

The Injusticeable and the Imaginable

PHILIP MEAD

University of Western Australia

These notes on Alexis Wright's fiction are about issues within (and beyond) Indigenous intellectual and political life in contemporary Australia that her fiction seems to address in imaginative and narrative ways. They're predominantly contextual rather than interpretative. In the context of our MLA panel (9 January 2015) on Wright's '(other)worldly' fiction I offered these contextual considerations, working from the outside in, as intended to assist with reading *The Swan Book* (2013), particularly for a non-Australian readership; a reading from the inside out would include consideration of Indigenous storytelling modes and their adaptation of dystopian generics, and the thematics of climate theft and ecological racism (see Rose). *The Swan Book* and *Carpentaria* (2006) currently circulate as world novels where they have a powerful and distinctive presence as complex literary narratives within transnational Indigenous and, to a lesser degree, non-Indigenous literary circuits (see Osborne and Whitlock).¹ At the same time these fictions emerge out of and address native (and national) historical and political matrices that include deeply contested, volatile ideas about state sovereignty, land rights, the history of settlement, and Indigenous policy. In this connection 'sovereignty' is the word I would like to draw attention to. A significant aspect of *The Swan Book* is the complex and self-reflexive ways in which it addresses the political and social debate about 'sovereignty,' although this aspect of Wright's fiction is not restricted to that novel.

A global south perspective is useful here because within influential, 'northern' paradigms of reading and method in literary studies that are constitutively defined by a certain version of the global, the planetary, the cosmopolitan, the transnational (or the post-national) the formations 'sovereignty' and critical regionalism are hard to read, or have been assumed to have been superseded. In those monologic frameworks the politics of national territory tend to be subject only to internal humanist critique, not discourse and criticism of fraught, real-world constitutionalism and foundational questions of sovereignty. While the term 'sovereignty' is obviously and variously abstract in reference, it also refers primarily to the state in its legal and factual alignment with the nation, with the international system of governance (the law of nations), and with the cartography as well as biopolitics of territory and borders. Dislodging literary sociability and the modes of interpretation from national territory—that is, geopolitical bounds and limits of space and history—seems like a liberating move, especially for any Indigenous body of work that by definition is always already constituted by the struggle against settler, invader and occupier nationalisms. Worlding or reterritorialising readings of the contemporary novel are often driven by a desire to circumvent defensive, incipiently racist or essentialising territorialism—spatially and historically. Reterritorialising the novel in this sense is to read it against and beyond the discursive bounds of a geo-unitary nation with its (often disremembered) foundations in violence and dispossession and its anxious, subjugating possessiveness about identity and myth. Critical decolonisation, or de-nationalisation, here, posits a kind of self-determination for the Indigenous text, its rulership of itself, the recognition of its unpatrolled citizenship, not of a

postcolonial nation or even a ‘first-world’ world literature, but of a trans-Indigenous first-nation of letters.

But the perspectives of some Indigenous writers, like Alexis Wright, may caution us to rethink any tendency to interpretative ecstasy here: as Wright reminds us in an important speech, the Mabo lecture, in Alice Springs in the same year *The Swan Book* was published (June 2013)—and which I return to in detail—Aboriginal people have a particular relationship to the word ‘sovereignty’ and its definitional role across the historical periodisation of their own subjugation. It is not easily escaped. Various white historians, perhaps Henry Reynolds and Bain Attwood most notably, have traced and analysed the history of sovereignty in Australia at the conjunction of the development of politico-legal institutions and the depredations of settlement, including those few occasional voices that were questioning from early on in colonial history. But while they are aware of the valency of sovereignty debates in the present and their relation to constitutional recognition of first peoples, the instabilities produced by efforts at decolonisation, and self-determination and treaty movements, as historians they are predominantly focused on the past.² In 2007 the writers in Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s edited volume, *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters* addressed issues of sovereignty, more broadly focused on the present, under the headings of law, writing, history and policy. These included Moreton-Robinson’s own chapter on Aboriginal autonomy and the perceived threat to national identity, Tony Birch and Philip Morrissey’s critiques of professional colonial history, Gary Foley’s powerful analysis of Mabo and, in its wake, Native Title legislation, and Wendy Brady and Maggie Walter’s comparative and global perspectives on Indigenous sovereignty. These essays, together with the discussion of sovereignty and Aboriginal rights in Larissa Behrendt’s earlier book *Achieving Social Justice: Indigenous Rights and Australia’s Future* (2003) and some of the contributions in Rosie Scott and Anita Heiss’s *Intervention*, an anthology of writings in response to the 2007 federal government Northern Territory National Emergency Response, published earlier this year, comprise a heterogeneous ensemble of writings including many individual perspectives on the past and the present, and with significant differences of personal allegiance. Collectively, though, they continue to address issues of sovereignty in relation to the contemporary Australian polity, an address that Moreton-Robinson suggests seems to occasion deeply anxious and furiously held political commitments: ‘public attitudes towards Indigenous sovereignty have changed very little since 1788, and any assertion of Indigenous sovereign rights continues to be met with rabid backlash and denial’ (xi). These issues also tend to be both subsumed and relegated in the republic debate in Australia when it surfaces intermittently—as in ex-Prime Minister Paul Keating’s recent media around the publication of Kerry O’Brien’s book *Keating*, an extension of his 2013 (that year again) four-part ABC series. Keating sees Indigenous self-determination, understandably enough, in terms of Mabo and subsequent Native Title legislation, but this is to mute the many voices of critique of post-Mabo Indigenous self-determination.

