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Ambiguity in Alexis Wright's Plains of Promise

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Abstract: This paper examines the critical reception of Alexis Wright's *Plains of Promise* as a piece of magical realism, and suggests that it should be read as something of a preparatory text for Wright's later and more highly acclaimed work, *Carpentaria.*

Keywords: Alexis Wright; *Plains of Promise*; ambiguity; Indigenous; women; magical realism

In its thus far short life as an acknowledged literary form, Indigenous women's writing has occupied a contentious and often confronting space in Australian literature. This is certainly true of Alexis Wright's 1997 novel, *Plains of Promise*. Nevertheless, it is also true that the novel represents a break with existing traditions of Indigenous women's writing, which had, until relatively recently, largely consisted of life-writing and works of non-fiction. *Plains of Promise* posits a new, necessarily political, distinctly Indigenous, and determinedly fictional and literary account of Indigenous women's experiences in Australia. As a means of reaching a greater understanding of the novel, this article will examine its interactions with Wright's later and more renowned novel, *Carpentaria*, as well as addressing some common criticisms of *Plains of Promise*. Many critics have found Wright's seemingly sporadic and haphazard use of multiple styles, genres, tropes, and symbols problematic, but I suggest that this effect is intended to critically engage with an extant body of literature, from which Wright seeks to set herself apart. Central to the novel is a pervasive sense of ambiguity and lack of certainty about past, present, and future; I take up Alison Ravenscroft's argument in her essay "Dreaming of Others," and suggest that Wright intends to force readers to confront their own expectations, and to acknowledge that some aspects of the experience of the "other" are necessarily unknowable, and that the text must, to some extent, alienate the non-Indigenous reader. The power of language and writing, or the lack thereof, is a central concern of the text; as a piece of writing itself, I will discuss how the text

engages with various documentary forms and how Indigenous people in the novel are either denied or granted a voice through the use of language. As the natural world features as an important force in the novel, I will also discuss the ways in which Wright uses the weather and nature to highlight the central concerns of the novel. Finally, I will discuss the "intersectionality" of racism and sexism and the bearing that these have on the female protagonists of the novel (Ichitani 192).

Having received a great deal less critical and popular acclaim than her 2007 Miles Franklin Award winning novel, *Carpentaria*, Wright's *Plains of Promise* has been criticised on a number of grounds. While many critics consider it to be a less refined and more clumsy attempt at the effects she was later to achieve in *Carpentaria*, I suggest that many of the criticisms that are often directed at *Plains of Promise*, and, indeed, at *Carpentaria*, are compromised by critics' expectations. Instead of branding *Plains of Promise* the lesser work, I intend to approach it as something of a preparatory text for *Carpentaria*, and suggest that an analysis of the interactions and parallels between the two works can improve readings of both. While the two novels are not particularly similar in content, or in terms of style, *Plains of Promise* seems to be cast from an older mould in comparison to *Carpentaria*'s radical, innovative, and often confronting narrative voice, thematically the works share some similarities, as well as being set in the same Gulf country region. Both feature several "wanderings and quests," though they are arguably more effectively foregrounded in *Carpentaria* (Ferrier 47). Elliot's search for Ivy's family paves the way, so to speak, for the quests of Mozzie Fishman, Norm Phantom, and Will Phantom. These exert on the narrative a more pervasively unsettled and expectant atmosphere than that achieved in *Plains of Promise*. Both also feature a number of sympathetic and respectable Indigenous male characters, although, again, this is more decidedly the case in *Carpentaria*, in which the principal protagonists are all male. This is suggestive of a desire to destabilise a dominant conception of Aboriginal men variously as lazy and violent substance abusers (Ferrier 48). This is foregrounded to a far lesser extent in *Plains of Promise*, with sympathetic male Indigenous characters such as Noah, Victor, Johnno, and towards the end, at least to some extent, Elliot, occupying far more peripheral, and, frequently, more ambivalent roles. Ultimately, perhaps the most significant parallel between the two is Wright's use of fiction to tell the truth as she sees it, and her ability to avoid being read as "sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form" (Morrison in Ferrier 45). She writes "with a complexity and sophistication that demands to be recognised as serious art," and which, moreover, posits a unique, forceful, and distinctly Indigenous Australian fiction (Ferrier 45).

