The Two Threads of a Life: Judith Wright, the Environment and Aboriginality

GARY CLARK
Adelaide

Dark-skinned Old Men, Whirlwinds of Destruction, and a Country Despoiled

At the close of her autobiography Half a Lifetime, Judith Wright offers an apology to indigenous Australians for the inequities and bloodshed of colonization: “To all of the peoples of the old and true Australia on whose land I have trespassed and whom, by being part of my own people, I have wronged, I plead for forgiveness” (296). Such an ethical position was born of extensive reflection and historical research on the nature and complexity of contact, specifically as it occurred in her region. Yet, the seeds of such thinking seem to have been lodged in the mind of the young Judith Wright much earlier, when walking her family’s property as a child, she would often see or imagine “old men, dark-skinned and shadowy, standing with spears in their hands among the few trees left standing on our sheep-ridden land, and it may be that I did—it was a feeling rather than an encounter” (296). The spectral presence of real or imagined Aboriginal people that Wright recounts was to haunt her throughout her life and led to the publication of a great deal of poetry and prose on the issues of dispossession and indigenous politics.

Wright also mentions how, while pregnant in 1955, the “feeling” and spectral presence that had haunted her as a child returned, this time in the context of broader social and environmental concerns. When her husband returned from a holiday on Palm Island, his reflections on the state of the Aboriginal population there reawakened her awareness of Aboriginal issues. Such concerns merged with those that informed her writings on the ecology and which led to her involvement with the biologist Francis Ratcliffe, one of Australia’s pioneer environmental writers, Vincent Serventy, the author of Australia: A Continent in Danger (1970), and the Australian Conservation Foundation (Brady 233–4). As she states of that crucial period in her life when her husband returned from Palm Island:

He returned rested but distressed by the state of the Aborigines on that miserable island. This aroused my own deep uneasiness about the situation of Aborigines and our own part in what I was beginning to see as a country despoiled. The two threads of my life, the love of the land itself and the deep unease over the fate of its original people, were beginning to twine together and the rest of my life would be influenced by that connection. (Half 284)

The image of dark-skinned men standing with spears in their hands among denuded and sheep-ridden land, seems to have again come to life in Wright’s consciousness. In this essay I suggest that such concern with the environment and social issues is amenable to a reading inspired by Murray Bookchin’s social ecology. As I have suggested elsewhere, debates in literary ecology since the early 1990s have drawn significantly from deep ecology, have given no consideration to the debate between deep and social ecology that occurred during the 1980s, and have neglected any intervention inspired by Bookchin’s revisionist critique of Marxism (see Clark, “History and Ecology”).

There is significant scope for literary ecologists to apply Bookchin’s social ecological framework to an analysis of writers whose social and environmental concerns intersect. For example, a critique of the impact of economic centralization on Earth’s human and non-human populations is evident in the work of Les Murray and Gary Snyder (Clark, “History and Ecology”). The case of Snyder is significant, for readings of his work have often focused on interests that he shares with deep ecologists, namely Zen Buddhism and Indigenous American traditions. The emphasis on this aspect of Snyder’s poetry led Max Oelschlæger, on the advice of George Sessions, co-author of Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered, to give Snyder the epithet “poet laureate of deep ecology” (437–8). Such an approach overlooks the importance of Snyder’s critique of economic centralization and the intersection of environmental, economic, political, and social issues central to a number of his poems and essays (Clark, “History and Ecology” 35–41). Also, the poetry of John Kinsella and the influence of anarchist political theory on his writing, the tradition from which Bookchin draws central aspects of his thought, is
illuminated by a social ecological analysis (Clark, “Rethinking Literary Ecology”). Throughout her writing, Wright is concerned with the impact of the colonial economy on both the environment and Australia’s indigenous population. In this sense a social ecological approach to her work is quite apposite. In this essay I extend my previous applications of social ecology to the study of literature, providing an alternative to the emphasis on deep ecology evident in the writings of a number of literary ecologists (see for example, Meeker 76–7, Oelschlaeger 243–80, Pite 357–73, Lussier 391–408, Love 225–40).