Alexis Wright’s Mabo lecture, an important contribution to this ‘sovereignty’ collective, referred to the context of these debates as a contemporary ‘storytelling war’—her language here would seem to support Moreton-Robinson’s view of the symbolic violence at work in the rhetoric of sovereignty debates. ‘We are in the middle of a storytelling war [Wright said] aimed at the destruction of our rights.’ This is not just a social and academic conflict, it is also a mediated struggle, including high-profile opponents of the sovereignty ‘movement’ as well as the influential speeches and media appearances of proponents like Rosalie Kunoth Monks and the local activism

of Muurrumu Walubarar Yidindiji, in his renunciation, earlier this year, of Australian citizenship and the declaration of the Yidindiji nation in North Queensland (see Daly). In the midst of this tumultuous, often bitter, contemporary discourse Wright's rhetoric tends to differ from the other participants, I think because of her thinking as a novelist (a particular kind of Indigenous storyteller, that is): 'our future [she said] requires us to become very mindful about preserving and rebuilding our oral tradition of good and skilful storytelling practice.' And she makes a powerful equation between Aboriginal legal activism in the heritage of Eddie Mabo, and Indigenous cultural expression, particularly narrative. In other words she extends this debate beyond the realm of the solely legal and judicial by pointing to the role of stories and meaning in the cause of justice and rights:

I think the ideas that drove Eddie Koiki Mabo's dream of achieving justice through the recognition of his inheritance and rights are ideas that we commonly think about as Aboriginal people. Most of us have spent our entire lives undertaking the hard work of trying to re-connect or to stay connected to our traditional country. That is the spirit of our culture. This is what I believe he was interested in—the life of the spirit—the essence or backbone of what we are—of what gives meaning to our world—and of really understanding the value of stories. He knew that it is perfectly reasonable to be reasonably angry if someone tries to take away your rights, and that it is okay to allow our instincts to react to threats to our survival [. . .]

It is the stories from all times that have created the map of who we are, our laws, and what we are made of. If we lose this—if we start saying that knowing ourselves through our legacy of ancestral and historical stories and attachment to the land doesn't really matter to us in the so-called modern world of Australia in the 21st century, then we will simply lose our identity and relationship to country. Our nations will no longer exist. It is this deep feeling for the stories of country that comes from our ancestors which not only tell us who we are, it also tells us where we have been, and provides us with the template and fundamental principles to imagine what will be important to us in the future.

The work of Eddie Mabo extended the story of who we are and our rights, and he did this by not letting other people continue to invent and dictate their own narratives about us—the narrative or story of terra nullius—which is linked to the story of assimilation, and the story of dispossession and oppression, that we are incapable of achieving what we set out to do and need to be protected from ourselves, or stories to denigrate and create self-loathing among our people.

The Swan Book emerges out of and addresses this contemporary socio-political understanding of political reality and narrative, of individual Indigenous activism and nation.

