’ (2006). ‘Country’ not only contains Aboriginal knowledge systems, it also designates an active living presence. As Deborah Bird Rose writes, ‘country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life’ (Rose, 7). Ancestral beings and their human descendants jointly share responsibility for ensuring the health and fertility of country, and in turn, their well-being is intimately tied to that of the land.

It is this vibrant terrain that these novels activate, thereby estranging the notion of it as *terra nullius*. Some scholars have noted the significance of land in these works, but only Paula Anca Farca has made it the focus of study, examining it as ‘silent witness’, ‘mediator’ and ‘detached ally’ in *Plains of Promise* (2010). Following her, Katie Valenta suggests that Wright uses the weather and nature to highlight the narrative’s central concerns (48). In his overview of Scott, John Fielder observes that ‘his writing is increasingly exploring a sense of place, more specifically ... Noongar country’ (165); and Lisa Slater argues that in *Benang*, ‘The land, not the book or the English language, becomes the site from which all life is generated’ (2006, 64). To portray this generative land in the novel, both authors mix genres, temporalities, narrative registers, styles and storylines, which has prompted critical debate about the nature of their textual reality, especially over the applicability of ‘magical realism’ (Bliss; Renes; Ravenscroft; Valenta; Takolander). Avoiding the term, Slater calls *Benang* ‘*marban* reality’ (2006, 65), a phrase evoking the *marban* (or Indigenous shaman) coined by Mudrooroo to describe an Aboriginal magic realism; and Martin Renes proposes ‘uncanny realism’ (2002) and ‘Dreamtime Narrative’ (2011). Because the novels’ unstable contemporary Waanyi and Noongar textual realities are rooted to various degrees in country and the complex cosmology which it encompasses, and yet exist in the capitalist, predominantly Christian frameworks of white Australia, these generic fusions or doublings point to two cosmologies with radically divergent conceptions of land.

Plains of Promise

Discussions of genre have arisen because readers find these texts challenging. This is especially true of *Plains of Promise*, which has received neither the extensive critical attention nor the award-winning acclaim of *Benang*. Some early critics accused it of not working (Sorensen in Ravenscroft 2012, 56). Confronted by its ‘strangeness and inaccessibility’ and mix of

‘miraculous’ and ‘mundane’ (682), Carolyn Bliss invoked ‘magical realism’ to help ‘clarify our vision’ (ibid). Renes was the first to express discomfort with this term, arguing that it ‘seeks to make an Aboriginal realm of knowledge digestible to mainstream readership by safely encapsulating it within the fantastic’ (2002, 77). Instead, he suggests, ‘Wright’s political agenda seems to deny non-Aboriginal readers full access to the native universe of the Aborigines’ (ibid). Noting the many puzzles it leaves unanswered, he argues that by not allowing a definitive reading of its crucial events, the text propels mainstream readers to ‘exercises of self-scrutiny and self-criticism’ (2002, 76), which force us to evaluate how we see ourselves and the surrounding world. Ravenscroft makes a similar point, arguing that its difficulty is an accomplishment rather than a failing (47). Her analysis focuses on Elliot’s transformation from Ivy’s abusive husband to her protector, and the story he tells Mary (‘Elliot’s story’), which she calls an anamorphic form, referring to Lacan’s definition of the skull in Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* (54).

But *Plains of Promise* is not a painting that can be viewed at once; it is a narrative that directs its reader sequentially and Elliot’s story, set in italics, is its last word. It demands our attention. It is a story of country, told in its idiom. The novel’s first words—its title—also direct us to land. Quoting Philippe Lejeune, Gerard Genette argues that such paratextual material is more than a boundary between the novel and the reader: it is “‘a fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one’s whole reading of the text’” (2). For Genette, this is a ‘zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public’ (2). The title announces land as subject: it denotes the grasslands in the Gulf of Carpentaria which were named ‘Plains of Promise’ by British explorer John Lort Stokes in 1841. Farca calls the title hopeful (35), but the text challenges this alien view of the land and Part IV renames it ‘Plains of Papery Grass.’ The ironic opening also contests this British view by figuring a poinciana tree growing in a Christian mission as a foreign, malevolent, deathly presence in Aboriginal land. No human is named in the opening section and yet the tree, its provenance, behaviour, and interactions with the land and its beings, are described in great detail. According to the mission’s Aboriginal inmates, the tree ‘should not have been allowed to grow there on their ancestral country. It was wrong’ (4).