A common criticism of *Plains of Promise* is that it attempts to straddle too many competing genres and story lines. Liam Davison is concerned that "Wright was uncertain about what type of novel she wanted to write," and states that, as the novel at various points, and often simultaneously, could be classified as "social history, political intrigue, cloak and dagger, [and] personal journey of discovery … a leaner, less ambitious approach might have been more successful" (Davison 42). To this list of genres and narrative styles, I would add the quest story, elements of life writing, and even the (perhaps contentious) classification of a magical realist novel. Davidson's assertion that a more refined selection of genre might have been more successful appears to be somewhat problematic, as he fails to set out categorically what "success" might mean. His distaste for Wright's mixing of genres and styles suggests that he

favours easily recognisable fiction, and that he found that *Plains of Promise* was difficult to follow, or perhaps defied classification; or that it was not immediately assimilable into the existing Australian literary canon. Instead of reading generously and assuming that Wright was educated and self-aware enough to intentionally incorporate a variety of genres, he seems to fall into the trap of thinking that "Aboriginal writers hide their aesthetic failings behind racial special pleading"; that Indigenous authors can get away with poorly constructed and ill-conceived writing because their people have been treated poorly in the past and deserve a break (Sharrad 52). Instead of adopting this patronising attitude to Indigenous writing, I suggest that non-indigenous readers should approach *Plains of Promise* with a willingness to accept that the content and style of the work is often confrontational, and that this is not necessarily born of poor writing, but rather that Wright employs it intentionally as an effect to produce a particular reaction in the reader, as well as to engage in a critical way with an existing body of literature.

In her essay, "Re-Surfacing Through Palimpsests: A (False) Quest for Repossession in the Works of Mudrooroo and Alexis Wright," Françoise Král proposes the image of a palimpsest as a means of understanding the composition of the novel. This metaphor is particularly appropriate for the various, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting styles and genres mobilised in the novel. Wright's is a particularly post-modern project, which seeks to question and destabilise a number of Western literary forms. It would be facile to suggest that Wright fully embraces any project of post-modernism; rather, she attempts to create her own unique form of protest literature, drawing on the post-modern technique of recognising, revisiting, and reusing past styles and genres as a means of engaging with them "with irony, not innocently" (Eco 67). Král suggests however that Wright's revisiting of past texts and styles "has little in common with the interplay of intertextual references in Western literature" (Král 14). Rather than complicity with works or styles that she references, she seeks their subversion and destabilisation.

It is difficult, for example, to avoid the comparison between *Plains of Promise* and Sally Morgan's highly renowned 1987 autobiography, *My Place*. There are a number of obvious similarities in theme and content: each tells the story of several generations of Indigenous women; many characters suffer under the oppression of colonial and post-colonial white Australia; there are a number of instances of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse with which characters in both books must contend; the search for identity, or more specifically, a "legitimate" sense of Aboriginality is a primary concern in both works; the importance of family and of belonging is also foregrounded in both works, albeit in vastly different ways. Despite these numerous parallels, in terms of narrative style, public and critical reception, and authorial voice and attitude to reconciliation, the two works could not be more different. A number of critics (especially Indigenous critics), of whom Jackie Huggins has perhaps been the most vocal, have vehemently criticised *My Place* on the grounds that it constructs Aboriginality as a concept and sense of self immediately accessible to non-Indigenous people (Jaireth 69). It is interesting to note that it is precisely on the opposite grounds that *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria* have frequently been admonished by non-Indigenous critics: critics complain that they are too inaccessible, too depressing, full of "tense shifts and awkward dialogue;" that Wright "cannot resolve the multifarious issues she sets running;" that "the storytelling voice too often lapses into that of social

commentary" (Sharrad 54; Ravenscroft 2010 195; Davison 42). Given Wright's keen sense of dark irony, *Plains of Promise* reads like a brutal and unforgiving parody of Morgan's *My Place* (Sharrad 56). Where Morgan's character progresses from complete ignorance of her Aboriginality to acquiring a sense of belonging in her family and community, a feeling of coming to terms with past atrocities, and hope for the future of reconciliation, Wright depicts a seemingly endless and bleak cycle of oppression, where generations "lead parallel lives without any interaction or communication"; despite obvious changes in time and setting, each woman is subjected to persecution on the grounds of her gender and Aboriginality, and the reader is left unsure about the prospects of reconciliation (Král 10). Since its publication, "*My Place* seems to have found its place in the list of canonical texts studied in the departments of Literature and Australian and Cultural Studies in Australia and abroad" (Jaireth 69). It is difficult to imagine the same ever being said about *Plains of Promise*, nor is it clear that Wright has ever intended for the book to be comfortably embraced as part of an acceptable Australian literary canon. Instead, it seems at every point to challenge and confront both its readers and traditional literary forms.

