Alexis Wright’s “Vision Splendid”: Aboriginal Economics, Climate Justice, and a Gaian World Literature

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A fighter and a visionary: these are the two words that Alexis Wright most often uses to describe Bruce “Tracker” Tilmouth, the titular subject of her 2017 biography. Tracker’s activism and agitation for Aboriginal rights were guided by his clear vision of the future towards which Aboriginal people had to work. As Wright explains: “Tracker called the future the ‘vision splendid.’ His vision was to secure the future of our culture by building a highly sophisticated, multilinked, independent Aboriginal economy based on traditional principles of economics” (2021). Wright had a long friendship with Tracker, having met him in the 1980s, and her own work is marked by an unusually comprehensive awareness of what it will take for Aboriginal people to achieve sovereignty, in all senses of the word.

This essay considers how Wright’s own writing participates in this project to advance the “vision splendid.” This is a collective vision that unifies the spheres of nation, economics and culture, ultimately putting forward a worldview centred around Aboriginal belief systems and ontologies. Wright’s approach to literature evinces a strong understanding of the literary text as both a commodity and as an artefact capable of preserving culture and constructing nation. An anti-colonialist poetics can be seen in her outright rejection of literary convention. But, as we will see, she takes the fight directly to the source, challenging the linear principles of capitalist development that underpin the European colonial project.

My analysis draws from the work of the philosopher Nancy Fraser and the maverick chemist James Lovelock, in order to situate Wright’s work more specifically within our distinct moment of global capitalism and eco-critical cognisance. Fraser's interrogation of capitalism offers a particularly clarifying means to understand the stakes of Wright’s
fiction, especially the extent to which Wright recognises the existing capitalist system as being implicated in an ongoing process of colonialism. Fraser argues that capitalism is more than just an economic system. Recognising the long reach of its ideology into all areas of life, she suggests that it is more pertinent to see capitalism as an “institutionalised social order, on a par with [...] feudalism” (2014, 67). Moreover, she points out that whilst the economic features of capitalism are visible in the foreground, capitalism itself is only viable because of three background conditions of possibility. In Fraser’s view, these are the spheres of social reproduction (unpaid “care” or “affective labour”), public power (the entire legal and political framework of the state), and the environment (treated as a passive resource).

Wright’s fiction shifts these background conditions into the foreground, presenting an ecological understanding of the economy as something tightly bound up with social and governmental relations, as well as involving the interaction between human beings and the natural world. The “vision splendid” brought to life by Wright in her novels is drawn from Aboriginal ontologies, but elements should have a familiar ring to Western audiences. It is a worldview that reverberates with the Gaia theory posited by James Lovelock in the 1970s, a hypothesis that “[t]he entire surface of the Earth including life is a self-regulating entity” (2000, ix). Gaia theory marks a profound shift in the understanding of human interactions with the environment, paving the way for an environmental science that takes it for granted that human beings have the ability to affect planetary conditions. Whilst details about Gaia theory continue to be debated within the scientific community, its legacy has been a widespread understanding that a more holistic, interdisciplinary approach needs to be taken to the Earth’s complex systems.

Although Gaian theory really shows Western science catching up with an outlook already endemic to Aboriginal culture, I will likewise be invoking Gaia, the Greek goddess and personification of the Earth in my discussion of Wright’s literature. My aim is not to recast Aboriginal epistemology in Western terms, but rather to highlight that Western culture already has a concept of the Earth as a singular, unified entity – that of Gaia, the ancestral mother of all things. With Gaia, an important bridge can be built between Aboriginal and Western perspectives, showing the valency that Wright’s articulation of the “vision splendid” has for non-Aboriginal contexts.

Reconsidering Wright’s literature in Gaian terms presents us with a radical proposition for the category of world literature. When world literature studies emerged as a significant critical paradigm in the 2000s, it positioned itself as the natural successor to postcolonial theory. There was a concerted push to move beyond localised national histories and recognise the global circulation of certain key texts. Yet even as world literature urged readers to deprovincialise their national canons, it opened itself up to criticism that it merely perpetuated Eurocentric attitudes towards canon formation in a new, Amerocentric guise.¹

With regards to Alexis Wright, she easily satisfies many of the criteria commonly used to identify a world literature author. She has been forthcoming about her influences, paying tribute to the wide-ranging pantheon of authors from whom she draws inspiration, especially Caribbean writers such as Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau and South American novelists such as Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel García Márquez. In addition, her own work has been translated into four languages (to date) and her second novel, *Carpentaria* (2006) was recently included on the syllabus for the
French *agrégation*. The global dissemination of her fiction is not in doubt. I suggest, however, that Wright earns her status as a world literature author not because of the nods she makes to literary influences drawn from a broader world canon of literature, or because of the transnational circulation of her texts, but rather because her work strives to overcome a problem at the heart of the novel form: its imbrication within the very worldview that invents nation-states and perpetuates exploitative capitalist economies. The formal innovations she brings to the novel may be motivated by a desire to find ways of capturing more authentically an Aboriginal worldview, but the results pave the way for a literature that can envisage new social and economic configurations.