The title of Part I, ‘The Timekeeper’s Shadow’, gestures to the crow which sits in the tree and brings the ultimate timekeeper, death; and to Ivy, who is called ‘the crow’s Timekeeper’ (22) by the mission’s Aboriginal kids because of the deaths sparked by her mother’s suicide. According to Old Maudie, who is ‘old as the land’ (11), Ivy’s mother threw herself into the fire to escape the torments of a black bird. This section is plagued by death, which it suggests is rooted in the white invasion of Aboriginal land and ongoing disruption of its ancient laws and lineages. The title of the second section, ‘Glimpses of Distant Hills’, refers explicitly to land and is again linked to Ivy, who is now incarcerated in a ‘mental health’ institution where her only sense of herself is connected to country, ‘contained in far-off glimpses, like remembering distant hills seen once from the window of a car’ (168). Part III’s title, ‘Victory Lane’, also points to land. It is named for the Melbourne street which houses an Aboriginal self-government and land rights organisation. ‘Victory’ is apt to the extent that here are Aboriginal activists advocating their rights and original habitation of Australia. This is further fleshed out in ‘the love children of Elliot and Gloria’ (160), the vibrant, authoritative adults Victor and Victoria. Part IV, ‘Plains of Papery Grass’, transmutes the book’s title into words more suited to this particular land. The

narrator repeats this phrase in the first sentence, expressing an intimacy with this place not conveyed by Stokes: ‘Any twisty road in the northern Gulf country will take you through kilometres of gravel winding through plains of papery grasses’ (247). Here we are reintroduced to a reinscribed country by a narrator using either a familiar second-person or a colloquial ‘you.’

Paratext also includes extra-textual authorial comments. As mentioned, Wright has stated that land is her subject. In 2013 she spoke of its living spirit: ‘If you do the wrong thing to country, the country will get sulky and cause harm. These ideas are very deep in us, it comes from a very early age, and it’s been reinforced through all my work’ (2013, 30). This is a narrative of wrong done to country by white invaders and the subsequent terrible harm it unleashes. Elliot’s story suggests this most clearly. It is presented at the furthest realm of western narrative possibility, distinguished from the preceding text typographically, formally, epistemologically and cosmologically. As Renes says, it ‘transcends Western parameters of fiction and is firmly embedded in Aboriginal perceptions of reality’ (81); or as Ravenscroft puts it, ‘positions itself in another epistemology’ (52). It operates in the realm of country. It is framed only as a recalled story sworn to be true; but we know Elliot is a true man of country, one who having brutalised Ivy now cares for her and keeps her land’s story, so we are to attend to it carefully. Its positioning after the meeting of the ‘three’ also speaks of its significance. It is about the Disappearing Lake and its waterbirds who bring rain and possess ‘*the gift of life*’ (303). One stranded bird is fought over by crows who control the waterbirds, and her great-grandchild goes mad ‘*because she lost her daughter in a terrible place*’ (304) and the lake dries up.

This is a story about Ivy’s Koopundi line made mad by their traumatic disconnection from land and family (Renes, Farca, Ravenscroft). Ravenscroft suggests it offers ‘a different view of Ivy and her mother than anything that has been seen before’ (55). The view might be different, but the novel has been telling this same traumatised story of this gifted family and their country all along. Renes and Ravenscroft suggest that the non-Indigenous reader cannot know, at several key stages, what is actually going on. But the text does give clues to some of its riddles – and the collective Aboriginal narrator suggests we pay attention to them, as it suggests Beverly Jipp attend to the ‘little louse’ on her husband’s face, which ‘should have been enough sign for anyone else, but it was lost on Beverly Jipp, who only searched for the most insipid realities of life’ (61). These clues include the fact that of the few specific dates given, all pertain to Mary and Jessie’s births, so we can learn that Mary is at least thirty when the waters miraculously return to the lake dry ‘for at least thirty years’ (302); and be reminded that it last filled just before her birth (83-86). Elliot returns from Ivy’s country in late December 1958 (116) and Mary is born soon after, in 1959. When adult Mary is introduced, a giant clock tells the date in red and her tram features ‘faces celebrating the Bicentenary’ (206); it is Thursday 15 August 1988. Jessie is born the following year and is four when she meets Ivy (259), so Mary is thirty-four when she is reunited with her mother.