Wright's unconventional use of the quest motif similarly results in ambiguity and confrontation of the reader's expectations. The novel features a number of quests, the two most notable of which are Elliot's journey south to find Ivy's kin in order to remove the alleged curse that her presence places on the mission, and Mary's search for her family and her Aboriginality. Unlike a traditional quest story, in which the protagonist either succeeds or fails to achieve his or her task, both quests end ambiguously, or not at all. Elliot is told that Ivy must be returned to her people, but Pilot's plan to take her home is thwarted when he is brutally murdered on his way into the mission. When Elliot does find Ivy's family he does not tell Ivy, and when Gloria goes to St Dominic's Mission, she has no interest in spending time with her "mousy cousin" (*Plains of Promise* 121). Later, when Mary discovers her Aboriginal heritage, she gets a job working for the Coalition of Aboriginal Governments in an attempt to find her Aboriginality, but finds her sense of identity constantly shaken by restrictive notions of Aboriginality, and her attempts to "find out about" herself belittled, especially by Buddy, who accuses her of being "hooked on the romance of it all" (227). Because Buddy is a "true Aboriginal," and because "he came from an Aboriginal reserve and only people like him who came from an Aboriginal reserve really knew what it was like," he feels he has a stronger claim on Aboriginality than Mary, and derides her attempts to come closer to understanding herself (265). The quest stories converge in Chapter Nineteen, when Elliot orchestrates a meeting of the three generations of women in a hut in the middle of a storm. Both have found family, but whether this has led to an augmented sense of self or belonging or Aboriginality is unclear. Mary's conviction that "[t]he woman was evil," suggests that there is little hope for reconciliation with the past (299). Indeed, the parable that Elliot tells, and which Mary recounts at the end, offers a very bleak view of the future, with the greed and madness of generations causing the lake to dry up forever. Nevertheless, some signs point to a hopeful ending: after the encounter, as Mary and Jessie leave, Mary sees Ivy sitting under a tree, playing with something on the ground with a stick, and "can feel her contentment" (301). The obvious connection between the unwitting Jessie and her grandmother suggests that, even if connection and reconciliation with the past is not possible for Mary, it may be for later generations. Indeed, Mary's willingness to bring Jessie back to the lake one day suggests that perhaps, contrary to Elliot's story, "the

secret of the lake" is not lost, and that later generations will be able to overcome the damage wrought by years of colonial oppression and hardship (304).

Wright's unwillingness to settle into one particular genre, which Davison finds unrefined, is, in fact, intentionally unsettling; tense shifts and sometimes awkward progression produce an alienating effect on the non-Indigenous reader, and is "deliberately intended to show us that (unlike the ultimately knowable stories of social realist critique) we do not really know this story," and perhaps never will entirely (Sharrad 54). Not only does Wright challenge established Western literary forms and styles, but she also employs a number of common Western literary and cultural symbols and motifs, in an attempt to undermine their meanings and to subvert the paradigms from which they have arisen. Foremost among these symbols is that of the crow. As is the case with her use of genres, Wright engages with the symbol of the crow prolifically and ambiguously. In most Western cultures, the crow is commonly regarded with suspicion and mistrust. With its black plumage and ominous cry, the crow is frequently associated with death and morbidity. It is in this way that the crow is first introduced to the novel: "Now a black crow sat in [the Poinciana tree's] branches, its beady eyes on the wait. Yes, someone else was going to die here" (*Plains of Promise* 4). The crow is ignored, "unwanted," and feared; it is immediately associated with the Devil, so the missionaries refuse to be "spooked," and the young Aboriginal girls of the mission pray "long and hard for eternal salvation" and try "to ignore the crow like everyone else" (4). Concurrently, Wright introduces an alternate reading of the presence of the crow: she gives voice to the Aboriginal inmates and their spiritual ancestors, who grow "more and more disturbed by the thirsty, greedy foreign tree intruding into the bowels of their world," and they invite "Cousin Crow to sit along the branches and draw the cards of death" (4). In *Aboriginal Mythology*, Mudrooroo describes the role of the crow in many Aboriginal traditions and myths: the crow is a "trickster character," and is renowned for its mirth and its role in the story of how fire came to humans; it is a respected, if not wholly trusted, figure (Nyoongah 35-36). The disparity between these two constructions of the crow creates a point of ambiguity that runs throughout the novel; the narrative's suggestion that Ivy and her descendants are closely linked, and often likened to crows, lends itself to a broader reading of similarities and interaction between the characters and the symbol. While some critics suggest that the crow is a malign force for all, representing for the Indigenous inhabitants "evil, death, sickness, and Ivy," I suggest that Wright is intentionally ambiguous about the significance of the crow (Bellear 194).

