

## Capitalism versus the agency of place: an ecocritical reading of *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*

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Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010) and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) have put the Indigenous novel at the centre of Australian literature for the first time and established these authors as two of Australia's most prominent and successful contemporary fiction writers. The novels have been widely acclaimed by scholars and critics; both won the Miles Franklin Award and were short-listed for major literary prizes. And yet both these novels trouble Australia's national identity, drawing attention to and challenging the economic project—capitalism—upon which the nation is predicated. Against the singularity of the nation and the abstracting forces of capitalism these novels posit the particularity and agency of locale, of place. This paper will argue, therefore, that only an ecocritical reading of these novels can adequately account for the challenges—formal, political, epistemological, ontological—that they pose. Through an ecocritical examination of the conflict between capitalism and regional Indigenous management embodied in these novels, I will argue that they rewrite Australia in the voice of the regional, and offer ways of reconsidering the relation of human and non-human which contest our prevailing economic models and their role in the ecological crisis.

From their opening pages *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria* articulate a clash between the cosmology of Indigenous Australians and that of the British who colonised the continent in 1788. I suggest that the two cosmologies can be distinguished chiefly on the basis of how they conceptualise the relation of humans to place, and that their clash derives from their differing conceptions of place, which I will define broadly as the non-human environment;<sup>1</sup> in one, place is enmeshed with human life, in the other, human life is raised above place and abstracted from it.

The Indigenous cosmology of Australia assumes the agency of place, or the non-human world, and a custodial, mutually nourishing relationship between humans and 'Country', an Aboriginal concept which denotes land, its creatures, ancestors, law.<sup>2</sup> The cosmology of the colonising British is informed by Christianity, whose first book, *Genesis*, gives 'Man' dominion over 'Nature', and by capitalism, which extracts human interactions with nature from place through its abstracting rhetoric of profit-calculation and 'material progress'. This rhetoric makes possible the framing of land as a commodity (increasingly formalised from 1750 in Britain by the Inclosure Acts), and its subsequent exploitation for profit, and conceives of human relations with land in terms of 'commerce', 'industry', and 'development'. These settler, profit-seeking relations between humans and nature are exemplified by the whaling and mining industries portrayed in *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria* respectively. It is because of this central importance of place in distinguishing these two cosmologies, and because of the novels' concern with the capitalist exploitation of two areas of regional Australia, that I argue that these novels can be examined most fruitfully using an ecocritical framework, the field of literary criticism specifically concerned with place in literature, rather than through notions of magic realism (see Joseph, Devlin-Glass, Ravenscroft), social contract theory (Brewster), modernism (Ravenscroft) or solely postcolonialism (Joseph, Devlin-Glass).

Formulated in the 1990s, ecocriticism intends specifically to address the contemporary crises in the environment (in part caused by industrial and global capitalism) from a literary perspective. In 1996 Cheryl Glotfelty broadly defined ecocriticism as ‘the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ (Glotfelty and Fromm xxi). More usefully for my purposes, in 2000 Lawrence Coupe called ecocriticism: ‘The most important branch of green studies, which considers the relationship between human and non-human life as represented in literary texts and which theorises about the place of literature in the struggle against environmental destruction’ (302).

Until recently,<sup>3</sup> ecocriticism had focused on the literature of Europe and North America, especially nineteenth-century Romanticism, and American nature writers such as Thoreau and Whitman, with ecocritical readings of Australian texts appearing only in the last few years. The first collection of Australian ecocritical essays, *The Littoral Zone*, was published in 2007. These essays concern the work of settler writers and therefore the Australian pastoral—and pastoral industry—is a predominant theme; as are poets, especially Judith Wright, who is also one subject of an earlier Australian ecocritical essay.<sup>4</sup> Tasmania too has recurred in Australian ecocriticism, notably in essays by C.A. Cranston and Tony Hughes-D’Aeth. While prominent Australian ecocritic Kate Rigby has written about this continent,<sup>5</sup> her major works such as her seminal ecocritical study *Topographies of the Sacred* (2004) are about European, especially German, literature. As a result of its focus on non-Indigenous texts, Australian ecocriticism has examined the environment from the settler perspective, even where this concerns the impact of colonisation and environmental degradation on Indigenous cultures.