Renes says the reader is forced into ‘a position similar to Mary, who unsuccessfully tries to unravel the mysteries of her past’ (2002, 1); but in fact we are told Mary’s back story which she never learns, including that she is a child of rape, that Ivy is her mother and Errol Jipp her father. Her past has been erased from the records (literally wiped from her birth certificate (209)) and is so tragic that no one from the mission can, or will, tell her who her mother is; but we are told her history and so know that Elliot reunites her with her mother. The cosmic significance of this

reunion and the triple Koopundi meeting spooks the community elders, still under the sway of the Christian God, and they ask Mary and Jessie to leave. In an authorial intrusion, Wright states what Mary *did not know*:

What she did not know was that the elders were accusing Elliot of making trouble by bringing Mary and the child together with Ivy. He had made a promise to them not to re-unite Mary and her mother. Now the promise was broken. They had told him *only one*, now the power would be too strong. They had told him to quickly choose which one he wanted to stay if he had wanted redemption from God. *Not three. Just one* (299, emphasis in the original).

But the power that is ‘too strong’ has already worked its magic: the desiccated lake is flooding after some thirty years. Flying over it, Jessie and Mary are pulled by ancient ties to their ancestral land: Jessie immediately wants to go there and Mary ‘suddenly finds herself promising’ to take her. This conjures Elliot’s voice telling her ‘a story which he swore was true ... (302).’ Here the roman font story off. This story is ongoing.

Elliot’s two secret journeys to Ivy’s ancestral land offer more clues and myriad instances of active country. ‘[T]rained in religious knowledge of the land by the thoughts of the elders’ (73), Elliot is a law man skilled enough to twice ‘slip through the *Aborigines Protection Act* (1911)’ (36) into the realm of country. As he travels this dangerous spirit terrain, he obeys its law, acting like his totem, the brolga (43), and ‘unlocking the land’ (ibid). First he learns that the deaths at the mission are caused by a cosmic disturbance in Ivy’s country. On his second journey Elliot almost dies but is nurtured by the land, especially by its ‘native grass’ (81). When he wins his gamble with death, he also ‘[wins] over the dominance of St Dominic’s and its ability to reshape his mind’, which allows him to ‘rejoin the deeper world of his birthright’ (82). Once Elliot is initiated into this deeper realm of country, ‘the eyeless cavities of pelican skulls penetrated far inside his mind.’ Here is the story of Ivy’s country; it is about pelicans. Next he sees hundreds of white-painted people dancing and singing with ‘[b]lack and white pelican feathers’ tied to their limbs (84). Ivy has a ‘strange smell’ that evokes a memory of pelicans on a beautiful inland lake (189-90). Valenta argues that the crow is Ivy’s clan’s totem because it is ‘undoubtedly aligned’ with her and her family (51), but she does not detect the pelican clues nor consider the crows in Elliot’s story. Here they are portrayed unambiguously as fighting, stupid, ‘lazy’, ‘greedy’, ‘evil’ and restless (303), qualities attributed to white people. It seems the reader must distinguish the false views of Ivy held by the other characters black and white, including as ‘the crow’s Timekeeper’ (22), from her presentation as her totem pelican, a powerful waterbird. Elliot then learns the pelicans’ story, not from words but from ‘the language of beating hands ... Hands telling the story of birds and their successful journeys beyond this country and back again’ (85). Next he is called by local Aboriginal woman May Sugar, who introduces him to the land’s spirits and native pines (87), welcoming him. Elliot is being inducted into a sacred ritual of country and the story of Ivy’s land is lodged deep inside his mind.