The crow is undoubtedly aligned with Ivy, her mother and her descendants. Like the crow, Ivy and her family are hated, misunderstood, and discriminated against for reasons wholly out of their control. While it is never explicitly stated, the reader is given to understand that the crow is Ivy's clan's totem, and consequently, that its role in the novel is to act as a protective and guiding force. The fact that the crow is distrusted in Western traditions for its blackness also suggests a broader allegiance to Aboriginal Australians; the community's discriminatory fear of both Ivy and the crow acts as a microcosm of the plight of Indigenous Australians. This analogy is most explicitly drawn out in Chapter Seventeen after Mary finds Jessie taunting crows. Here, again, the narrative is ambivalent in its attitude to crows: initially Mary, becoming "lost in a parody of narrow-minded country towns," compares crows to the garrulous, nosy, racist, and insular townsfolk that she has met in her travels (*Plains of Promise* 257). She is then struck by some "empathy, if only momentarily, for the predicament of black

crows" (257). She begins to see similarities in the types of discrimination that crows and Aboriginal people have had to endure:

> Black is negative. Stands for no. Crows are negative. Even if they have a family life. Similar to an Aboriginal community, tribe, kin-group. But crows were blacker, and as far as Mary was concerned it didn't matter who discriminated against them. She had hated crows for as long as she could remember (Norman was the only exception). It didn't matter if Jessie learned to hate them too (258).

Despite the touch of empathy that Mary feels, with this final sentiment, Wright offers a bleak view of the future for reconciliation. This hopelessness is indicative of Wright's fear that "forgiveness is almost unimaginable. There is no healing road of reconciliation for many thousands of Aboriginal people" as they are "still on the road of genocide at the hands of Australian governments" (Wright, "Politics of Writing" 15). Nevertheless, Wright offers no final or definitive reading on either the position of the crow or the possibility of reconciliation.

Alison Ravenscroft explores the similar sense of ambiguity that pervades *Carpentaria* in her essay "Dreaming of Others." While critics have admonished the text for having too many competing story lines, and offering too miserable and conflicting a vision for the future of race relations in Australia, as indicated above, Ravenscroft suggests that the value of the text lies in Wright's imaginative use of unresolvedness and ambiguity. She focuses in particular on the classification of the text as "magical realism," a genre often ascribed to works of post-colonial fiction. She argues that the term "magical realism," as it is applied in a great deal of contemporary literary criticism, has ceased to mean a "representation of subjective reality, a reality that is amplified until its own so-called magic appears in the work of art" (Ravenscroft 196). Instead, it has come to be associated with a dialectic which establishes two oppositional forces in the text: the "magical" tradition of the colonised, and the "realist" tradition of the coloniser. This, she argues, invariably ends with the arguments arriving at "the point they are supposedly contesting: that the other's understanding of reality is a poor one, it is 'subeducated', … it is naïve and fantastic, it is based in beliefs of the mythic and magical" (Ravenscroft 197). In this way, readers of a text are able to place that which is foreign or inscrutable to them within a knowable Western tradition, and thus within the realm of understanding. Instead of adopting this approach, Ravenscroft suggests that a non-Indigenous audience should read "through a paradigm of radical uncertainty;" that is, with the awareness that some content of the text is unknowable, and that it is necessarily strange, uncertain, and most likely alienating to non-Indigenous readers (197-198).