But what do Moreton-Robinson and Alexis Wright understand by the words 'backlash' and 'war'? What they're referring to, I think, is the rhetoric within the Aboriginal intellectual and leadership community, not just to reactions from without. Marcia Langton's Boyer Lectures for 2012, by one of Australia's highest profile Indigenous intellectuals, *The Quiet Revolution: Indigenous People and the Resources Boom* (2013) were framed in terms of a different kind of storytelling project:

Langton writes in her introduction that in the lectures her goal was to change ‘the narrative from the tired old story of the black victim/protestor to a more informed account of Aboriginal engagement with modernity, and the resulting cases of economic success and ingenuity against the odds’ (13). (The ABC’s Boyer Lectures are the equivalent of BBC Radio 4’s Reith lectures in the UK, and the CBC’s Massey lectures in Canada.) There were a couple of controversies occasioned by Langton’s lectures: first, a flare-up in the ongoing contention with high profile climate and sustainability scientist Tim Flannery, a former Australian of the Year (2007) and his ‘future eating’ theory about the Aboriginal people as ‘enemies of nature’ (in Langton’s phrase) because of their possible contribution to the ‘first’ Australian extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna (see Bird Rose, ‘Decolonising’). The other was a counter-broadside from the conservation movement, including Flannery, about the issue of the non-disclosure of subsidies for Langton’s research by resource and mining companies Rio Tinto, Santos and Woodside (see McColl). Rhetorically, Langton’s polemic was couched as a critique of the racist and colonising meme of the noble savage, which she saw as buried in Green ideology and political practice: ‘They [national parks] are not wilderness areas. They are Aboriginal homelands’ (Harrison). But these controversies, relatively marginal in terms of Langton’s overall project, entirely overrode the real polemical vehemence in the lectures, which was against what she referred to as the advocates of Aboriginal sovereignty.

In the final lecture, ‘The New Narrative of Indigenous Success,’ a title which again acknowledges the centrality of the idea of narrative to these contentions, she turns from an account of racist elements in the right-wing commentariat (*Quadrant*, radio shock-jocks, etc) to what she describes as ‘other monsters stalking this landscape’: ‘one of them is a favourite of the professional dissidents in the Aboriginal movement: ‘Aboriginal sovereignty’ (138). ‘There is a small and powerful group of Aboriginal people [Langton writes] involved in the politics of this domain, stridently advocating this concept. What does it mean? A separate state? Enactment of Indigenous rights? Such questions have never been answered, and the concept remains a slogan, one that points to a vaporous dream of self-determination but does not require any actual activity in the waking world to materialise it. It is Australia’s version of the Marcus Garvey moment of 1950s Jamaica that dreamt of the repatriation of African descendants to Africa and involved the proto-Rastafarians in rituals such as waiting on the wharf for their saviour, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, to arrive on a ship and rescue them. In the early 1990s, some advocates for this idea of Aboriginal sovereignty had Aboriginal passports made and with them travelled internationally for some years’ (138–39). ‘It bemuses me,’ writes Langton, ‘that so many people are enthralled by this absurd political ideology,’ a ‘fatuous political path’ (139; 140–41). Langton went further and identified an ‘undercurrent in the Reconciliation movement’ where ‘many Aboriginal advocates of reconciliation have addressed themselves not to the settlers who want absolution for their ancestral past in Australia’s history, but to young Aboriginal people attracted to the Aboriginal sovereignty slogans’ (140).

In this context, instead of referring to any of the important landmarks in the cause of Aboriginal land rights, like the Yolgnu Gove petition case of 1963, or the Gurindji Wave Hill movement of 1966, or Paul Coe’s case against the Australian Government (*Coe v Commonwealth*, 1979), or Mabo (1992) or Wyk (1996)—all instances of the struggle for self-determination—Langton cites the instance of the passports issued by Michael Mansell’s Provisional Aboriginal Government—‘stunt’ is her word—to ridicule the sovereignty movement.³ The Aboriginal passports issue was