One of the biggest issues of our time is the looming threat of climate change. Wright’s fiction reveals the anthropocentric nature of accepted categories of “world literature.” She offers us instead a truly comprehensive worldview: a world that recognises both human and non-human elements. She presents us with a Gaian world literature, a literary perspective that dares to imagine a future beyond the exploitative cycle of the colonial project.

**Colonialism is not sustainable**

The practice or system of colonisation is usually understood in human terms. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* reminds us, the word “colonialism” is “[n]ow frequently used in the derogatory sense of an alleged policy of exploitation of backward or weak peoples by a large power.” In the eighteenth century, the British arrived in Australia and colonised the native Aboriginal population. The unilinear propulsion of this endeavour is self-evident. British settlement in Australia – predicated first and foremost on the displacement of its Indigenous inhabitants – was intended to be irreversible. Resources were to be extracted from the continent, liberating capital for the creation of wealth back in England. The value of the Australian continent was considered only in terms of what could be repatriated back to the imperial centre.

It is worth remembering that “to colonise” is a transitive verb, meaning a verb that requires an object to receive the action being described. Aboriginal people found themselves the target of a process whose very goal was to reduce them to mere objects. Various discursive strategies were used to deny their humanity, beginning with the doctrine of *terra nullius* to argue that there was a legal basis for Britain’s appropriation of uncultivated land and the frequent invocation of extinction discourse to downplay any British culpability in the vast reduction of the Aboriginal population. Despite the widescale dispossession and carnage that ensued, the British did not succeed in completely subjugating Australia’s Indigenous inhabitants. The refusal of Aboriginal peoples to accept object-status and the reassertion of their subjectivity is the long history of colonial resistance that has become a constitutive part of modern Aboriginal identity.

The spirit of Aboriginal activism galvanises the work of Alexis Wright. Her literary corpus is predicated on an outright refusal of the axioms of Western colonial ideology. As Wright demonstrates across a significant body of both fictional and non-fictional work, writing is simultaneously an act of cultural preservation and a political assertion of the centrality of Aboriginal cultures to Australia. Striving to create a literature that more authentically presents an Aboriginal worldview, she has pioneered a new form of...
vernacular literature. It is one inspired in equal measure by traditional oral storytelling forms and examples of literary experimentation drawn from the broader canon of world literature. Throughout her work she has frequently emphasised the importance of sovereignty for Aboriginal people. Talking about her 2006 break-out novel, Wright has said: “Carpentaria imagines the cultural mind as sovereign and in control, while freely navigating through the known country of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds” (2006, 6). Sovereignty for Wright is not confined to simple descriptions of self-governance but means achieving authority in all realms: political, cultural, and economic.

If her fiction often performs and promotes a “sovereignty of the mind,” then her non-fiction exhibits a keen awareness that this cultural sovereignty is intrinsically dependent on achieving forms of economic sovereignty. This is articulated by one of Wright’s earliest works, the edited collection Take Power, like this old man here (1998). In her introduction to this volume, she writes: “Economic development does not have to mean commercial development in the usual western sense. It can also mean maintaining indigenous economic processes and cultures, and building on them so people have the resources to enjoy land rights” (1998, xi). Wright’s understanding of the interrelationship between culture, economics, and nation emerges from the multi-pronged onslaught endured by Aboriginal peoples during the colonial era. But it is also an inherently ecological view.

This comes to the fore most clearly with Wright’s “collective biography” Tracker, a compilation of oral testimonies about Tracker’s life from those who knew him as well as from Tracker himself. Wright continually asserts Tracker’s importance as a visionary, someone capable of moving beyond the immediate problems facing Aboriginal communities and intent on finding comprehensive, longer-term solutions instead. She argues that the deep insight of Tracker’s “vision splendid” was his understanding that economic autonomy was necessary in order to achieve cultural sovereignty. For Tracker, one of the key reasons for the failure of Australian government policies in Aboriginal communities was the fundamental mismatch in assumptions regarding economic behaviour. He says: “There is a whole range of policies from this new federal government based purely on straight-out economics, but you cannot develop an economic model for Aboriginal people that is alien to the social structure that you are dealing with. The economic model has to be sustainable, but it has also to be culturally sustainable” (Wright 2017, 384). Tracker’s stated objective here shows us the key ways in which an Aboriginal economy conspicuously differs from standard market capitalism.