While Ravenscroft writes with *Carpentaria* in mind, her argument is also a valuable tool for reading *Plains of Promise*. As discussed above, Wright's narrative style tends to bring together a number of different and sometimes conflicting genres, story lines, tropes, and symbols, without necessarily satisfactorily resolving them. Rather than constituting a flaw in her writing style, the uncertainty that this conflict engenders points to gaps and silences in both non-Indigenous and Indigenous ways of knowing and their sites of intersection (Ravenscroft 210). Because Wright herself is uncertain about the possibility of successfully addressing these silences and embarking on a path

to reconciliation, she offers no comforting resolution to the conflicts that she calls forth. The reader, and indeed her characters, are interpellated to acknowledge that there are things that the "other" knows, that we cannot. The way in which she positions the reader makes it difficult to recognise the authenticity of story or of character, just as it is difficult for Ivy and Mary and other Indigenous characters to establish a secure sense of self and Indigeneity; thus, she highlights the white reader's problematic demand that characters and stories be authentic and identifiable. In spite of this seemingly impenetrable ambivalence, Ravenscroft suggests that Wright does encourage the reader to make an effort to understand the "other," but stresses that this must be a "movement towards understanding rather than an arrival"; that no work of literature can provide true knowledge of another, since art can only ever point to the other, but cannot fully render it (Ravenscroft 215-216).

One of the primary concerns of *Plains of Promise* is the power of language and how it can be used either to reinforce or to subvert colonial and white hegemony. Written records feature heavily in the novel, in various forms. The novel, itself a written record, also plays a role in either perpetuating or subverting dominant paradigms, as does the body of Indigenous literature that has preceded it. The project of writing the unwritten history of Aboriginal persecution has been a central concern for many Indigenous writers; since the first generation of published Indigenous writers started to become well known in the 1960s, many have expressed a keen fear of being written out of history (Král 7). This is a fear justified by a great deal of document manipulation and erasure in the novel. When Ivy's mother commits suicide, spurring on a number of other Indigenous women in the community to do the same, Jipp has no trouble convincing a doctor six hundred kilometres away to issue death certificates specifying natural causes, thereby sanitising the deaths and nullifying and delegitimising the hardship and pain that drove the women to suicide (*Plains of Promise* 27). The very act of suicide is itself, in these cases, erasure: the women self-immolate, in a literal embodiment of their erasure from society. Moreover, the brutality of the act is suggestive of the harsh and traumatic conditions that must have driven the women to suicide: the narrative states that the victims "suffered horrendous burns, long and agonising pain while death crawled its way though (sic) to them. This was the legacy of Ivy's mother. Her only legacy" (22). Similarly, when Ivy arrives at Sycamore Heights, the only record that accompanies her is a note specifying that she is not to be returned to the mission, and that she should remain in the mental institution until fit for medical discharge (167). Her past, and all the wrongs perpetrated against her have, thus, effectively been obliterated, as the hospital is provided with "no information in her file about her admittance, no medical notes on her condition, no note of her age or anything about her background" (167). Documents concerning the welfare of Indigenous people in the novel seem to have little grounding in genuine concern for them: Penguin's grab for power at Sycamore Heights is decided by Ivy's case (171). He launches an investigation into her treatment and establishes that it has been inadequate, securing his own position of power within the organisation as a result. All evidence relating to the seizure of power and the alleged botched abortion is then destroyed, without any mention in the narrative of improved treatment for Ivy. Here, systems that are in place to protect and help Ivy are in actuality merely used by white people in positions of power for their own gain, with little regard or concern for Indigenous well-being. Documentation is easily manipulated to ensure maximum expediency. Even the more authoritative and assertive Indigenous figures in the novel are oppressed and marginalised by the authority of the

written word. Jipp manages to fool Elliot into marrying Ivy by simply giving him a marriage certificate to sign: "Elliot signed his name carefully but did not read the document – he was not asked to do this, and Jipp quickly took it back" (126). Although Elliot is respected and even feared within the Aboriginal community for his intelligence and alleged magical abilities, his exclusion from the white legal system exerts a control over his life that he cannot counter.

Not only does Wright foreground the importance and power of the written word, but also the lack of it: paradoxically, Indigenous resistance in the face of their powerlessness within the colonial system often takes the form of silence. Paul Sharrad suggests that, for the Indigenous people in *Plains of Promise*, their greatest power lies in their ability to refuse containment in the white colonial system; while most are "pushed about as passive objects," their passivity allows them at the very least the ability to refuse to be implicated in the colonial system or to cooperate with their oppressors (56). The first example of such resistance takes place in Chapter Two as Jipp mows the lawn. He is frustrated at the "so-called mindless" old tribal Indigenous people, who sit in the sun all day and watch him go about his business. The narrative lauds them as figures deserving a great deal of respect and deference for their "great knowledge and wisdom of their traditional homelands" (19). The oppression and destitution that the old folks have suffered at the hands of the white colonial system has left them with "nothing to say to one another about their institutionalised life. The old ones gave up talking about it long ago; they move in silence along the track" (19). Nevertheless, there is power in their silence and apparent purposelessness. Jipp finds their behaviour inscrutable, and, consequently, infuriating. They are not breaking any laws by merely sitting in the sun, but Jipp finds their torpidity illogical and frustrating: "He is angry that they are sitting there in the dirt in the heat. They always do it. Sit there in the sun for nothing" (20). Ultimately, this refusal to act within the Western colonial system, or rather, the refusal to act at all, is an assertion of independence: "They sit there silently, separately, until midday. Then they get up and walk back over the scorched dusty track. Empty-handed. Independence intact. Another successful protest against the whiteman's time" (20).