an instance of outrage for the conservative Prime Minister John Howard. This is weird, given that the much more high profile instance of Aboriginal protest in this connection, and from around the same era, is the tent embassy of 1972, an equally illegitimate ‘stunt,’ one might assume, in terms of critique of settler sovereignty (symbolising the Aboriginal people’s sense of being aliens in their own land). Even weirder is the accusation of Garveyism, suggesting that this Aboriginal politics is in the name of a pan-Australian Aboriginal state, led by a diasporic Aboriginal person, to be located somewhere else. The accusation of pan-Aboriginal nationalism is particularly ironic, given that it implies Aboriginal adoption of the colonising *nation* as the model for political struggle, the race-based nation within a postcolonial nation. And insofar as the tent embassy implied a kind of analogous adoption, it is ironic that Langton doesn’t mention it. ‘Professional Aboriginal dissidents,’ in Langton’s view, ‘cling to their own from of Garveyism’ (142).

Noel Pearson, perhaps the highest profile Aboriginal leader in Australia at the moment, and a co-member with Langton of the Expert Panel on Recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in the Constitution, and whom Langton references in her lectures, is a co-refuter of the idea of Aboriginal sovereignty, although not quite as vehemently. For Pearson, quoted in Langton, it is ‘absolutist, nihilist daydreaming about what should be’ (142), the antithesis of his own version of Australian Indigeneity, with its layered identities, homeland communalism, the ‘right to take responsibility,’ and market liberalism (Neale, *Sydney Review*)—all concepts inflected for a (settled, unified) nation in Pearson’s writing (layered identities, for example, are homologous with the layered history of the nation). Pearson’s critique relies on a more juridical rhetoric than Langton’s, also foundational to white settlement, that sovereignty is ‘injusticeable,’ a fact of white settlement reaffirmed by the Mabo case, just as it opened up the possibility of native title (*A Rightful Place*, 40–41). Pearson is not interested, as he says, in ‘tilting at the windmill of sovereignty as a question of *legal* legitimacy’ (41). Extinguishing the doctrine of *terra nullius* didn’t mean recognising prior Indigenous sovereignty, the judgements were explicit about that. Pearson is here using the technical legal term injusticeable as understood within the doctrine of the ‘Act of State,’ in this instance the legal and political frame of the Constitution of Australia, which defines all the jurisdictions of a nation, including the rights of citizens (if not explicitly) (see Reynolds, ‘After Mabo’). According to this doctrine there is no jurisdiction within the nation where its own ‘original’ jurisdictions can be at law; questions or issues about its own constitutionality, if you like, have no standing. There are many issues here, but not the least issue at question for Aboriginal discourses about sovereignty points to the opening words of the preamble of the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act* (of the UK parliament of 9 July, 1900), that the

people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and under the Constitution hereby established.

Those people didn’t include Aboriginal people, so what is their relation to those people who did ‘agree to unite’? What role did Aboriginal people have in this founding social and political contract of Australian sovereignty?

Alexis Wright has been tilting at the windmill of sovereignty since she began working within local activism and social policy for Aboriginal self-determination and land rights since the mid-1970s, working ‘extensively in government departments and Aboriginal agencies across four states and territories as a professional manager, educator, researcher and writer (see Wright, ‘Grog War,’ half title page). In 1978 she worked for the Queensland Aboriginal Legal Service as a representative of the Lardil people on Mornington Island, in the political fallout from the winding up of the Uniting Church mission. This was about self-determination in the face of attempts by the then Bjelke-Petersen Queensland government to control the island. In 1982 she was involved with the finalisation of the Nicholson River Land Claim (aka the Waanyi/Garawa claim), and in 1984–85 in the McLelland Royal Commission on Maralinga Nuclear Tests, and as a co-ordinator in 1993 of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Constitutional Convention. In 1997 Wright co-ordinated the Kalkaringi Convention, a response to a convention for Northern Territory statehood held in Darwin earlier that year and that refused to significantly acknowledge Aboriginal rights of self-determination and self-government. Kalkaringi is next to the Aboriginal community at Daguragu, where ‘Vincent Lingiari led his people, the Gurindji, when they walked off Wave Hill cattle station in 1966 because of the way they were being treated by the owners of the property, the British pastoral company, Vestey’s’ (Wright, ‘Breaking Taboos’).⁴ It was her experience with the Central Land Council that led to her editing, in 1998, *Take Power: Like this Old Man Here: An Anthology of Writings Celebrating Twenty Years of Land Rights in Central Australia, 1977–1997*, a compilation that chronicles the first twenty years of the Land Rights movement in Central Australia, drawing on archival research and interviews with Aboriginal people involved in the movement, as well as lawyers and anthropologists. And that’s really just a sketch of her activist work in the cause of Aboriginal self-determination and land rights.