The singular purpose of capitalism is to convert resources into capital, a form of value that can then be easily transferred, stored and accrued. Nancy Fraser notes that: “Capitalism is peculiar in having an objective systemic thrust or directionality: namely, the accumulation of capital” (2014, 57–58). Neoliberalism, in particular, encourages the view that the market is multidirectional (global) and presentist (almost immediately equalised into the correct market price). As Fraser notes, however, there is an inherently linear direction to market capitalism, where capital moves outwards and away from the initial resource. Under colonialism, this movement of goods and resources is highly visible with attendant environmental and cultural destruction at the colonised location. Aboriginal economics, however, understands economic activity to be a necessary precondition in order to preserve culture. Economic sustainability is
of the utmost importance because it leads to cultural sustainability rather than the accumulation of capital for its own sake.

Deliberating on the very possibility of an alternate type of economic system – in this case an Aboriginal economy – provides us with an important external reference point. Critically, it allows us to assess our current situation caught in the seemingly inescapable, totalised framework of neoliberalised global market capitalism. The horrors of colonialism stem from its de-humanising tendencies: the way it fostered slavery and genocide, and the way it normalised a culture whereby some human beings were treated as non-human objects. But we might also see this as an extension of a capitalist mindset that already thought of the natural environment as a passive resource. The attempt to deny the humanity of non-Europeans was but the next logical step in a process that had already reduced all non-human life to objects.

By its very definition, colonialism is not a sustainable practice. Empire relies on the creation of wealth through territorial expansion, the extractive colonisation of other peoples and lands. The linear orientation of Empire colours our experience of time, space and history, leading to ideas about the natural path of evolution and extinction. It underpins our very system of capitalist economics. Back when there were still blank spaces on the map, people assumed that the process of colonisation could continue – unabated and indefinitely. By the end of the twentieth century, however, it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain belief in the validity of modern progress. As Bruno Latour observed in 1993: “we can no longer point to time’s irreversible arrow, nor can we award a prize to the winners” (10). In a political sense, the increasing magnitude of warfare, culminating in the development of nuclear weapons, provided an important caveat that these straight lines could only lead in one direction: towards mutual destruction.

The realities of climate change, however, alter not only the terms by which we see our present-day lives or envisage the future, but also the way we assess the true impact of past colonial practices. With the declaration of the Anthropocene we have an admission that we are now in a geological epoch created wholly by human behaviour; which is to say, we recognise that climate change is a result of centuries of exploitative capitalist culture. Difficult as it is to grasp, the devastating impact that colonisation has had on human populations is dwarfed by the cumulative, irreversible damage it has caused to the non-human world.

Under capitalism – and with it the progression to modernity – nature loses agency and comes to be treated as an object, a resource to be utilised for the production of capital. Fraser further reminds us that nature is one of the background conditions of possibility for capitalism. She writes:

At the other end of the economic process, conversely, the production or consumption of commodities is unimaginable without nature at the output side as a sink to absorb the waste, whether in the form of carbon emissions or anything else. Capitalism therefore takes absolutely for granted that there is a sustainable, self-reproducing natural ecosystem that the economy relies on for inputs and outputs. (Fraser 2020, 1329–30).

Moving past the tipping point of climate change eliminates this background condition, ultimately rendering capitalist enterprise impossible over the long-term.

Deeper implications can therefore be drawn from the emphasis on culture put forward in Tracker’s concept of the Aboriginal economy. In Wright’s book, he says:
So you ask the question, what does the model look like? [...] It has got to be economically sustainable and that means commercial. It has got to be environmentally sustainable, and it has got to be culturally sustainable because if you do not have the culture in the back of it, then you do not have a model. (2017, 387)

Wright’s own personal advancement of this vision is to draw attention to the greater role to be played by literature. If Western cultures have a tendency to see literary works as cultural artefacts, Wright underscores instead how they can serve as important maps and templates to instigate future change. By crafting a sovereign Aboriginal literature, she attests that alternatives to the current world exist.

Toward a Gaian world literature

Global warming was accurately predicted in 1981 by a research team led by the climatology scientist James Hansen. Hansen himself gave testimony about the greenhouse effect before a US Senate Committee in 1988. However, a significant lag of some thirty years can be observed between the science of climate change and a more widespread production of literary responses to it. The term “cli-fi” popularly used to describe climate fiction was only coined by the journalist Dan Bloom in 2007, and the genre itself only started to be recognised as a growing sub-section of science fiction in 2013.