Another figure who will adopt this attitude of passive protest or resistance to "the whiteman's time" is Ivy. Arguably the most downtrodden and discriminated against character in the novel, she is pushed and pulled about the country, perennially unable to exert her own volition. She is regularly and brutally raped by Jipp as a child, and tormented and hated by most inhabitants of the Mission. When she arrives at the mental institution, she is subjected to regular medical examinations, during which she is poked and prodded, and is generally "on show for the medical profession" (170). After the belly-dancing programme at Sycamore Heights is shut down, and the institution undergoes an inquiry into the restriction of the patients' civil liberties, and the inappropriate influence of missionary zeal on the treatment of the residents. Ivy's involvement in the belly-dancing programme had played a role in bringing about the inquiry into the institution, and the consequent review of the undue power given to the mission. In her passivity, Ivy had, inadvertently and unaware, "caused the toppling of mission control over so many Aboriginal lives" (180). The narrative then states that, "in future years, if the lives of Aboriginal women such as Ivy are unravelled, their names may be remembered like latter-day Joans of Arc or Florence Nightingales" (180). Such comparisons suggest that Ivy's character is powerful, but that she has no way other than

passivity and silence to exert any influence over her situation. Also implicit is a hope, or even an expectation, that the future will yield more autonomous Indigenous writers and activists who will attempt to redress the silences that have plagued women like Ivy.

As documents themselves tend to work against Indigenous people in the novel, Paula Anca Farca points out that the land itself and natural forces take on the responsibility of sympathetically documenting the hardships of the Indigenous characters. A great deal of the violence and abuse that occurs in the novel takes place without any witnesses present: Jipp's repeated rape of Ivy, Pilot's brutal murder, and Ivy's mother's death are all witnessed by none but the victim and the aggressor. Farca indicates that the permanence of the land is such that, where these events are "erased from official documents and historical accounts, […] they are integrated into the landscape" (Farca 29). The banana plantations are symbolic of the land's rejection of the colonial yoke: when Reverend Jipp disturbingly melds cemetery with food source, as physical evidence of the "life everlasting in the whiteman's faith," and the freedom from privation granted to reformed Aboriginals, the fruit recalls death and decay, and causes a "head-to-toe rash" in all those who eat it (*Plains of Promise* 32). No one in the community cares to touch the morbid harvest, and consequently it is mainly the children of the mission on whom the blighted fruit, and the Christian faith, is foisted, and it is they who bear the subsequent hardship. Because of the land's violent reaction against this colonial incursion, the plantations are abandoned, become overgrown, and devolve into a "thick maze for snakes" (33). Descriptions of the ironically titled Eden-like "Jipp's Paradise" are replete with hellish images and the plantation comes to be associated with Jipp's repeated sexual abuse and rape of Ivy.

Similarly, several instances of pathetic fallacy suggest that there is some sort of sympathetic relationship between many of the novel's marginalised characters and nature; as if the weather can speak where characters have been denied a voice. When Ivy's mother dies and is given a funeral by the church, an electrical storm suddenly breaks, "lashing out with all its violence at the lowering of the coffin into the freshly dug hole" (18). The funeral rites are eventually halted by the ferocity of the storm, and Ivy's mother's coffin is left "to lie in the deep hole fast filling up with water," to be filled in later by "some black souls" (18). Thus, the violence of the storm affords the Indigenous "black souls" some, if only a very little, autonomy from the whiteman's control of the woman's burial. Later, when Eliot, on his quest, is near death, he is "[r]evived" by the rain that pelts against his body, and is "guided by flashes of lightning" to dry land and the storm rapidly fills the disappearing lake (79-80). An interesting comparison can be drawn between Wright's portrayals of weather in *Plains of Promise* and *Carpentaria*. Both feature floods that occupy a somewhat ambiguous space: in *Carpentaria* "water along with fire is associated … with acts of resistance associated with nemesis and renewal" (Ferrier 49). In *Plains of Promise* the flooding of the lake on Elliot's quest is a sign of renewal and beauty. However, when Ivy stands in the "swelling waters" of the river, they and the accompanying storm are objects of fear (*Plains of Promise* 34). This contrast demonstrates the sympathetic, but nevertheless harsh and unforgiving nature of land. The characters' relationship with the land is complicated by colonialism: where once "the spirits and the black people would have spoken to each other," now "the black man's forced absence from his traditional land had inspired fear of it" (75).