This paper extends the ambit of ecocriticism by focusing on two novels written by Indigenous Australians. To date these two novels have not been considered in ecocritical terms and yet they both emphasise ‘the radical ontological shift in understanding place that occurred through the process of European colonialism and Christian missionization’ (6), as DeLoughrey and Handley describe the shift from a dynamic model of land to British colonial rule in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. As DeLoughrey and Handley argue, Achebe’s novel shows how Igbo language and being are constituted by the land and how that relationship is radically altered by ‘the social, cultural and linguistic force of empire’ (6). In doing this I will be following recent scholarship which has extended the scope of ecocriticism from its focus on Europe and North America to the rest of the world, particularly the global south. As DeLoughrey and Handley put it, in recent years there has been ‘a remarkable turn in which ecocritical methodologies have been adapted for rethinking postcolonial literature’ (9).

These ‘postcolonial ecologies’ are informed by Edward Said’s work, which helps us to see ‘that to speak of postcolonial ecology is to foreground a spatial imagination made possible by the experience of place’ (4). According to Said:

For the native, the history of colonial servitude is inaugurated by the loss of locality to the outsider; its geographical identity must therefore be searched for and somehow restored ... Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable first only through imagination. (77)

In their conceptualisation of place and history, DeLoughrey and Handley also draw on the work of Guyanese author Wilson Harris, who has suggested that in order ‘to engage a historical model of ecology and an epistemology of space and time ... we must enter a “profound dialogue with the landscape”’ (4). Following Harris, they ‘foreground the landscape (and seascape) as a participant in this historical process rather than a bystander to human experience’ (4). Such a model is essential in considering *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*, both of which work to recover the land through imagination, and both of which foreground the landscape and seascape as active participants in the historical process. This model of an active land is consonant with the Aboriginal notion of ‘Country’, which is evident in these novels and can be seen to clash with the Western understanding of ‘land’ as inert territory (*terra nullius*) available for exploitation and profiteering. This clash is seen most potently in the conflict between capital and land, or in the two very different conceptions of territory as ‘real estate’ and ‘Country’ played out in these novels (and in contemporary Australia). Capitalism is articulated most clearly in the colonising people’s management of natural resources, specifically: whaling in *That Deadman Dance*; and mining in *Carpentaria*. It is through these two industries that the two cosmologies of indigenous Australia and the British colonisers can be seen to meet and clash. Treating these two novels in the chronological order of their timeframes—*That Deadman Dance* from 1826, *Carpentaria*’s recent past—rather than of their publication, provides a useful framing of the introduction of capitalism to Australia with a nineteenth-century energy industry (whaling) and then its flourishing some 150 years later with that emblematic twentieth-century energy source, uranium.

From their opening pages these novels foreground the non-human world and its active relation to its human inhabitants—and introduce in contrast the settler’s cosmology. In *That Deadman Dance* the contrast between the two cosmologies is seen in their respective attitudes to whales: ‘Bobby came at Jak Tar, words rolling from his lips trying to explain something: old people passing, the whales, me them brothers’ (261) compared to the settlers’ view: ‘A few more whales and Captain Brother Jonathon would have all the oil he could carry ... Chaine could have all the bone; there was still a market for the fine structures from their mouths, stays and bustles for the fashionable ladies’ (271). And in *Carpentaria*, the contrasting views of place are equally clear: ‘Everyone had set up camp at the lagoon, and finally now the spirit trees knew who was there, you could see something was wrong in how they were dancing when the wind started to blow up suddenly like a telephone was ringing’ (425). On the other hand, capitalism’s big company ‘set about pillaging the nation’s treasure trove: the publicly touted curve of an underground range embedded with minerals’ (9).