Although artistic responses to climate change have proliferated over the past decade, they often seem measured and restrained when compared to the increasingly alarmed warnings issued by scientists about the reality of change underway. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report for 2021 could not be phrased any less ambiguously. The opening headline statement on the report says: “It is unequivocal that human influence has warmed the atmosphere, ocean and land. Widespread and rapid changes in the atmosphere, ocean, cryosphere and biosphere have occurred” (A.1). The question scientists ask is no longer whether earth’s climate will warm or not, but by how many degrees that warming will be. By contrast, cli-fi novels continue to be regarded as a niche area within the science fiction genre, a category closer in form and audience to speculative fiction and fantasy rather than the more mainstream literary realist novel.

In The Great Derangement (2016), Amitav Ghosh reflects on the difficulties of writing fiction capable of conveying concerns about climate change. He admits that these non-fictional reflections were prompted by the challenges he encountered when writing his novel The Hungry Tide (2004), which explores the devastation wrought by rising waters in the Sundarbans. The Hungry Tide explores the competing, sometimes conflicting, needs of environmental conservation and social justice. It also tries to convey a sense of the devastating personal losses to be expected as climate change increases the magnitude of natural disasters. Towards the end of the novel, a cyclone hits the Sundarbans and leads to the death of a fisherman. The small scale of personal tragedy depicted in Ghosh’s narrative seemed wholly insufficient, however, when an earthquake occurred under the Indian Ocean a few months after the novel’s publication in 2004. The resulting tidal wave ravaged coastal communities in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Somalia and the Maldives, leading to the deaths of over 230,000 people.
Comparing the loss of one individual in Ghosh’s novel with the mass tragedy experienced in the real world reveals a gross incongruity of scale: perhaps the key obstacle faced by novelists when addressing the realities of climate change. Acknowledging that climate change is a preoccupation for many writers today, Ghosh observes that: “it is a striking fact that when novelists do choose to write about climate change it is almost always outside of fiction” (8). In The Great Derangement, he methodically works through a series of conventions in the literary novel that create barriers to writing about the environment: the temporal line of the novel assumed as progressing gradually and hewn closely to individual lifespan, the way in which nature is treated as an inanimate backdrop to human agency, and the concealment or tempering of improbable events in order to construct a more plausible sense of reality. Ghosh writes as a novelist but if we, as critics, are to remember the novel’s status as an art form that rose in conjunction with industrialisation, then the significance of these conventions becomes clear. The novel’s focus on the individual – the emphasis of which facilitated the rise of the democratic nation-state – turns out to be the central premise that thwarts attempts to discuss and imagine climate change as an actuality.

Similar issues exist within literary criticism, which is so often constrained by conventional practices that view the literary novel as an ancillary object within larger social frameworks. We see this at work in postcolonialism, which tends to read the novel within a national politics, or in the world literature paradigm whose focus on transnational flows and cultural exchange is implicitly drawn from economic frameworks of trade and commerce. I don’t wish to suggest that it is impossible to read literature separately from the broader frameworks of nation or economy, but it is important to recognise that these structures themselves are, to use Fraserian terms, part of capitalism’s “institutionalised social order.” Difficulties in grasping the problem of climate change arise because it runs counter to the very ideology of capitalism that produces these schemas. The reality constructed by the realist literary novel is conceptually part and parcel of the capitalist culture of modern life.

A review of world literature paradigms underscores this point. Most attempts to conceive of a world literature aspire towards a unifying framework that moves beyond national differences to inscribe the world as a singular community. David Damrosch highlights the ways texts flow between nations in a mode of circulation and reading (2003). Wai-Chee Dimock urges us to read literature in a context that extends beyond the chronology of the nation, looking instead towards a longue durée timeline or planetary perspective (2009). Franco Moretti proposes new techniques of “distant reading” in order that we might more precisely arrive at an aggregate perspective, one that can help us “focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text” (2000, 57). But whilst these lenses help make visible transnational flows, they do not necessarily overthrow the nation. A planetary perspective functions by stepping so far back, the differences between nations become hard to distinguish. This is not the same as having those differences erased. In that regard, world literature may invoke the planet but its scrutiny of texts through the international flows of trade, commerce and translation inevitably continues to prolong an anthropocentric view of the world.

Wright’s fiction points to a new direction in world literature for which I will draw on the critical precepts of Gaia, the personification of the Earth. A Gaian world accounts not only for human beings but also includes all non-human entities. It is a genuinely inclusive, comprehensive summation of the planet on which we live. Wright’s Gaian...
world reveals the telescopic intersection between the postcolonial and world literature paradigms – how the local is key to finding a path towards the nation and then the world. The world portrayed in Wright’s “vision splendid” is not the abstract universal posited by the world market economy but rather a diverse ecology that always bears the marks of specific localities. Wright’s fiction makes evident the ways in which world literature paradigms themselves are localised in a specifically neoliberal, “non-political” concept of the world. They are drawn, in effect, from a normative Western perspective.