What I also want to consider in this essay is Wright’s interrogation of the colonial gaze, and the ways in which the land was perceived and framed by the early settlers, in her essay “Landscape and Dreaming.” Cartography and picturesque aesthetics, which were both expressions of modernity’s rationalization of environmental space, were two of the most common perceptual constructs evident in colonial attitudes to land. Wright is concerned with how such perceptual frames are implicated in the economic commodification of the land and the effects such processes of commodification and enclosure had upon Australia’s indigenous populations.

The European “attitude to land” avers Wright, and the “attitude of the Aboriginales were quite irreconcilable” (Cry for the Dead 139). Wright elaborates on the nature of such antithetical conceptions of the environment:

In fact, this very word “landscape” involves, from the beginning, an irreconcilable difference of viewpoint, and there seems no words in European languages to overcome this difficulty. It is a painter’s term, implying an outside view, a separation, even a basis of criticism. We cannot see it against the reality of that earth-sky-water-tree-spirit-human complex existing in space-time, which is the Aboriginal world. (“Landscape and Dreaming” 32)

Claude Lorrain (1605–1682), the French landscape painter who was most responsible for the popularity of picturesque aesthetics and the evocation of tranquil rural “prospects” in eighteenth-century Europe, had considerable influence upon colonial art in Australia, particularly the work of John Glover (Hughes 41). Such artistic framing of the environment represented an implicit advertisement for the pastoral industry, evoking ideal scenes of settlers contentedly ploughing and cultivating land that had, more often than not, only decades before, been occupied by indigenous people. This ideological will to visually enclose and dominate space, central to Claudian perspectivism and a great deal of colonial painting in America and Australia, is aptly termed the “magisterial gaze” by the American scholar Albert Boime. The panoramic prospect, suggests Boime, “becomes a metonymic image—that is, it embodies, like a microcosm, the social and political character of the land—the desire for dominance” (21). Like the maps of the cartographer, such a practice was a form of ocular enclosure of space, reducing the natural world to the dictates and ideology of colonial vision. And such framing of the environment, as Wright suggests, represents “a partial, inadequate, and temporal vision, reflecting our own interests” (“Landscape and Dreaming” 32). Paul Carter in his The Road to Botany Bay (130–5) and The Lie of the Land (52, 66) has analyzed how the “planar” and geometric representations of space evident in picturesque aesthetics and cartography possessed very specific ideological agendas of their own. Simon Ryan, in The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia, extends Carter’s spatial history framework in his discussion of the intersection of picturesque aesthetics and cartographic discourse in explorer journals (54). What such studies demonstrate is that the perceptual apparatus of the colonial gaze, be it aesthetic or practical, is underpinned by a number of cultural biases and assumptions. Central to such “interests” were the economic imperatives of the fledgling pastoral and agricultural industries; in other words, what Boime termed the “social and political character of the land.”

It was the inability of the colonists to recognize not only the social and practical importance the land played in the life of Aboriginal society, but also its spiritual value that often underpinned the rapacious appropriation of traditional hunting grounds and the consequent destabilization of fundamental aspects of Aboriginal culture. The “earth-sky-water-tree-spirit-human complex” of Aboriginal culture was as alien to the colonist’s gaze as cattle, sheep, pale skin, and military uniforms were to the indigenous population. The at times tragic outcomes of such antithetical conceptions of the land and cultural differences followed in the wake of settlement. Of the experiences of the Wadj people of the eastern seaboard, one of the first Aboriginal groups to be affected by colonization, Wright states:

The land itself was now disfigured and desecrated, studded with huts, crossed by tracks and fences [. . .] The all-embracing net of life and spirit which had held land, and people, and all things together was in tatters. The sustaining ceremonies could not be held, men and women could not visit their own birthplaces [. . .] and proper burial became impossible and injustice had to be done to the rights of the dead. (Cry for the Dead 27)

The “earth-sky-water-tree-spirit-human complex” became fragmented, the perspective and meanings of the ocularcentric agriculturalist inscribed on the land, effacing a vast and intricate web of cultural and spiritual meanings. Like the “outside view” of the picturesque painter, the maps of the cartographer, which replaced indigenous meanings with “tracks and fences,” are a form of ocularcentricism with potent political, social, and environmental consequences. As Martin Jay argues, such modern expressions of ocularcentrism extend the West’s privileging of sight over the rest of the sensorium that was first consoli-
dated in the Hellenic world (24–8). Such visual dominance not only produced a "disfigured" environment, but also adversely affected the social, religious, and ceremonial life of indigenous peoples.