And the novels’ key events, including their climaxes, are triggered by the clash of these two worlds. In *That Deadman Dance*, the whales are fished out by the settlers’ exploitative, profit-driven hunting sprees, which drives the Noongar to ‘poach’ and ‘steal’ food from the settlers. And so begins the inexorable unraveling of a brief period of co-existence. In *Carpentaria*, the climaxes are the destruction of the mine by human and non-human agency, and the destruction of the town by a cyclone. As well as their foregrounding of place, both novels are also notable for their generic hybridity and their hopefulness despite their traumatic subject matter—and these qualities have been remarked on by critics, among them Brewster, Joseph, Devlin-Glass, Ravenscroft, Martin Renes, Patrick Allington, Rich Carr, Martin Shaw. Both novels fuse elements of fiction and non-fiction, but what has particularly engaged critics is their mix of realism with fantasy and magic—or, as I would prefer to say, their fusion of Western realism and

Australian regional Indigenous realities. Also remarkable are the novels' narrative voices, their third-person perspectives which shift between white and black, present and past, human and non-human, and, especially notable in *Carpentaria*, between cosmic and earthly.

The novels' central concern with place, while frequently alluded to, has not yet been fully explored. The use of ecocriticism distinguishes my work from that of other critics by putting the question of land—and more broadly of 'Country'—at the centre of my critical concerns. Land, if understood in the broadest Aboriginal sense as 'Country', encompasses an entire Indigenous Australian cosmology, one very distinct from settler Christianity and capitalism. And in its theorization of land, ecocriticism can account not only for the novels' foregrounding of place, but also for their 'magic'. In particular I will examine Anne Brewster's application of social contract theory to *That Deadman Dance* and Alison Ravenscroft's discussion of *Carpentaria* as magic realism. While Brewster's analysis implicates land, it does not account for its centrality in the novel; Ravenscroft does not account for the multiple Indigenous *realities* that *Carpentaria* encompasses, but which are contained in the notion of Country.

*That Deadman Dance* is set in a nascent colonial outpost which clings to the southern coast of Western Australia. Over the course of the 12 years it covers, a rival commercial settlement is established nearby by Geordie Chaine, the colony's most enterprising man, praised for his energy and initiative, his ability to acquire and develop. As the narrator says: 'Chaine knows what he wants. Profits, not prophets ... Of course he'd profited from Jak Tar, same as he had from everyone he knew. The thing was, without him, none of them would be able to make a living here, except, of course, the blacks' (293). After several failed farming ventures, Chaine seizes on the idea of capitalising on the annual visits by American whale boats who hunt the whales which flock to a nearby beach each winter and extract their oil to fuel industrial North America. Driven by profits not prophets, by the abstractions of his accounts not the rhythms of the embedded world around him, Chaine makes possible a dramatic increase in the number of whales hunted each winter—until one season no whales come.

But what about the whales?  
 Maybe we fished them out.  
 But no one could know for sure. (338)

The disappearance of the whales is the trigger for a tragic reversal in relations between Indigenous and settlers in the novel, especially between the novel's central character Bobby Wabalanginy and his white friends.

Critical response to *That Deadman Dance* has focused on four key elements of the novel, all of which are relevant here: its 'mixing together', as Brewster puts it, of Noongar and white settler experience in early south western Australia (68); its powerful evocation of place and the natural world; its unexpected hopefulness and relevance for contemporary debates on indigenous-settler relations; and its hybrid, challenging form and style. In the most extended critique of the novel to date, Brewster focuses especially on the first of these, the novel's 'mixing together' of Noongar and white experience. Her examination of Noongar and white intersubjectivity borrows from social contract theory to develop the idea of a 'cross-racial contract' and discusses whiteness and Indigenous sovereignty in this context. Brewster uses the trope of the social contract to think

further about the ethics of embodied cross-racial relations figured in the novel, and argues that the trope is useful because it accentuates the participatory role of the contractors. She suggests that contracts ‘can give rise to alternative forms of agency’ (62). This idea of alternative forms of agency is key to my argument and essential in any consideration of *That Deadman Dance*, a novel in which, for example, frogs instruct humans: ‘Frogs call out from where they’re buried, sensing rain, saying move inland move inland move away from the sea’ (290).