Even though it was published a decade before Ghosh’s book, Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) works well as a companion piece – indeed, could be read almost as a direct reply. Her novel is told from the perspective of an Aboriginal community – the Pricklebush – where the non-human natural world is alive and agential. In a sweeping epic told with a chorus of voices, *Carpentaria* moves the novel beyond the timeline of an individual lifespan. It opens with the creation story of the Rainbow Serpent, situating its characters within the epic timeframe of a world history. Human beings here live in a world clearly shaped by natural forces. As Wright tells us: “The Pricklebush mob saw huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town, even inside other folk’s houses, right across any piece of the country” (59). These creation spirits provide an embodiment, indeed a personification, of natural events.

Wright’s portrayal of a cyclone in *Carpentaria* makes for an instructive comparison with Ghosh’s in *The Hungry Tide*. In Ghosh’s novel, news of the cyclone first comes from other people – they notice boats turning around and heading inland, and news of the cyclone is confirmed by an alert from the weather office in New Delhi (2004, 342). Out of contact on the water, marine biologist Piya observes that dolphins are “surfacing with unusual frequency” (366) and then feels the strong winds that herald a coming storm. Wright, by contrast, shows us the cyclone in *Carpentaria* from its very beginnings, arising out of a battle between nature spirits: “Poor land woman devil Gardajala. The sea woman, whose name must not be mentioned because she might be listening, far out at sea, was spinning herself into a jealous rage. She was almost cyclonic, if you could believe in the power of her magic” (2006, 276). Similar to the Greek gods, Wright’s Waanyi spirits of the land and sea have their own lives and disagreements which overshadow the people living on the earth.

Natural disasters reveal the inconsequentiality of human existence. Both the Pricklebush and Uptown find rare agreement in the understanding that there is nothing to be done except to stay out of the way. Desperance is subsequently evacuated before the cyclone hits. Wright conveys the magnitude of this event by narrating it from different perspectives. We first see the cyclone focalised through the elder Norm Phantom, a skilled fisherman who weathers the cyclone on an island shoreline, racing to escape the rising tide of the sea. The cataclysmic weather sends all life forms into panic. Wright describes the flocks of birds flying inland but Norm also finds himself running amongst the *yinbirras*: “These were fairy-like people the good storytellers told about the strange Yanngunyi tribe whose true home was beyond the sea” (2006, 299). Wright explains:

> The *yinbirras*, they said, were related to all of the tribes. These Yanngunyi were people who lived beside other real people, and even though you could hear them going about their daily business, shouting at each other to listen, they would not let anyone see them because they ‘did not want to be found’, or ‘made civilised.’ (299)
The *yinbirras* seem to be half-nature, half-human: “A fish-faced old woman with eucalyptus leaves strewn through her wildly, wet white hair, sat in the boat” (300). Some communication is possible between Norm and this “ghostly tribe” (307). He asks her “‘Wanyingkanyi ninji nanagkurru jila?’ What are you doing there?” (300) and she replies “Wawaru. Nothing” (300). There are limitations, however, to their ability to commune: “Then she said things to him in a language he did not understand” (300).

Defying expectations, Wright’s novel doesn’t dwell on the aftermath once the cyclone hits. Instead, her narrative moves backwards in time, returning to document the local conflicts between the Aboriginal Pricklebush and the white Uptown folk. The reader must progress through nearly two hundred more pages of narrative before the cyclone appears again, this time experienced from the perspective of Will Phantom, Norm’s son. By returning to the natural disaster in this manner, Wright emphasises its magnitude and also gives it a sense of inevitability. Her first description of the cyclone focuses on its origins in forces beyond man’s control, and is careful to point out the calamitous effect it has on the natural world: “As Norm listened to the deafening roar of the sea stripping into the sand dune, he knew the sea would eat its way through the sandbank and tear into the bush” (2006, 298). It is only with the second pass at the material that we see the effects of the cyclone on the human world: the entire town of Desperance is levelled. Will shelters overnight in a hotel – the only building to survive the storm – but it collapses soon afterwards, leaving Will to reflect on the makeshift nature of the human world: “It was at this point he realised how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country” (491).