Wright’s prose works, The Generations of Men (1959), Because I Was Invited (1975), The Cry for the Dead (1981) and her autobiography Half a Lifetime (1999), are all concerned to varying degrees with Aboriginality and the ecology, Cry for the Dead being the most comprehensive engagement with environmental and indigenous issues in her career. Also in her poetry, particularly The Moving Image (1946), which contains the “Bora Ring,” “Nigger’s Leap, New England,” and “Half Caste Girl,” she broke new ground in how European Australians envisaged their relationship to the Aboriginal community. This impulse continued through to Phantom Dwelling (1985), and although her approach changed over the years, there is a strong sense of continuity evident throughout her career.

In “The Bora Ring,” adding a dimension of moral culpability to a poem of the “last of his tribe tradition,” Wright describes a squatter coming upon an abandoned bora ring. The vanished culture, the only physical remnant being the “grass that stands up so mark the bora ring,” still haunts the landscape with the kind of spectral presence evident in Wright’s childhood visions: “the apple-gums/posture and mime a past corroboree/murmur a broken chant” (The Moving Image 2). Such a presence, with its brooding atmosphere of cultural displacement, according to Wright, ferments beneath the civilized rationality of not only her ancestors, but also modern Australia. In The Generations of Men, the incident of Wright’s grandfather riding across the plain and encountering an Aboriginal person provides the context for the poem. We are told how “riding over a bare plain in a drought, without long grass or cover anywhere, he had seen to his surprise a warrior standing alone by one dead tree on the plain” (92). Albert Wright was apparently quite affected by the encounter, one that resonates with Wright’s childhood experience of “dark-skinned old men.”

At the time of Albert Wright’s encounter there were no longer tribes living in the area, such a rare meeting obviously rekindling the culturally repressed awareness of the appropriation of lands and consequent cultural displacement upon which his title was predicated. Later in the novel the full moral impact of the experience is made clear when the darker dimensions of colonial history resurface into consciousness. The result is an awareness of guilt and culpability in the destruction of a people. “Would his sons, too, be driven in this whirlwind of destruction, and wake perhaps, as he was doing, to ask in the end what had consumed their lives?” (161) What had consumed their lives was the desire to enclose and commodify the environment, which often required overlooking or repressing any ethical considerations regarding the effects this process would have upon the indigenous population. The often quoted ending to “The Bora Ring” not only implicates the appropriating drive of the squattocracy in acts of murder, colonialism’s “whirlwind of destruction,” but also expresses the fear and guilt associated with such acts:

Only the rider’s heart
halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word
that fastens in the blood and the ancient curse,
the fear as old as Cain.

“Nigger's Leap: New England” continues these concerns. The poem recounts the incident of a group of Aborigines who were massacred by being forced off a cliff at Bluff Rock. The darkness of the “lonely air,” which represents not only the approaching night but also the occlusion of a culture by the nightmare of history, is “a cold quilt across the bone and skull/that screamed falling in flesh from the lipped cliff/and then were silent, waiting for the flies.” The poem goes on to evoke the sense of alterity that the Aborigines evoke in the European consciousness: “And there they lie that were ourselves writ strange.” The poem attempts to see from the perspective of the other. The “gulfs” that separate our respective worlds are central to the poem, yet it also expresses a desire to bridge such cultural alienation:

Now we must measure
our days by nights, our tropics by their poles,
love by its end and all our speech by silence.
See in these gulfs, how small the light of home.

“At Cooloolah” develops the theme of responsibility and guilt that we saw in “The Bora Ring,” the tone however becoming more confessional and personal. Evoking memories of her grandfather’s account discussed above, the poem concludes:

And walking on clean sand among prints
of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear
thrust from the water; and like my grandfather,
must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.

Not only is the poet burdened by guilt, but also the sense of being alienated from the land, upon which she feels to be an intruder:

The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah’s twilight
has fished there for longer than our centuries.
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,
and he will wear their colour till he dies;
but I’m a stranger, come of a conquering people.
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,
being unloved by all my eyes delight in
and made uneasy, for an old murder’s sake.