In the 1990s, though, Wright’s activism took a turn from political organisational involvement in Aboriginal causes to fiction writing. In a 2001 talk, ‘The Politics of Writing,’ she explains:

By the time I had come to making the decision to write a novel in the 1990s, I guess it was at a time of deep inner personal crisis I was experiencing about everything I had ever believed in about our rights as people. I was questioning the failures of our hopes for just about everything we fought for. Every idea and goal was overtaken by others. Governments found new ways of making our lives harder. We did not seem to gel as a political movement at either the national, state or regional level. As individuals, as communities, as peoples with Indigenous rights, everything we did to accomplish anything seem to be a meaningless exercise because the force of ingrained racism stood against us.

I wrote *Plains of Promise* to deal with my inner crisis and loneliness of the soul. [. . .] I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. (‘Politics of Writing’)⁵

While creative storytelling offered Wright a way through this personal crisis in Indigenous and political selfhood, it’s not as though narrative fiction presented an unproblematic alternative to political work, with all its formal challenges and its questions of existential origins and social utility. Wright has written, for example, about her worries about *Carpentaria*’s non-standard narrative style:

I also knew that I would pay a price for my decision to write a novel as though some old Aboriginal person was telling the story. I think what I feared most was that this kind of voice and style of telling would be flatly rejected in Australia. Every day I was writing the novel, I would begin the day by arguing with myself about how a manuscript written in this voice was taking a big risk.

I knew that by using a storytelling narrative voice in a language that was as much my own as it is of Aboriginal people in the Gulf, I was setting myself up for failure. ('Gulf Music')

Part of the formal crisis here has to do with the extremity of the social history Wright wants to grasp, the ground zero of human experience that *Carpentaria* narrates, the devastation of culture and lifeworlds represented by violence and dispossession of colonisation and the poverty and despair that follow in its wake, right down to the present.

What I would like to point to here is the way in which Wright's work, what we might call her literary activism, has never given up on the idea of sovereignty or forms of self-government, but has developed and expanded that notion—however informed by the realities, disappointments and failures of actual political work—to include a hard-won understanding of the self-governing imagination and closely related critical projects, with their political work in Indigenous cultural politics. Together these constitute what she refers to as the sovereignty of the mind. As she said in the Mabo lecture: 'We are often told to forget about Aboriginal rights, that our claims of sovereignty won't feed people. I really think that assertion needs to be properly examined.' Another aspect of Wright's thinking about sovereignty of the mind, and one that is closely related to her Mabo lecture is her ARC funded project 'Australian Indigenous Storytelling,' an 'essayed memoir' project she has been involved in for a couple of years now. Here Wright is investigating, at the same time as she was writing fiction like *The Swan Book*, 'the life and work of the important Aboriginal visionary leader, political thinker, strategist, and resource scientist, Leigh Bruce (Tracker) Tilmouth [. . .] looking closely at Tilmouth's own storytelling practice [and] how Aboriginal stories have been told in recent years, and which stories have been used in the creation of a national narrative for the re-shaping of Aboriginal Australia.'⁶

And in relation to the fictional aspect of this project:

The art of storytelling [. . .] is a form of activism that allows us to work with our ideas through our imagination, knowledge and instincts, our principles and values of all times, past, present and future working together—as all times being linked and important to us—not just what is good enough for the moment. This is where I try to work, and in my new novel *The Swan Book*, I have tried to imagine and write a story of the future, let's say continuing the current situation a hundred years from now. ('Mabo')

There is no space here for an extended reading of Wright's novel, but a brief sense of the novel might substantiate the relevance of the kinds of contextual ground I've been covering. In the apocalyptic world of *The Swan Book*, then, the globe has been ravaged by climate change wars—