Wright does more than provide Nature with agency – *Carpentaria* effectively collapses the firm boundary that usually exists in the novel between human and non-human. The people of the Pricklebush exist in a world attuned to the spirits within things. This equality between the human and the non-human becomes evident with the character of Desperance’s barman, Lloydie Smith, who is in love with a spirit caught in the plank of wood that forms his bartop. Within the narrative, Wright skillfully creates ambiguity around the story to allow it to maintain some credibility within a realist framework. The spirit is visible only to Lloydie. We are given an indication of his affection for the plank of wood midway through the novel, when everyone stops to watch Lloydie wipe down his bar: “he worked the wood carefully, in rhythmical motions, as though he were caressing a woman’s skin” (2006, 341). But the true relationship between Lloydie and his bar top is revealed when the cyclone threatens to hit Desperance. As the town is evacuated, Lloydie stays behind with ropes to tie himself to the bar. At this moment the other, spiritual dimension of the wood is revealed: “It was actually true, Will thought, remembering the women who told love stories about Lloydie worshipping a mermaid locked in wood. They said it was a true romance and he thought they were joking. Of course, he was staying with his mermaid” (472). This might all be interpreted as a strange obsession or figment of Lloydie’s imagination, but for the fact that when the cyclone has passed, Lloydie has disappeared (474).

Over the past decade, there has been growing consensus that our very ability to understand and mitigate the crisis of climate change hinges on making a profound change to the way in which we perceive the non-human world. Jane Bennett has argued for the vitality of objects or a thing-power materialism, suggesting that our understanding of non-human objects as inanimate or resting hinders an ability to conceive of the world in ecological terms. She writes: “The figure of an intrinsically
inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption” (2010, ix). More recently, Judith Butler has expressed similar concerns, saying: “And yet, an inhabitable world for humans depends on a flourishing earth that does not have humans at its centre” (2021). Wright’s attempts to press the literary novel into new forms capable of alerting readers to the Gaian world we live in therefore have greater implications for our ability to imagine interactions with the non-human world. One of the advantages for Wright is that she doesn’t need to invent it all from scratch. Aboriginal ontologies already contain a cohesive, holistic, ecological worldview. The task she set herself of trying to “extract my total being from the colonising spider’s trap door” (2018, 228) creates a method by which we can begin, collectively, to envisage a modernity far more complex than the illusory presentism that characterises this moment of late capitalism.

In order to have a future we must redress the past

33 As the twentieth century drew to a close, two narratives of global history seemed to offer up a happy ending for the story of colonialism. In one version, the ignominious shadow of Western imperialism was banished by an international wave of nationalisms, a de-colonial decoupling that culminated in the establishment of a series of autonomous nation-states. Not all these nations achieved democracy outright, but there was always the prospect that they would do so at some point later in the future. This version of history insinuated that though the civilising project had been cruel, by creating the preconditions for the rise of the democratic nation-state it might also have planted the seeds for something noble.11

34 Another ending was advanced by the indistinct contours of globalisation. In this rendition, the trajectory of colonialism found itself overtaken by an even greater homogenising force. Rather than being united in empire, people were to be consolidated within the great, equalising framework of the global market. Faith in neoliberal marketisation reached its apogee in the 1990s when there was a prevailing belief that accelerated cross-border flows would render the nation-state obsolete, and that the interdependence of all countries fostered by a global market would ultimately give birth to a unique type of world culture.12 This was heralded as a new time to come of cosmopolitan hybridity, peace and prosperity.

35 Both these narrative arcs seemed neatly to sidestep the consequences of the colonial process, eager to declare it over one way or the other. A defining feature of globalisation was the way it revelled in cultural hybridity; in hindsight some have wondered if this was simply the celebration of superficial difference. The globalised vision of the world remained a homogeneous one, and the prophesised end to conflict implicitly assumed the successful dominance and normalisation of one (Western) culture. These two happy endings envisaged for colonialism were quick to relegate it to the past. They urged people to move on instead to a brighter future, whether this be one of national autonomy or the carefree present-tense of the neoliberal market.

36 However, as the first section of this essay should have made clear, the achievement of peace and prosperity emerging from the successful completion of the colonisation process was never a possibility. Colonialism’s linear trajectory is necessarily destructive and ultimately unsustainable. The terminal point of the colonial project, so deeply
rooted in capitalist ideology, cannot be the happy co-existence of all peoples on earth because it leads to the destruction of the very planet on which we live. This, in turn, results in renewed competition for even scarcer resources, bringing increased importance to the notion of justice.

The lived reality of Aboriginal people in Australia provides an important reminder in the first instance that the process of colonisation has not ended. Second, we cannot collectively move beyond our colonial past and into the future without rectifying the structural inequalities created and institutionalised by the colonial process. Addressing questions of social justice requires a fundamental shift in perspective, recognising that the straight, unwavering lines of capitalist progress have always been a mirage. In actuality, the Earth is spheroid, meaning all lines on it are slightly curved. If we begin drawing a line at one point and continue to trace its path, eventually it will come back to us. Wright’s ecological view contains a recursive dimension that continually affirms this interrelationship between all people and all things, asserting Aboriginal history as also being a constitutive part of Australian history.