In The Cry for the Dead, Wright states that the “lack of social hierarchy and of greed for possessions” made indigenous peoples “easy victims to the whites, who despised them, thinking them poor and without government, and only just, if at all, above the social level of animals” (22).
Murray Bookchin’s analysis of the differences between tribal communities and the hierarchies of modern centralized economies is instructive here. As Bookchin writes:

[N]ature still binds society to herself with the primal blood oath. This oath validates not only kinship as the basic fact of primordial social life but its complex network of rights and duties. Before hierarchy and domination can be consolidated into social classes and economic exploitation; before reciprocity can give way to the “free exchange” of commodities; before usufright can be replaced by private property, and the “irreducible minimum” by toil as the norm for distributing the means of life—before this immensely vast complex can be dissolved and replaced by a class, exchange, and propertyed one, the blood oath with all its claims must be broken. (85)

It is the weakening of such kinship obligations, according to Bookchin, that is required in order to allow the unmitigated exploitation of the natural world, which historically is predicated upon both the dispossession of indigenous peoples and also the commodification of human labor. Bookchin’s assertion is that the commodification and destruction of the environment is a product of stratified economic and social structures; that, in other words, the appropriation of nature is made possible by the oppression of humans by humans. As he states that the “homogenization of ecosystems goes hand in hand with the homogenization of the social environment and the so-called individuals who people it [. . .] there is an intimate association of the domination of human by human with the notion of the domination of nature” (96). Such domination is given expression in Wright’s confession of feeling “uneasy, for an old murder’s sake.”

In “Two Dreamtimes,” written for the indigenous writer and activist Odgers Noongal, Wright offers a critique of the imperatives of colonial and modern economies, with both humans and the natural world, as Bookchin asserts, being adversely affected by the commodifying impulse. Pre-contact social and ecological conditions, living “within the great net of life” and “plucking blue leaves from their eucalypt scent, hearing the call of the plower,” are contrasted with the impacts of a stratified agroecological economy. The “hard rational white faces,” (A Human Pattern 167) that embody the ideology of “progress and economics,” (168) destroyed not only the indigenous population, but also the environment and the poetic impulse that it inspires:

Raped by rum and an alien law,
progress and economics,
are you and I and a once loved land
peopled by tribes and trees;
doomed by traders and stock-exchanges,
bought by faceless strangers.

And you and I are bought and sold,

our songs and stories too,
though quoted low in a falling market
(publishers shake their heads at poets).

The visual enclosure of environmental space by the cartographer was the prime motivation of exploration and settlement. The process of map-making and carving the ecology into saleable portions, which could be marked out by fences, roads, and tracks, imposed its own purposes and meanings on the land, which were inscribed over the prior meanings indigenous peoples attributed to the environment. And the differing conceptions of space that Wright refers to in her “Landscape and Dreaming” essay not only indicate antithetical ways of perceiving the land. What also emerges is the implicit meaning evident in the picturesque gaze and the economic imperatives that underpin colonial and many modern attitudes to the environment. And both the environment and Australia’s indigenous population were adversely affected by the practical manifestations of such cultural constructs. In this sense, Wright’s writing on the environment and indigenous issues is more amenable to a social ecological approach, as opposed to a reading inspired by deep ecology.

WEAPONS, TOOLS, AND STENCILED HANDPRINTS

In her “Landscape and Dreaming” essay, Wright also develops her engagement with environmental and indigenous issues in the context of evolutionary ecology, archaeology, and the political insurgency of contemporary Aboriginal people. In a postcolonial context of heritage and land claim legislation, such writing represents a re-inscription of the “earth-sky-water-tree-spirit-human complex” (32) in a highly politicized atmosphere, a complex that had originally been effaced by the economic interests of colonialism, and its various acts of visual enclosure.

Wright closes the account of her region’s history, The Cry for the Dead, with the following reflections on the land originally occupied by her grandfather, Albert Wright:

None of the descendants of Albert and May Wright now own land on the plain or beyond it; and perhaps none of the descendants of the Wadj, if any remain, have seen the country that once was theirs. At Woorabinda reserve, the Aborigines still congregate [. . .] Above them, the cliffs and ravines of Expedition Range still shelter, in caves and overhangs, the crumbling bones of those who were pursued there more than a century ago, and a few fading and eroding scratches and stains of old stenciled hands and figures may remain as the last memorials of the Wadj and their northern neighbours. (279–80).