Before leaving, Elliot sees Pilot’s mysterious death foreshadowed: he watches fog burying Pilot and May Sugar and thinks: ‘A double suicide’ (95)? Pilot has just told him to watch for evil spirits: ‘You’ll see that low fog crawling like a snake across the ground, sneaking around until it finds someone to take away’ (94). The snaking fog is associated with the land’s ancestral

serpent⁴ which, having been misused by white people (75), is now unleashing harm. This is not the only death connected with its serpentine powers. As *Carpentaria* more clearly indicates, two potent manifestations of this country's ancestral serpent are fire and storms (Wright 2006, 410; 484-487). Tellingly, Ivy's mother's self-immolation sparks an outbreak of 'suicides *always by burning*' (22, my emphasis); Buddy's brother Donny nearly dies in a fiery car accident (224); and 'major fires' erupt after police raid the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments (232). Storms also break at significant moments, including at Ivy's mother's funeral (18); the destruction of Ivy's lodgings (198); adult Mary's first appearance (205); her daughter Jessie's birth (213); and the significant triple mother-daughter meeting (293). Both Farca and Valenta acknowledge that land and natural forces are significant for the Koopundi women, but do not connect this to country (Farca; Valenta, 55). I suggest their association with nature, especially storms, fire and winged creatures, gestures to country and their ancestral powers, which have been traumatised but not extinguished. Despite her apparent lack of agency in white society, Ivy is instrumental in the destruction of mission control, Sycamore Heights and her subsequent lodging. Her own power and that of her family is explicitly stated. Her grandfather was a formidable healer (93, 110-11). Lesley, an authoritative Aboriginal activist, says of Jessie: "I feel her power. She will be a powerful woman one day" (215). Elliot also attests to Jessie's power, telling Mary: "You don't see do you? Jessie will" (286). And testifying to Ivy's own power, Wright states in an authorial intrusion: 'Ivy Koopundi never knew she had caused the toppling of mission control over so many Aboriginal lives. In future years, if the lives of Aboriginal women such as Ivy are unravelled, their names may be remembered like latter-day Joans of Arc or Florence Nightingales' (180).

Ivy's daughter Mary is not shown to understand Elliot's story of her own country, but the fact that she 'hears' it flying over her restored country suggests she still holds her ancestral knowledge and that it is hers to tell. This story recounts from country's point of view the destruction of the gifted Koopundi line; the main novel ends with their land restored. Country abides. As Elliot realises, although their land has been stolen by 'the white man' (74), 'nothing foreign could change the essence of the land. No white man had that power' (75). Here country is, if not triumphant, then certainly given the last word.

Benang

It is possible to argue, as Harley himself suggests, that *Benang* is 'just variations on one motif' (369): hovering. Harley's floating has received much critical attention, including by Maria Takolander, who also addresses Ravenscroft's rejection of magical realism to describe Indigenous-signed texts. Takolander argues that *Benang* is magical realism; and that it is not the texts' Indigeneity that makes them resistant to interpretation, but rather their irony 'that disturbs the interpretive process' (8) and forces the reader into an ethical position from which to make her own judgement. Therefore, as Takolander stresses, it is irony that opens Harley's 'capacity for levitation' to multiple readings (7). It can be interpreted as an attempt 'to deanchor kinship and the body from their position within and positioning by the colonial archive' (O'Reilly, 168); the uprooting of Aboriginal people from their ancestral land (Katrin Althans 111); Harley's entrapment 'in a blank colonized mind' (Slater 2006, 58); a play on the "'uplifted" Aboriginal man of colonial policy' (Takolander 7); and on his pale skin and white ancestry (lightness). It also represents his birdlike powers of elevation and song which allow him to resonate with the sounds of the ground above which he hovers: his own particular Noongar land. This ground is

central to the novel's concerns, and yet it has received little critical attention.