It is not only Indigenous characters with whom the natural world is sympathetic: there is a strong allegiance between Pilot and the bush and native Australia flora and fauna. While the narrative specifies that, due to his experience as a skilled physician in China, he would have fit into "the white world of any Australian city," he prefers to live in the bush with the Aboriginal people, and has, indeed, married an Indigenous woman (138). Pilot seems the embodiment of Wright's hope for the possibility of understanding between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people: he acknowledges and respects Indigenous traditional ownership and customs, is eager to learn local languages, and is interested in acquiring access to Indigenous ways of knowing, in particular those relating to medicine (138). When Pilot is brutally murdered, his "badly lacerated body" is found lodged in a prickly pear tree, with leaves and dirt in his wounds and a green tree frog in his pocket (132; 138). Paula Anca Farca suggests that it is not only the land that leaves its mark on Pilot, but that Pilot also leaves his mark on the land: the "blood stains and broken branches" (Farca 34) that he leaves behind serve as a record of the violence and injustice done to him, in spite of Jipp's failure to investigate, or even report, the death (*Plains of Promise* 132). As Pilot is buried, Noah witnesses dozens of "black spirits, some still in mission dress, some without clothes, some clothed in grass or paperbark" carrying Pilot's soul away (*Plains of Promise* 140), implying that his acceptance of and deep respect for Indigenous culture has allowed him to gain true acceptance into the spiritual community. Thus, Wright hints at the possibility of understanding and communion between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures, but only with mutual respect and compromise, and notably, in this instance at least, not involving a white person.

While the narrative tends to focus on subjugation suffered as a result of racism, there is also an undeniable emphasis on gender as a site of oppression. Tomoko Ichitani proposes the concept of "intersectionality" as a way of approaching "intersecting patterns of racism and sexism" (Ichitani 192). While, in theory, both anti-racist politics and feminism have sought to liberate Indigenous women, in practice each has played a part in their subjugation. Feminism, at least in its earlier manifestations, has been directed by and for white women, and has sought liberation from a variety of structural, political, and social impediments. Accordingly, it has sought to create new ideals of womanhood, based on these freedoms. These norms of womanhood, however, have proved in many cases to be equally, if not more problematic, than traditional patriarchal roles: they are able to masquerade as a liberating force when in fact they still require Indigenous women to conform to a foreign and imposed feminine norm. Perhaps more prominent in *Plains of Promise* is the sexism inflicted upon Mary under the guise of anti-racism. Buddy, a keen advocate of Indigenous rights and liberation from the colonial yoke, is highly sexually exploitative and has little concern for, or is ignorant of, gendered forms of discrimination (Ichitani 195). Ichitani suggests that it is land that separates white from Indigenous gender issues, as Mary's sense of Aboriginality is only kindled on first contact with her land; land that "she felt she knew although she had never been there" (Ichitani 198; *Plains of Promise* 270).

In *Plains of Promise*, Alexis Wright posits a unique, distinctly Indigenous, and confronting form of writing. *Plains of Promise*, while a notable work itself, can also be seen to act as a stylistic and thematic precursor to what is generally acknowledged to be Wright's finer work, *Carpentaria*. Her engagement with existing tropes and genres allows for their reinvigoration and critical reassessment in the context of Australian

Aboriginal affairs, making the work fundamentally political at the same time as being highly literary and, at times, lyrically beautiful. Wright engages with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing to produce, not a synthesis, but rather a constant sparring unresolvedness, which encourages the reader to adopt an attitude that is both critical and open. She offers no resolute solutions or concrete hope for the future of reconciliation; she merely hints on occasion that reconciliation may be possible only through a change in attitude towards Aboriginality, Aboriginal politics, and engagement with Australia's brutal history.

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