The social contract trope allows Brewster to establish two conflicting claims to sovereignty in the novel: the British settlers’ legal logic of private property in which sovereignty derives from ownership of land, for example, through the building of fences and boundaries; and ‘a countervailing narrative of the enduring sovereignty of the Noongar’ (63). According to Brewster, this provides the geopolitical base of the Indigenous people’s status within the social contract. Drawing from Brewster’s use of social contract theory, with its emphasis on conflicting claims to sovereignty and the possibility of alternative forms of agency, I argue that an ecocritical reading of the novel best accounts for its emphasis on these two things, that is, on the conflict between British and Noongar conceptions of sovereignty, and of human relations to land and on the possibility of new forms of agency unacknowledged by British settler culture, specifically, the agency of place and of the non-human world.

Brewster argues that the ‘alternative subjectivity’ epitomised by the relationship between retired British military doctor Joseph Cross and Bobby, is subtended by ‘a rudimentary white recognition of indigenous sovereignty and *its embeddedness in country* by white characters in the novel’ (63, my italics). For Brewster, *That Deadman Dance* is ‘centrally concerned with the psychical nature of whiteness’ (61). While I agree with Brewster’s claim here about the novel’s suggestion of an Indigenous ‘sovereignty’ which is embedded in Country, I would argue that white *perceptions* of it are not the novel’s primary concern. Instead, I argue that the *fact* of Indigenous ‘sovereignty’ and its embeddedness in Country are the novel’s primary concerns. Although rather than ‘sovereignty’ I would prefer the words used by Scott, such as ‘confidence’, ‘strength’, ‘inclusiveness’ rooted in place. As Scott says in his Author’s Note: ‘I wanted to build a story from [Noongar] confidence, their inclusiveness and sense of play, and their readiness to appropriate new cultural forms—language and songs, guns and boats—as soon as they became available. *Believing themselves manifestations of a spirit of place impossible to conquer*, they appreciated reciprocity and the nuances of cross-cultural exchange’ (398, my italics).

The narrative itself attests to this, as the ending shows. Here Bobby attempts to contest British law with his own story rooted in place, told in dance and song—‘a few words on paper ... What was that against dance and song?’ Bobby is gifted at expressing place and community through his body:

Bobby Wabalanginy knew that he could sing and dance the spirit of this place, had shown he could sing and dance the spirit of any gathering of people, show them what we gathered together here really are. He reminded them he was a dancer and singer, what Dr Cross called a *gifted artiste*, and by these means and by his spirit he would show them how people must live here, together. (390)

Brewster also remarks on the novel's generic hybridity and use of historical and oral records as being directly linked to the 'theme of Noongar people and culture's survival and continuance' (68). While I agree with Brewster's suggestion that the novel's fusion of fiction and non-fiction is directly linked to the continuance of Noongar people and culture, I would suggest that the trope of the contract—so deeply rooted in British law and in particular commercial law—is not the best frame within which to situate the novel. I foreground instead the Noongar conception of Country—'Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time?' (Scott 394)—and its variance with that of British settler capitalism—'The land awaits development ... Land would be granted here, too, they insisted, to those with capital and without need for the purse strings of government' (Scott 141-42)—which demands an ecocritical approach. Brewster's approach, then, is useful for addressing one of the novel's core concerns, the relations between Noongar and white settlers, and the implications of this for Indigenous sovereignty, but in my view it sidelines what for me is the key difference between the world views of Noongar and white settlers: their relative conceptions of place. I argue that it is the Noongar's beliefs about place that are the source of their strength in the novel, as well as of the sense of hope and joy it leaves with its readers, unexpected because of the traumatic story it tells, and therefore of its relevance for Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations today. And also, more broadly, for human beings generally on a planet threatened with ecological destruction.