The title directs us to this country, the particular land of Benang, a place 'so powerful that when I first went back there the birds spoke to me' (494). So too does the first epigraph, taken from a submission to the 1984 Seaman Land Inquiry: 'Many Nyungars today speak with deep feeling about this wild, windswept country' (7). This epigraph presents an official testament of Noongar truth about land, which is immediately contested by two further epigraphs: racist, eugenicist extracts from newspapers dated 1933. This is emblematic of the narrative, which operates through juxtapositions of Noongar and white versions of the land and people Indigenous and European. The first four pages exemplify this, introducing the main themes in terms of black land and *terra nullius*: the country that sings through Harley versus the telegraph lines vibrating with unseen voices; his hovering over country versus the 'exalted level' (11) of official history; the sand, plants and creatures of black land versus the salt of cleared, exhausted settler land which holds gold and extrudes dead trees as inert telegraph poles; and Harley's connection with life, death and the curlew, versus the stench of death, anxiety, anger and betrayal that permeates the novel. Harley introduces himself as a hovering narrator and conflates himself and his song with the musical calls that come from 'this place right here' (10). As Scott has said: 'I am – Harley is – one of the many possible manifestations of place, its dreaming, its ancestry' (quoted in Uhlmann, 50). Like the Koopundi women, Harley is associated with a bird (the curlew) and with 'bringing life' (10). His closing words also invoke this singing land (497), recalling the opening. This circular structure transmutes western linear time and ideas of progress into the cyclical continuity of country. The land's abiding presence is further emphasised by the last chapter's title ('continuing ...'); and last word, 'Benang', Noongar for 'tomorrow' (466), which alludes to Harley's family roots in country and returns to the novel's entry point, its title.

The title also directs the reader to Harley's great-great grandmother Benang (472), known as Fanny, who is deeply connected to her ancestral land. While critics have discussed the novel's irony, less attention has been paid to the serious register it adopts in relation to black land, notably in the lyrical passages that portray Fanny's almost ecstatic rapport with country. When Fanny, Sandy One and their son travel through country, the land's bounty is evoked with poetic beauty. The plains are 'grassy', 'green and soft and undulating', with flowers of '[p]inks, creams, yellow white and blue, delicate little things, looking so fragile, but so hardy', and trees whose 'yellow sap tasted like sugar' (181). The prose here is rich and erotic, recalling the fruitful charge of *The Song of Songs*. Fanny knows the secrets of this land and shares their goodness with Sandy: 'She penetrated him with golden-downed stalks and he sucked at the honey he tasted there' (182) and gives him 'sweet water from her hands' (183). Her country is 'parkland' (181) which Sandy understands has been actively made by 'people and fire' (181). Slater's astute discussion of Fanny's 'embodied practice', which has the power to contest Ern's writing and thinking style (2005b, 69), can be seen as an expression of her kinship with country. This constant exchange between body and environment (*ibid*, 70) is part of the practice of belonging to and caring for ancestral land.

The vitality of Benang's verdant country diverges radically from the historical record: 'The diaries and journals tell me that there was nothing but plains of sand and sharp rolling stones. Impenetrable mallee. Salt lakes, and brackish streams' (181). In the colonisers' view, this land is barren. Their capitalist spirit, disconnected from the terrain, is also characterised by hovering:

this ‘pioneering, entrepreneurial and opportunistic spirit which soars when there is money to be gained’ (209). The settlers’ language introduces a cursory articulation of the earth: a skimming (10), and numbers that carve up the land and its people, each ‘designated by a fraction’ (28). As Jason W. Moore argues, capitalism is not just an economic system but a way of organising nature (Moore 2015). Its abstracting worldview makes time linear, flattens space, and disconnects the mind from the body and the natural world. Like Harley, both Ern and Daniel float. Ern is a ‘newly elevated and self-employed carpenter’ (54); ‘up in the sky’, he ‘again thought about possessing land in this place’ (53). But his floating is radically different from Harley’s because of their very different relationships to land: Ern ‘had rarely touched the land. Ernest Solomon Scat floated all his life, in a different way to myself’ (55). Daniel also briefly floats, when pulled into his goldmine by Fanny’s grandson Jack Chatalong. His subsequent death is a vision of Euclidean space destroyed: when Jack ‘hung all his weight on that hand’, he sees Daniel as ‘geometric shapes—squares and rectangles and diamonds—suddenly exploding, suddenly being blown apart’ (85). Jack’s unexpected weight – he is a slender boy, Daniel a massive man – is of country. He has been instructed in its ways by his mother and has lived with Fanny, unlike his cousin Will. It is Jack who has the land-given gravity to ground Harley from his elevated state, while Will also floats away: ‘And for some reason, which I could not comprehend at the time, [Jack] was able to get hold of Will, and was both weighty and strong enough to pull the two of us in like spent fish’ (149).