'wild weather storms [. . .] the culmination of years of droughts high temperature and winds in some countries, or in others, the freezing depths of prolonged winters' (25). Some Aboriginal people, swamp people, have retained a home, 'everywhere' else though, 'probably millions of white people were drifting among the other countless stateless millions of sea gypsies looking for somewhere to live'—some of these wandering hoards are seeking the refuge of remote, surviving Aboriginal homelands (23), islands of Indigenous ecological and cultural survival in a world where land and climate have been lost. 'Fleeing people became refugees marching onwards [...] Hunger was constant. Waves of vermin, rats disguised as men, drove the moving chains of humanity into traps. The killing of people was without reason, fruitless and endless' (27). Rising seas have flooded all the borders and boundaries of the present, those markers of the nation-state and of geopolitical territory have disappeared and navigating the flooded lands, for hardened refugee environmentalists, is life-threatening (306).

But this global future is not uniformly dystopian, indeed the novel remediates speculative fiction in Aboriginal terms. Indigenous nations, like the Brolga nation have grown up 'just down the road from the sites of earlier human and natural depredations of Aboriginal land, an 'Army-controlled Aboriginal detention camp' and military ordinance dump, and a spreading mountain of sand (115). This is a world then, in which non-Indigenous societies and governments have collapsed into global chaos, where all issues of national sovereignty, whether territorial or governmental (state or nation, local or global) appear as short-sighted and self-destructive arrangements, a matter of a few hundred years. But Wright's vision is an immensely subtle and complex one, well exemplified in the character of Warren Finch, the central male character of the novel. At the point where Finch is introduced into the narrative, there is a long, Swiftian diatribe against the kind of Indigenous positionality and rhetoric represented by writers Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson:

they agreed by presenting themselves as being well and truly yes people who were against arguing the toss about Aboriginal rights. [. . .] anti-culture, anti-sovereignty, anti-human rights, anti-black armband history for remembering the past, anti-United Nations, or Amnesty International, as much as being anti-pornography, anti-paedophiles, anti-grog, anti-dope, anti-littering, anti-having too many dogs and pussycats, anti-any kind of diseases or ill health, anti-welfare, anti-poverty, anti-anyone not living like a white person in their houses [. . .] anti-anyone who opposed their human and personal rights, or their land rights, or their native title, anti-never having enough heat in the weather, or anyone who got in the way of what they said was Aboriginal-defined self-determination. (96–97)

But Finch has been brought up by Aboriginal elders 'in isolation, out bush away from everyone'; he 'shone like the rising sun, and was already as fearless as their greatest ancestral spirits, would one day become the best man that ever breathed air on this planet' (95). Finch's choice of Oblivia as his wife is heartbreaking for his own people who feel 'resentment at the swamp people's spite for allowing something like this to happen when they knew that the destiny of the girl belonged elsewhere, to the clans-country on the other side of the hills, in the homeland of their boy, more wondrous than the air itself' (95). The young Aboriginal woman, Oblivia, seems to stand for the most brutally traumatised sector of the Aboriginal population—withdrawn, almost mute, terrified, 'polluted' in the view of some of her own people—yet she has a protector and auntie in the old white woman Bella Donna of the Champions. Oblivia is also chosen by Finch, the talented young

Aboriginal leader who has risen from his childhood in the Broilga nation to Deputy President of Australia and who is recognised as a possible global leader, given that national governments have disintegrated. The Broilga nation is chosen by an international fact-finding delegation to be their showpiece of what a future human world was all about' (106). But in the end it is Oblivia who survives, while Finch is assassinated.

The futuristic, allegorical, symbolic mosaic of social and governmental possibilities that *The Swan Book* presents are neither predictable nor easy, and of course they belong to a different order of discourse from the socio-legal discourse around Indigeneity of Langton and Pearson. And for Wright, there is a clashing and vying storytelling contest between these discourses, a narrative civil war within the Indigenous intellectual domain. Wright's fundamental point, I think—not without layered ironies and styles of Indigenous storytelling—is that sovereignty is a question, that's the activist politics of narrative, a question that needs to be asked. '[O]ther people's sovereignty' is something that Oblivia hears about, sitting in the back seat of a travelling car after her marriage to Finch—a marriage that will become an imprisonment to a person who becomes a series of media events—in a conversation between Bella Donna and the Old Harbour Master. '*Who gives him the right to decide on other people's sovereignty?*' (232). The point is the question. Sovereignty may remain injusticeable in the Australian legal and cultural jurisdiction of the imperial and settler past, and in the troubled present, but the dissolution and critique of that illegitimate form of sovereignty is complexly imaginable in Wright's storytelling.