*That Deadman Dance* opens with young Bobby Wabalanginy writing in chalk on a blackboard, as he has been taught by the novel's exemplary white settler, Dr Cross. Bobby's story is deeply connected to the 'right whale' (species). Their intimate, fraternal relationship is established from the outset and is continually refigured in the novel. As is the whales' connection to the elder Menak, who gives Bobby his whale story. And it is Menak who oversees the sustainable management of the Noongar's particular patch of ocean, the interactions of local human and non-human realms.

The plot moves from one relationship between Bobby and place to its opposite; that is, it opens with Bobby being inducted into the white language and its understanding of place, and ends with him deliberately reversing this process. In the opening scene, Bobby is writing, using the settlers' tools to record his sightings of whales. At the novel's end (although not the story's end) he divests himself methodically and ritualistically, in dance, of the settlers' trappings in order to stand for his people and his land.

The first word of the novel is Noongar, '*Kaya*' (hello) and it is *written* by Bobby. So already the novel is focused on the two worlds contained in that written word: the writing, the letters, of British communications technology and its materials; and the language of the local inhabitants, the Noongar. 'Nobody ever done writ that before, he thought. Nobody ever writ *hello* or *yes* that way!' (1) This is a welcome to the reader as well as an indication of how Bobby's people have greeted the strange newcomers. They have welcomed them, said yes to them.

Bobby writes about a whale—'*Roze a wail*'—and then he writes about himself writing about a whale, making a connection between himself and the whale, using alien, fragile tools: chalk 'brittle as weak bone' and 'thin' slate. He remembers himself as a baby,

when he first saw whales rolling between him and the islands: a very close island, a big family of whales breathing easily, spouts sparkling in the sunlight ... Bobby wanted to enter the water and swim out to them, but swaddled against his mother's body, his spirit could only call. (2)

From this halcyon memory the narrative moves to an overt reference to Western cosmology and its clash with the local story: 'Unlike that Bible man, Jonah, Bobby wasn't frightened because he carried a story deep inside himself, a story Menak gave him wrapped in a memory of a fiery, pulsing whale heart ...' (2).

The narrative then breaks off into the story Menak has given Bobby. The telling fuses the animate and inanimate worlds, all is alive, fluid: there is 'a long *arm* of rock'; the water 'bulges' as if giving birth and gives forth a whale; the whale is 'barnacled' like a rock, barnacles 'stud' its smooth dark skin and 'crabs scurry across it', as across a rock; until the whale and shore (the arm of rock) are conflated: 'That black back must be slippery, treacherous like rock' (2). Here whales are rock and rocks have arms. And both have blowholes: 'But you see the hole in its back, the breath going in and out, and you think of all the blowholes along this coast' (2). This is a coast of rock and an ocean of whales, continuous, rock becoming whale, whale rock.

But Bobby is shocked back into the present. He is beginning to see with Western eyes, courtesy of Dr Cross and his English, his writing: 'It wasn't true, it was just an old story, and he couldn't even remember the proper song. There was no whale' (3). Bobby cannot *even* remember the *proper* song. And without it, the whale is gone. Already he is beginning to lose his story and his place. Now Bobby sees in 'boat lengths' and the sea is 'scuffed' (like shoes) and 'agitated'—'and then there was no sea, no sky and the world had compressed itself into a diagonally grey space for him' (3). Here in this grey scene without Bobby's story is the first abstraction of European Euclidean geometry—'diagonal', 'space'—and immediately it is followed by the abrupt arrival of the novel's embodiment of capitalist profit-seeking, the entrepreneur and developer Kongk Chaine, who bursts in: 'Bobby heard the heavy tread, and Kongk Chaine thrust himself into the little hut' (3). There is '[h]ardly enough space for the two of them beneath this roof, these three flimsy walls' (3)—and so it will prove to be; there is not enough room for them both in this locale which is being transformed by the settlers into abstracted 'space'. 'Space' is an empty word, not at all like Noongar place. Kongk and Bobby sit side by side and despite the great man's warmth, Bobby feels cold for the first time. And now he becomes one with the settlers' technology: his 'fingers *were* chalk', his body *is* the writing tool: 'He drew on the wet slate with his finger'. And what does he write, now he has become one with the white man's world? 'Fine we kild a wail'. And so whale killing enters the novel—and the Noongar's world.