And it is Jack who takes Harley driving into his Noongar country, ‘to show me some places’ (167), and teaches him how to trust the land and himself: “‘You gotta get back. Work your way through this shit. Find that spirit which is in you. The land is still here. Trust’” (351). He attests to the ancient claims their people have on this land: “‘We been here forever, all along this coast. This is our country’” (190). Jack also takes Harley to meet his two unknown sons, conceived before the car accident made him impotent (448). They embody Harley’s continuity in this place, grounding him: ‘I was still a lightweight, but as I walked hand-in-hand with my young children, I noticed that my footprints in the sand were almost as deep as theirs’ (454). Their mothers understand that this is a story about place: ‘They did not want to be central in such a story, which they understood must be about place, and what had grown from it’ (452). The narrative ends with Harley’s flights reconstituted as a symbol of vitality, rather than one of rootlessness and death (Takolander, 6). This shift is triggered by country: by Harley’s travels to his Noongar ground; and his walk with his two sons at Dolphin Cove (454) – where birds speak to him (494) and Sandy One washed up (*ibid*) – and where, with his sons, he suddenly finds himself hovering, ‘poised, balanced’ (456). When he tells Jack and others about the birds, they regard him attentively, say: “‘Those birds. That was the spirit in the land talking to you. Birds, animals, anything can do it. That is what Aboriginal people see’ (457).

Through country Harley gradually reconstitutes his upliftedness from angry impotent drifting to an active, generative, poised hovering, which grants him vision, a multivocal Noongar vernacular and the gravity to plant his feet in the sand (454). His homecoming does not end the novel. Instead, his new rightful elevation allows him to see the many fragments of his family history come together in this one place. The Noongar view prevails. Slater concludes that Scott’s multivocal composition not only questions ‘the adequacy of the novel form and the English language to represent Indigeneity’, but also proposes ‘a new style of writing that generates new speaking positions for Indigenous people’ (65). I suggest it also begins to generate new speaking

positions for the land, not as *terra nullius* but as an articulate subject in its own right. The settlers' view of land as an abstracted Euclidean space available for capitalist expansion, a resource awaiting exploitation, is challenged by the living presence of country.

Conclusion

This living land is a key component in the narrative worlds of *Plains of Promise* and *Benang*. Both insist on country in various ways and attest to the abiding potency of its ancient law, which manifests in the bird-like being of the Koopundi women, Elliot and Harley. In doing so they contest the land's construction as *terra nullius*. Speaking of *Carpentaria*'s big move, Anne Brewster argues: 'The narrative point of view positions [the Indigenous characters] as central to this cosmology and renders indigeneity the default position for humankind' (2010, 87). Similarly, *Plains of Promise* and *Benang* are their authors' first fictional forays into narrating country as subject and positioning its cosmology as the default law of this continent. This interrupts a narrative which has figured land as 'empty' and lacking in agency, which has a number of far-reaching ramifications. In rewriting the land as country, they assert Indigenous ontologies and modes of inhabitation, and resist the history of invasion and erasure they recount. By politicising land, questioning its nature, and suggesting that land and society-economics-politics are mutually constituted, they reopen land as a contested site in the Australian literary imaginary for investigation beyond its more familiar tropes of bush, gothic, sacred, postcolonialism, feminism, masculinity. Considerations of country are also significant for contemporary ecological debates, which hinge on rethinking western conceptions of the natural world, including land and its relationship with humans, and of the human itself. In arguing for the entanglement of Aboriginal people and their lands, for the mutual constitution of humans and place, *Plains of Promise* and *Benang* address one of the key questions of ecocriticism as defined by Garrard: 'the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself' (5). This suggests that, as Hughes-D'Aeth contends, there is much left to do in Australian ecocriticism.

Notes

1 They have, however, been mentioned alongside each other, for example, in Bill Ashcroft, Frances Devlin-Glass and Lyn McCredden's *Intimate Horizons*; and by Martin Renes (2011) in his discussion of Wright focused on *Carpentaria*.

2 The *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children From Their Families* was established in May 1995 and tabled in Federal Parliament in May 1997.

3 Scott's first novel *True Country* (1993) is set in northern Western Australia.

4 The ancestral serpent created the Gulf country (Wright 2006, 1).

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