In *Take Power*, the economic consultant Greg Crough emphasises that redressing past wrongs is a necessary step in securing a future, not only for Aboriginal people but the country as a whole. In economic terms, making the investment necessary to help Aboriginal people create a self-sustaining economy costs less over the long-run. By way of comparison, he refers to The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in Canada (1996) which found that it was “essential for governments to bring about sustained improvements in living conditions for Aboriginal people” (1998, 288). Crough then impresses upon us that this was “seen as an investment in the future of the Canadian economy, not a drain on that economy as is often seen in Australia” (288). A self-sustaining Aboriginal community has the capacity to generate wealth and contribute to the wider national economy. Thriving local economic systems help support the broader economy similar to the ways in which a diverse ecosystem helps to maintain the Earth’s biosphere.

Given the implications that Wright’s work has for constructing a Gaian world literature, it is instructive that Wright discovered this pathway by returning to her cultural past. Reflecting on the process of writing *Carpentaria*, Wright has said:

> I was determined to create a work of authenticity to honour my traditional homeland, and in the writing I began to understand more fully how the powerful spirits of our ancestral homeland were imbued in the soul of our people, who are country itself. This was where true sovereign governance lay, with the ancestors. (2020, 94)

Once again, we see how a Gaian perspective is different in that it favours divergence instead of convergence, the strong reinforcement of locality over globality. A Gaian world literature has confidence in the underlying advantages conferred by cultural difference.

Wright’s work emphasises that the importance of achieving social justice for Aboriginal people does not simply have repercussions for them alone, but for society more broadly. When turning to the issue of climate change, we begin to see that this does not mean society in the national sense but also the international community at large, for climate change will inevitably affect the Western world which has, historically, considered itself to be immune from such disturbances. For instance, Wright’s post-apocalyptic novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), contemplates the mass migrations that will be precipitated by climate change. Considerations of climate justice frequently dwell on
the ways in which climate change will disproportionately affect those already disadvantaged by colonial history. In the character of Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions, Wright, however, confronts the Western world with the prospect of its own extinction.

Ruminating on *The Swan Book*, Wright has said:

In the novel, the postapocalyptic world of climate refugees adrift on the sea was a way of visualising global politics in the future and what landlessness will mean for greater numbers of people – epitomised by the character Bella Donna who is actually not a black or brown person but a white woman from Europe, presently at the top of the human tree in terms of wealth and land security. (2021)

Bella Donna is a climate change refugee, a white European who has come to settle amongst the people of a remote Aboriginal community. Wright makes it clear that she is the last of her people: “Her country of origin, Bella Donna had claimed, was where people of the modern world once lived happily by doing more or less nothing, other than looking after themselves from one day to the next to fuel the stories of their life, but they were finished now” (2013, 25). Bella Donna serves as a warning that climate change will not simply affect the developing world. The risk assessment for climate change is different from anything seen before: when we are told that the world is at risk this is a Gaian world that involves not simply all humans but all living creatures on Earth.

Significantly, the Aboriginal community that Bella Donna lives amongst is no exception to these forms of myopia about climate change. They find commensurate difficulty in imagining that her tragedies will one day become theirs. Rather than taking heed of her warnings, they regard Bella Donna as a mere curiosity:

The maddest person on Earth told her stories of exile endlessly, but who listened? The swamp people were not interested in being conquered by other peoples’ stories. Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions knew times when no one listened to the inconsequential stories she sung to herself: when hungry people feed themselves fat on voices droning from the radio, and repeat what they hear, they are like canaries. (2013, 33)

In this manner, Wright resists imbuing Aboriginal people with “magical” qualities in the manner of the “Noble Savage” or “magical negro” tropes that have historically circulated in Western cultural forms.

The Aboriginal community in *The Swan Book* has no innate moral superiority or ability to predict the future. They may equally struggle to understand and adequately assess the threat posed by climate change. What Wright puts forward as an advantage for Aboriginal people is their continued survival in the face of a long, ongoing colonial onslaught. Whilst acknowledging the trauma and anguish generated by this experience, Wright’s fiction also finds recuperative elements in the nature of survival. Central to their ability to endure is an understanding of the world as a dynamic, closed system of transformation and renewal. As Wright says:

Our ancestors lived through many changes in the country in the ancient past, and in adapting our culture to these changes, they continued to follow the annual cycles of the land, of the seasons, the flow of rivers, of tides, of waves, of currents, of stars, noting that nothing remains static. (2021)

A return to the traditional principles of a lifestyle attuned to the inherent motion in the world, as opposed to manifesting a desire always to control it, assures the survival of both the world and the many diverse lifeforms within it.
Sovereignty, for Wright, is not achieved by erecting borders and policing them indefatigably. True sovereignty has a resilience, is secure and enduring, regardless of the circumstance. This understanding that sovereignty cannot come from solipsism is clear in Tracker’s response to the question of how to deal with the British occupation. He says: “How do we deal with it? How do we deal with it is not from turning inwards, but to expand outwards to take care of our own business” (2017, 381). In this vision of sovereignty, achieving a self-sustaining Aboriginal economy lays the foundation for them to ensure the continuation of Aboriginal culture. In order to better understand the world as Gaian, the largest perspectival transformation must surely be in the way we understand the economy. The end-point for economic activity must be culture because the true end-point for the alternative – which aspires merely to the creation and accumulation of more capital – is really the devastation of climate change.