The capitalist transformation Kongk wreaks on the land and its people will bring a new relationship between the human and non-human world, and place, which supplants the Noongar one. Nowhere does the cultural clash take place more powerfully than in the being of Bobby, who is eventually torn between the worlds of Kongk and of the Indigenous elder Menak. It is Menak who speaks in the novel for the Noongar cosmology:

He turned to the ocean. A whale, almost touching the rock Menak stood upon, rolled to one side with its eye upon him. Menak heard its voice, its moist exhalation. Had he lured this?

Crab and shell mean nothing to this one; this whale wants the company of people, wants to be ashore. ...

Firelight reflected in a whale's eye; himself dissolving there. Be the whale. (245)

Menak is merged with his place, its ancestors and creatures—the non-human world—which he understands as shaping his life and place as he shapes them.

As with the destruction of the whaling industry in *That Deadman Dance*, the destruction of the mine in *Carpentaria* triggers the novel's climaxes. *Carpentaria* is set in a small town called Desperance founded as a port for the transport of ore on a river near the Gulf of Carpentaria—until the river one day changed its course and left the town without a purpose, abandoned and strangely cut off from the nation. But the local mining continues regardless—until it is sabotaged by one of the novel's central characters, Will Phantom, rumoured to be a terrorist with the power to make atomic bombs from stolen uranium.

The novel's generic hybridity has troubled critics, especially its apparent fusion of 'realism' with 'fantasy' or 'magic'. This particular blend has preoccupied many critical appraisals of the novel to date and has led to its consideration as magic realism. For example, *Carpentaria* moves 'beyond the form of realism' to 'engage a politics of fantasy' (Joseph 1); 'This ambitious novel molds satire with a new form of magic realism based on Indigenous knowledge' (Devlin-Glass 392); and 'It quickly becomes clear that magic-realism has been taken up in the name of literary postcolonialism's interests in the possibilities of reading and writing difference between the coloniser and the colonised' (Ravenscroft 195). In the most extended critique of this tendency to date, Alison Ravenscroft argues that many critics 'remain at a loss' when attempting to make sense of *Carpentaria*. One very popular response to this, she continues, is to 'fit the text within the constraints of magic realism' (195). In this approach 'magic' and 'real' are used to describe 'two distinct representational codes at work in a text' and two distinct worlds (Ravenscroft 196). Ravenscroft criticises this strategy for its designation of Indigenous colonised subjects as 'magic' while attributing 'realism' to the colonisers (196). With her interrogation of magic realism, Ravenscroft makes a welcome break from this mode, but I would argue that her subsequent reading of *Carpentaria* through a 'poetics of uncertainty' as 'a novel that presents a white reader with its own quite specific qualities of unknowability, and undecidability' (214), is an inadequate response to a novel of such power, energy and political purpose, one which demands its reader enter a vividly realised and very particular and localised Gulf world.