Intimated here is the avenue that Wright explored in the formulation of her own sense of connection with the land and her desire to articulate an alternative social and ecological ethic. She accepted the Jindworoobak ethos of developing an indigenous poetic tradition, but was also
wary of merely consuming Aboriginal culture and attempting to recuperate the meaning it had for others for oneself. She sought to develop a sense of inhabiting the land through the terms and concepts provided by her own culture, namely the sciences of archaeology and prehistory, as opposed to a falsified identification with an imagined Aboriginal mode of dwelling:

It will take four or five hundred years for us to become indigenes; and to write poetry, unless you are an indigene, is very difficult [. . .] The [A]borigines lived with the landscape and every bit of it had meaning for them [. . .] This is what the Jindyworobaks were trying to get at but they were doing it the wrong way. They were trying to get back to the [A]borigines' meaning, but you can't do this. You've got to live your own meaning into it. You have to be yourself and at the same time come to terms with something that you have robbed of its original meaning. This is an extremely difficult thing to do. (qtd. in Strauss, 59–60)

Such comments were published in 1967 and seem somewhat at variance with her later articulation of a sense of displacement in poems such as “At Cooloolah” and “The Prospector.” Despite such awareness of being implicated in the dispossession of Aboriginal people, Wright's love of the environment seems to be so strong that it continually resurfaces despite the intellectual articulation of her political position. Again, her earlier reflections give an indication of this undercurrent of attachment that resurfaces in various guises, and which is often at odds with her feeling that she is, as she writes in “At Cooloolah,” a “stranger, come of a conquering people.” As she suggests, in Australia we could become something new in the world, “a people who have seized the chance to make a new kind of consciousness out of new conditions” (Prophecations xvii).

In “Landscape and Dreaming,” published twenty years after the above comments, Wright outlines what such a “new consciousness” might entail. In her desire to “live [her] own meaning,” as opposed to that of the Aboriginal meaning, the essay blends evolutionary ecology, archaeology, and reflections on conservation and indigenous rights. It is a contemporary form of inhabiting the land, which is radical in both its social and ecological import, dealing with environmental deterioration, the problems of ownership, and the political insurgency of indigenous Australians.

In “Geology Lecture,” she writes that humans contain “all prehistory in our bones/and all geology behind the brain” (172). In “Lichen, Moss, Fungus,” Wright explores the role of the most basic and fundamental flora in the formation of current ecosystems. In writing of lichens, which are “still involved in making soils as they were hundreds of millions of years ago” (Rolls 182), and particularly in association with “cyanobacteria had weathered rock to make fertile soils available” (44), Wright’s form of inhabiting the environment is resonant with the temporal depth of ecosystem evolution:

- Autumn and early winter
  - wet this clay soil with rains.
  - Slow primitive plant-forms
  - push up their curious flowers . . .

- Over the wet decay
  - of log and fallen branch
  - there spreads the embroidery, ancient
  - source of the forests.

Again in “Sanctuary,” both botanical and geological evolution merge: “The immense/tower of antique forest and cliff, the rock/where years accumulate like leaves” (82). She continues such meditations on deep time, glaciation, and the continent’s ancient fire regimes in “For The Quaternary Age”: “You tried to drown us in your melt of flood/and freeze us staring in your glacial step./Burned by your intermittent fires I’ve known/splinters of crystal forming in my blood . . .” (198).

What is significant, though, in terms of Wright’s engagement with Aboriginal culture, is how the notion of deep time is articulated in archaeological discourse and the dating of rock art. In “Rockface,” both geological and Aboriginal pre-history converge, effectively problematizing the legal fiction of terra nullius, predicated, as it was, upon the agro-centric equation of cultivation with ownership, and the consequent denial of property rights to the subsistence economy of hunter-gatherers:

- Of the age-long heave of a cliff-face, all’s come down
  - except this split upstanding stone, like a gravestone…

In the days of the hunters with spears, this rock had a name.

- Rightly they knew the ancestral powers of stone.