NOTES

¹ For example, Wright's fiction was a focus of the Association of Australian Studies in China's 2015 international symposium on the parallel study of Australian Indigenous people and Chinese Mongolian nationality. See also Osborne and Whitlock.

² See Attwood, but also Reynolds, 'After Mabo, What About Aboriginal Sovereignty?'

³ See 'Sovereign Union—First Nations Asserting Sovereignty: <http://www.sovereignunion.mobi>

⁴ Wright's 'Breaking Taboos' insists on the 'suffering [that] is widespread in our communities. I do not write stories of 'getting on and getting by.' Marcia Langton replied to this essay with the accusation that Aboriginal writing, scholarship and research was 'taking on the feel of Holocaust Studies' ('Marcia Langton responds').

⁵ Wright's role in Aboriginal political movements was in fact more 'writerly' perhaps than this paper suggests: *Grog War*, for example, 'contains two chapters of fiction because I was asked not to identify members of the community who have suffered from the consequences of alcohol and the state of cross-cultural relationships in that town' ('Breaking Taboos') and while she was working for the Central Aboriginal Land Council she published short stories and creative essays.

⁶ See 'Australian Indigenous Storytelling':

https://www.uws.edu.au/writing_and_society/research/current_research_projects/australian_indigenous_storytelling

WORKS CITED

Attwood, Bain. *Possession: Batman's Treaty and the Matter of History* Melbourne: Miegunyah, 2009.

Daly, Paul. 'Indigenous Activist Murrumu has fought the law this week. But who will Win?' *Guardian* (7 August, 2015): <http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2015/may/27/murrumu-charged-after-driving-with-licence-issued-by-his-indigenous-nation>

- Harrison, Dan. 'Langton Attacks Flannery for holding 'racist' belief.' *Sydney Morning Herald* (December 8, 2012): <http://www.smh.com.au/national/langton-attacks-flannery-for-holding-racist-belief-20121207-2b14s.html>
- Langton, Marcia. *The Quiet Revolution: Indigenous people and the resources boom*. Sydney: HarperCollins/ABC Books, 2013.
- _____. 'Marcia Langton responds to Alexis Wright's Breaking Taboos.' *Australian Humanities Review* 1998: <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/emuse/taboo/langton2.html>
- McColl, Gina. 'Langton failed to disclose mining company funding.' *Sydney Morning Herald* (March 2, 2013): <http://www.smh.com.au/national/langton-failed-to-disclose-mining-company-funding-20130301-2fbtx.html>
- Neale, Timothy. 'A Stake in the Game.' *Sydney Review of Books*.
<http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/noel-pearson-rightful-place/>
- Osborne, Roger and Gillian Whitlock. 'Carpentaria: reading with the dirt of blurbs and front pages.' *JASAL* 16.2 (2016).
- Pearson, Noel. *A Rightful Place: Race, Recognition and a More Complete Commonwealth. Quarterly Essay* 55 2014. Collingwood, Vic: Black Inc., 2014.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. 'Decolonising the Discourse of Environmental Knowledge in Settler Societies.' Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke, eds. *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003. 53–72.
- Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2013.
- _____. 'Mabo Lecture.' Native Title Conference, 'Shaping the Future,' Alice Springs, June 3–5, 2013:
file:///Volumes/User_data/Users/lpmead/Documents/Australian%20literature%20and%20the%20world/sovereignty%20of%20the%20mind/MLA%202015%20Alexis%20Wright%20panel/MABO%20LECTURE%20-%20dirtsong%20&%20ALEXIS%20WRIGHT%20-%20The%20Black%20Arm%20Band%20Company%20The%20Black%20Arm%20Band%20Company.webarchive
- _____. 'Gulf Music.' *Australian* (9 June, 2007):
<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21853571-5001986,00.html>
- _____. 'Politics of Writing,' *Southerly* 62.2 (Summer 2002): 10–20.
- _____. 'Breaking Taboos' *Australian Humanities Review*. 1998:
<http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-1998/wright.html>
- _____. *Grog War*. Broome: Magabala, 1997.