In contrast, I argue that the novel's hybrid, challenging form and style, its foregrounding of Country from the first page and the agency with which it endows the non-human world are part of a deliberate strategy on Wright's part to embody in a Western literary form her contemporary Indigenous cosmology—with serious political intent and real world implications. That this is a move intended not to alienate her audience, but to invite them to enter into this world. This is something the novel form does—and that Wright explicitly considers it to be capable of. As she wrote in 'Politics of Writing': 'Literature gets to the very personal. It invites the reader to fully experience our stories' (13). Rather than seeing *Carpentaria* in terms of a poetics of uncertainty, a politics of fantasy, or as magic realism, I see it as attempting to embody in novel form a complex multivalent mesh of Indigenous realities related to place and their active



interconnection with the human world that I would call, following Timothy Morton, ‘ecological’. And this is contrasted in the novel with white settler culture, especially in its forms of Christianity and capitalism. And so I would argue that the novel does not distinguish two forms of ‘reality’—a ‘real’ world familiar to Western readers as distinct from a ‘magical’, Indigenous world unfamiliar to them—but multiple *realities*: specifically, a Western dualist, abstracted mode of apprehending the world and an Indigenous polyvalent, embedded mode. I suggest that only an ecocritical approach to the novel can encompass such a reading.

Wright herself vouches for this multiple realities reading (rather than ‘magic’ versus ‘realism’). Here is her understanding of the multiple realities *Carpentaria* encompasses: ‘The world I try to inhabit in my writing is like looking at the ancestral tracks spanning our traditional country which, if I look at the land, combines all stories, all realities from the ancient to the new, and makes it one—like all the strands on a long rope’ (Wright, *Politics* 20). As Ravenscroft says, *Carpentaria*:

inscribes different worlds and representational modes in the space of a few lines or phrases; it brings different objects, different worlds, into such close proximity that their placement in a rational or magical mode is undecidable. It makes the very division into magical and rational, living and dead, body and country undecidable—at least for this white reader. (206)

*Carpentaria* collapses these (Western) binaries into a continuum, a new metaphysics and ontology, an ecological one, a particular Indigenous one. Among other things, the Indigenous cosmology of *Carpentaria* articulated through its genre-blending and fluid narrative voices (which speak for a range of human and non-human forms) collapses the binaries of Western cosmology and philosophy, whose limitations ecophilosopher Val Plumwood so thoroughly analyses in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.

It is this challenge to Western dualism that has so troubled critics. For example, Ravenscroft notes that it unsettles conventional European arrangements of ‘objects into reality and fantasy, interiority and exteriority, country and culture, earth and body’ and the text ‘morphs, it shimmers’ (206). But, as others have argued, such as Joseph and Devlin-Glass, *Carpentaria*’s breaking down of European object arrangements and its shimmering text are nevertheless embedded in ‘the mundane and everyday real’ (Devlin-Glass 393), in a particular local Indigenous world specific to the Gulf country—in place. And it is through the agency of this specific world of the Gulf country, this particular ecosystem, that the novel argues against the forces of mining and global capitalism.

In *Carpentaria* the fate of capitalist exploitation of local resources is reversed: here the introduced industry, the mine, is destroyed by an improvised contingent of local saboteurs led by Will Phantom—assisted by the non-human world. Just as their plan seems to be going astray, the fire they light to be dying, suddenly the wind and the hills intervene, in concert with the will and cries of the human would-be destroyers:

It looked as though the fire was going to peter out ... Our men looking from the hills continued staring at the little flame flickering there fizzing out. What could they do? It

looked like defeat was imminent. And, that same old defeated look, two centuries full of it, began creeping back onto their faces. But, it was too late now, they had a taste of winning, so they projected their own sheer willpower right across that spinifex plain, calling out with no shame, *Come on, come on*, willing the little flame not to fizz, believing magic can happen even to poor buggers like themselves. (410-11)

And, somehow, '[t]he unbelievable miracle came flying by. A whirly wind ... just as a matter of fact sprung up from the hills themselves ... It happened so fast when the fiery whirlwind shot into the bowsers and momentarily, lit them up like candles. ... the explosion was holy in its glory. All of it was gone. The whole mine' (411). As in *That Deadman Dance*, it is ancestral story that ties the Aboriginal characters of *Carpentaria* to their place, that intimately binds them to the specificities of their land. Will Phantom's father Norm is a keeper and teller of these stories of the old country. And Norm knows intimately the river that has shaped their land, which was gouged from the earth by the ancestral serpent: 'The Pricklebush mob say that Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began' (6). And their conception of the wealth that lies underground, beneath their land, is vastly different from the way it is conceived by the multinational mining company which has paid for the right to extract its ore: 'hauling up rich ore scraped from the mother load embedded in sequences of rock that looked like the growth rings of a powerful, ancient being' (10).