In “Landscape and Dreaming,” Wright questions colonial notions that constructed Aboriginal people as having no fixed habitation, and therefore “having no claim on the land or title to it through cultivation, management, or habitation” (29). In her attempt to see things from the “Aboriginal viewpoint” (30), she details a great deal of archaeological evidence of past indigenous cultures, discussing them within the context of environmental issues, such as the World Heritage legislation that prevented the building of the Franklin River Dam (41).

What was significant in this case was not only environmental concerns but the convergence of nature and culture conservation or preservation. As Wright states, the “peril of the Gordon and Franklin Rivers posed by the dam proposals set off [. . .] exploration by [. . .] archaeologists” (41). The result of such investigation pushed back Aboriginal occupation dates, which had previously been estimated to occur around the time of the last Ice Age, some ten thousand years ago. “Carbon dating,” states Wright, “in Deena-
Reena Cave, deep in the limestone cliffs of the Franklin River, proved occupation as far back as twenty thousand years” (41). The discovery was of “immense help to the Commonwealth government in its High Court case to obtain an injunction against building of the dam, under World Heritage legislation it had introduced” (41). This represents the re-appropriation of pre-contact occupation and cultural links with the land, in the context of a white discourse of ecosystem conservation and cultural heritage preservation. The further association with sacredness and the archaeological time scale, is made in regards to Australia’s Central Reserve, which Wright tells us is “the home country and has for thousands of years been the sacred origin and life support of the Pitjantjajara people, and the peoples who are their neighbors” (51). Such a deployment of archaeological discourse in the establishment of prior occupation and the designation of sacred sites has become a controversial and potent political force in contemporary Australia. As Wright suggests, the Aboriginal people who now live on the Central Reserve “have a veto over mining if they do not wish it” (51). It was the establishment of similar cultural connections with the land that underpinned significant aspects of the decision against damming the Franklin River.

The resurgence of indigenous conceptions of the sacred in contemporary political debate arises what Gelder and Jacobs term the uncanny experience “when one’s home is rendered, somehow and in some sense, unfamiliar; one has the experience, in other words, of being in place and “out of place” simultaneously” (“Landscape and Dreaming” 23). The notion of Australia as being owned by the descendents of Anglo-Celtic and Asian settlers has been problematized and de-stabilized by the overturning of the legal fiction of terra nullius; we are paradoxically, in other words, citizens of Australia, yet that belonging is in a state of ethical tension with the notion it is the home of another culture that once inhabited the ground we now walk on. Home, belonging, notions of ownership, and the attendant right to exploit resources on the part of mining companies have all become contestable assumptions. In the context of discussing the decision against mining at Coronation Hill in the 1980s, the authors state that the resurgence of, and uncanny nature of the sacred, act as a way of “inducing a productive re-alignment of power in an emergent postcolonial nation” (21). As Wright attests, in a discussion of the United Nations Human Rights Commission program of self-determination in the 1980s, Aboriginal “rights to land and to compensation for the loss of land and of their former way of life have been emphasized in the federal Parliament by ministers and others, and are part of national debate” (54). It is within such cultural and political contexts that I want to look at Wright’s reflections on the Wadjji people of her region.

In “Night” and “Carnarvon Ranges,” from the sequence Seven Songs from a Journey, Wright evokes the spiritual propinquity between land, flora, fauna, and people as she writes in “Night”:

The contours of night are like
the contours of this rock,
and worn by light as by water.
The pin-sharp stars drag
their thin bright trails across it.
The moon’s pale creek and the floods
of the sunlight erode it;
and round its secret flanks
the current of the living—
plant, beast, and man and god—
swirl their phosphorescence.

The earth is here constructed as being in darkness, until it becomes illuminated as cultural landscape. As hunting grounds sculpted through centuries of “fire-stick farming,” as the embodied form of ancestors, the environment is in a dynamic relationship with culture. In “Carnarvon Range,” Wright acknowledges the contemporary absence of such habitation, yet still seeks to sing the land into being:

Carnarvon Creek
and cliffs of Carnarvon,
your tribes are silent;
I will sing for you—
each phrase
the size of a stone,
a grey,
and a purple;
a parrot’s cry
from a blossoming tree,
a scale of water
and wavering light—
each word a sign
to set on your cliffs,
each phrase a stone
to lie in your waters.