A sustainable economy, like the Earth itself, is a closed system. In a world obsessed with linear progression – the straight lines of development, “civilisation,” progress – it is no longer possible to avoid curvature, sinuosity, recoil. These are the lessons to be taken from Wright’s work. But while we might take heart or inspiration from what Aboriginal activism has managed to achieve thus far, we should not underestimate the task ahead for mounting a global response to climate change. Wright’s work stands as a testimony that Aboriginal peoples’ fight for social justice is still ongoing after two hundred years. By contrast, the fight for climate justice has only just begun.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Gayatri Spivak (2003) and Emily Apter (2013) are two prominent critics who have raised concerns about the underlying methodology used by world literature scholars. Elleke Boehmer’s considered analysis of the overlaps and differences between postcolonial, world literature and world-systems literature frameworks is also a very useful entry into these debates (2018, see especially chapter 7 “Concepts of Exchange: Poetics in Postcolonial, World, and World-Systems Literature,” 145–72).


3. See Stuart Banner for a more comprehensive examination of how the doctrine of terra nullius went against existing British legal precedent (2007, especially chapter one “Australia, Terra Nullius by Design,” 13–46). For more on the propensity to use extinction discourse, see Brantlinger (2003).

4. More detail about the violent warfare that took place in the early days of settlement can be found in Connor (2002). Note that the violent process of colonisation against Aboriginal people did not end with Federation in 1901. Dirk Moses observes that police massacres of Aborigines in 1926 and 1928 “scandalised local and international opinion” and identifies the process of British settlement in Australia explicitly as “colonial genocide” (2004, 7).

5. I have written about Wright’s introduction of oral storytelling techniques into the Western novel elsewhere. See Ng (forthcoming, 2023).

6. A useful discussion about how Wright’s concept of sovereignty relates to those of other significant Aboriginal figures such as Marcia Langton or Noel Pearson can be found in Mead (2018). Philip Mead astutely notes that Wright “extends the debate beyond the realm of the solely legal and judicial” (346). The matter of Aboriginal sovereignty is frequently considered in legal terms but also has much broader cultural, ontological and epistemological implications. See Moreton-Robinson (2007).

7. Wright has written: “When you move into the realm of your own sovereignty of mind by shielding yourself from the kinds of interferences that rob you of the ability to think straight,
that sap your spirit, or block you from seeing and making your own judgement, then you are able to govern your own spirit and imagination” (2021).

8. A longer history of climate science, including the CO2 theory put forward by Svante Arrhenius in 1896, can be found in James Lawrence Powell (2015).

9. More on the history of cli-fi can be found in Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra (2019).

10. The rise of the novel in conjunction with industrialisation, modernity, mass culture and the nation-state has been well-documented by various scholars. Ian Watt (2000) and Benedict Anderson (2006) are but two examples.

11. Note that this recuperative narrative was promulgated by people on both sides of the colonial divide. Reflecting on the legacy of colonial history in postcolonial countries, Edward Said (1994) observed that: “Large groups of people believe that the bitterness and humiliations of the experience which virtually enslaved them nevertheless delivered benefits [...] that over time seem to have made imperialism much less unpleasant” (18).

12. Institutions such as The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank played a key role in facilitating regional economic integration across the globe. A considered account of the ideology that underpinned this globalising mission can be found in Ngaire Woods (2006).

13. Sociologist Matthew W. Hughey provides a good description of this phenomenon in modern film, linking it to the equally stereotypical White Saviour narrative. He writes: “In brief, the Magical Negro is a paranormal or godlike Black character who transforms the life of a lost and broken White character” (2012, 756).

ABSTRACTS
Alexis Wright is known for reshaping literary forms to better suit and present an Aboriginal worldview. Her work not only contains an inherently ecological perspective, but is also marked by a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which literature is imbricated with the nation and the economy. This essay traces the connections between Wright’s agitation for sovereignty and social justice, the creation of an Aboriginal economy, and the colonial legacy of climate change. It suggests that Wright’s fiction lays bare the anthropocentric nature of world literature in its current state and tables the prospect of a Gaian world literature.

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