As in *That Deadman Dance*, the non-human world and its relations with its human inhabitants is foregrounded in the opening pages of *Carpentaria*. And further, I suggest, here more strikingly than in *That Deadman Dance*, the ancestral land and its creation story and guiding spirits are the novel's central concern. And its nature argues against its mining. Here is how *Carpentaria* opens:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity ... Looking down at the serpent's wet body, glistening from the ancient sunlight, long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time. It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. (1)

This spirit laden land—Country—lies at the heart of these two novels. And it is Country and its interactions with the human which make them so challenging for non-Aboriginal readers, formally, epistemologically and ontologically. Both novels conclude with radical reversions to Indigenous visions of place. As they open with Christian-capitalist settler visions of it. And so I would argue, by focusing on this centrality of Country an ecocritical reading of these novels is a richly productive way in which to consider their rhetorical intent. And the vision of human-non-human relations rooted in place that this yields can inform our understanding of and approach to environmental destruction more generally. The environmental crisis shows that the Aboriginal understanding of human relations to place as custodial and interdependent is a more accurate conception than that of capitalism's view of human relations to place as a one-way relationship of extraction, one which exhausts place, paying it no respect on its own terms, according it no being. Or, to put it in capitalist terms, the environmental crisis demonstrates that 'the

environment' is not an 'externality' to the economy, but the superstructure in which the economy—and all human life—is embedded.

Through their focus on the specificities of place—the oceanic worlds off today's Albany and the gulf country of Carpentaria—these novels not only contest the logic of the settlers' capitalistic enterprise, which abstracts its endeavours from place, reconceiving them in the rhetoric of profit making, but through this they challenge the idea of a particular settler-Australian literature which apprehends the land as other. This ecocritical framework not only allows the novels to speak to the nation from their embeddedness in place, but also to the many places that comprise the planet as the forces of global capital increasingly impinge upon them. Their vision of a custodial relation between the human and non-human world offers a new way of conceiving human relation to place, one which I would argue is critical in an era of climate change and ecological destruction.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Buell: 'Place is an indispensable concept for environmental humanists not so much because they have precisely defined and stabilised it as because they have not; not because of what the concept lays to rest as because of what it opens up.' (62); and Garrard: 'the widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and non-human, throughout human and cultural history, and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself' (5).

<sup>2</sup> Ecological philosopher Deborah Bird Rose defines Country as 'a living entity with consciousness, and a will toward life', 'a place that gives and receives life' (7).

<sup>3</sup> See Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (2010), and DeLoughrey and Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment* (2011), two books which specifically address the gap in critical literature on ecocriticism and postcolonialism. As DeLoughrey and Handley say in their introduction: 'Our hope in *Postcolonial Ecologies* is to outline a broader, more complex genealogy for thinking through our ecocritical futures and a turn to a more nuanced discourse about the representation of alterity, a theorization of difference that postcolonialists, ecofeminists, and environmental activists have long considered in terms of our normative representations of nature, human and otherwise' (9).

<sup>4</sup> Louise Thomason's 'Women, Nature and Poetic Dwelling: ecofeminism and the poetries of Phyllis Webb and Judith Wright' in ed. Philip Mead, *Australian Literary Studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Proceedings of the 2000 ASAL Conference* (2001).

<sup>5</sup> For example, in her essay on Canberra, 'Ecopoetics of the Limestone Plains' in Cranston and Zeller, *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers* (2007).