These two poems evoke the occupation of the Carnarvon Ranges by Aboriginal people, and the tragic effects of colonialism upon their culture. They also illustrate Wright’s interest in the indigenous issues of her region in the context of broader social and political forces, particularly land rights and environmental conservation. In caves among the Ranges the engravings of “vulva” motifs, as John Mulvaney writes, represent one site among thousands that are, with difficulty, being preserved for “research and cultural heritage purposes” (359, 362).

In The Cry for the Deal, Wright refers to archaeological work in the region and the discovery of several “layers” of occupation. The most recent contained “weaponry of wood, with barbs and points of bone or marsupial teeth bound on with fibre and sinews and secured by resin,” the oldest dated at fifteen to seventeen thousand years, containing “large heavy types of stone scraper—tools and
weapons.” There is also telling evidence of a more recent presence among the caves, one that has literally inscribed itself over prior meanings. “In the Carnarvon caves,” Wright tells us, “Aborigines left those penciled handprints of men, women and children and of weapons and tools and ornaments, guarded by tall painted figures, which are now overlaid by the scrawled initials, hearts and arrows of literate occupation” (17). Such writings are metonyms of colonialism. Yet the cultural reach of those earlier signs of occupation have a broad, and uncanny, resonance within the context of Australia’s contemporary political landscape.

The “Landscape and Dreaming” essay contains reflections upon the acclimatization of Australians of European descent to the specific nature of the Australian continent. And it is attachment to the land that Wright feels may provide the basis for fruitful exchange between Australia’s two cultural traditions, once so alien and irreconcilable:

The land we occupied less than two hundred years ago has been decisively and immensely altered during that time. Australians of European descent or Asian descent may never attain the kind of intimate relationship with it that so many millennia have given to its Aboriginal inhabitants. But the growth of attachment on grounds not wholly economic is perceptible already, and may finally bring the two viewpoints a little closer if real action is taken to heal the wounds we have dealt both the land and its original owners. (55)

The implication here is that the construction of nature as a commodity is a limiting and reductive attitude towards the ecology. The sense of identity and dialogue that obtains between subject and object, between land and people, that is intrinsic to indigenous cultures, is anathema to the objectifying impulses of the economic mind. Wright is implying, like social ecologists, that the development of a sense of attachment to the environment requires a radically different perspective to that of hierarchized and centraliz ed economic structures.

Bookchin not only offers a critique of the objectification of both humans and nature, but also proposes an alternative social and ecological ethic. Social ecology, as Wright points out, questions the “prevailing marketplace image of nature,” and in its attempt to ground an “ethics of freedom rather than domination,” it places the “human mind, like humanity itself, within a natural context and explores it in terms of its own natural history” (40). Wright’s ecological ethic is similarly grounded in an understanding of the natural history of the continent and a sense of attachment to place that is “not wholly economic” or based upon the view of nature promulgated by the market place.

Bookchin believes in the individual’s right to act as an “ethical being [. . .] guided by a rational, humane, and high-minded notion of the social and communal good” and not just as a “narrow egoist” (152). Further, such an ethical outlook is extended to his conception of the non-human world and humanity’s place within it. The self, from a social ecological perspective, writes Clark, is considered as an “organic whole [. . .] in a constant state of [. . .] self-transcendence.” Wright’s alternative to a mere economic relationship with the non-human world is resonant with such a social ecological ethic, which replaces the “hollowed out ego” of “consumer society with [. . .] a richly developed self-hood” (qtd. in Keultz, 119). Such an ecologized conception of the self is evident throughout Wright’s poetry and prose, what she refers to as the “earth-sky-water-tree-spirit-human complex” (“Landscape and Dreaming” 32) of Australia’s indigenous cultures.

Throughout her writing, Wright has engaged with both the social and environmental consequences of unmitigated exploitation of the natural world. She has also sought to articulate alternative attitudes to the environment and Australia’s indigenous peoples. Along with writers such as Les Murray, John Kinsella, and Gary Snyder, her work is amenable to a reading inspired by the social ecology of Murray Bookchin. Bookchin is one of the most provocative and significant contemporary writers on radical ecology, whose writings to date have been neglected by scholars of ecological literature. The applicability of his theories to Wright’s poetry and prose suggests one of the many ways in which social ecology may be utilized by literary ecologists. □

Works Cited
Copyright of Antipodes is the property of Antipodes and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.