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The Donkey and the Haze: Green Capitalism, Possession and the Authority of Country in Alexis Wright's Praiseworthy

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ABSTRACT

Australian governments have long told Aboriginal people that their future lies in self-sufficiency and economic independence, and the climate crisis has given that promise a green vocabulary. This essay reads Alexis Wright's Praiseworthy (2023) as a satire of the promise. Its target is not only the extractive mine of Wright's earlier fiction, which persists in the novel, but an Aboriginal green enterprise: Cause Man Steel's plan, devised without government money, to harness the continent's feral donkeys as transport for a world after fossil fuel. Read with Irene Watson's critique of native title and recognition, the scheme refuses assimilation while speaking the state's language of independence and reaching for a Native Title claim over animals. The novel does not, however, set Country against the market as a pure outside. In its final chapter Country pays for the scheme, settler business rushes to join it, non-owners hurry to make treaties recognizing Aboriginal sovereignty, and the narration lets market demand, Cause's breeding program and the ancestral mob's account of Country's power compete as explanations. The essay's claim, tested against these passages and against the ancestors' choice of Cause, is that Praiseworthy stages Country absorbing the market while refusing to let any possession, by the state, by Cause or by the market, settle what Country means. It names this structure absorptive sovereignty and shows what the concept reveals: that in Wright's satire even recognition arrives as a commodity rush, and that the authority it answers to is Country's own.

KEYWORDS

Alexis Wright; settler colonialism; green capitalism; native title; Indigenous sovereignty; postcolonial ecocriticism

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1. Introduction

For decades Australian governments have addressed Aboriginal people through a discourse of self-sufficiency, and they have delivered it through training and work programs in remote regions; the Community Development Program, introduced in 2015, is the latest, and the government has now committed to replacing it (Office of Impact Analysis, 2024). The climate crisis has lent this discourse a green register, in which Indigenous enterprise is offered as a climate solution; carbon farming on Aboriginal land is its most visible form, and public-health scholarship now asks whether carbon markets operate as a new colonialism for Indigenous peoples (Redvers et al., 2025). Irene Watson, a Tanganekald and Meintangk legal scholar, names the older pattern beneath both: the state, she argues, turned the demand for self-determination into "the management of colonialist policy by indigenous people for Indigenous Peoples" (Watson, 2015, p. 3). Literary criticism of Indigenous writing has had much to say about resistance to the mine and the polluted river, and less about how fiction judges an Aboriginal enterprise that borrows the language of independence in order to escape the state. It is that judgment, and the authority on which a novel might ground it, that concerns this essay.

Alexis Wright's Praiseworthy (2023), her first novel since The Swan Book (Wright, 2013) and, like it and Carpentaria (Wright, 2006), a fiction of the Aboriginal north, takes the question as its object. In a town under a permanent ochre haze, Cause Man Steel devises a scheme to harness the continent's feral donkeys as a transport economy for a world after fossil fuel. The novel won the 2024 Miles Franklin Literary Award and became the first book to win both that award and the Stella Prize (Edwards, 2024). Parts of the reading offered here have precedents. Gleeson-White (2023) traces Cause's dreams to the belief in Indigenous economic independence that Wright set out in Tracker (para. 13), and calls his venture "designed for and profiting from the global climate emergency" (para. 14); Garas (2024) sets the donkey plan against assimilation; and Saunders (2025), in the one peer-reviewed

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discussion I have found, already reads the novel's "ancestral haze" as "a symptom of global warming" ("Ecocide, extinctions & settler-colonial climate washing" section, para. 2). What no reading yet theorizes is how the novel judges an Aboriginal green enterprise against the authority of Country, and how its ending unsettles the opposition between them.

I argue, in a form the text could refute, that Praiseworthy satirizes Cause's scheme as a refusal of assimilation written in the state's idiom of independence and the property form of native title, yet it does not set Country outside the market: in the last chapter Country pays for the enterprise and settler business rushes to join it. Throughout, however, every attempt to settle what Country is through possession, whether by the state, by Cause's Native Title claim or by the market's offers of merger, is narrated as incomplete, rebutted or overtaken by Country's own agency; no passage narrates such a possession as accomplished and uncontested. A single passage in which the state, Cause or the market came to own Country, the haze or the donkeys, and the narration let that ownership stand, would falsify the reading; the strongest candidates, the ancestors' election of Cause and the ending in which Country pays, are examined below. I call the structure this claim describes absorptive sovereignty: Country takes in what the settler economy brings, its money, its animals and its treaties, without yielding title to the state, to Cause or to the market.

I read as a non-Indigenous critic based outside Australia, at a distance from both the Waanyi world from which Wright writes and the settler society the novel satirizes. Jeanine Leane, a Wiradjuri writer and critic, insists that those who represent Aboriginal lives must know them "through social and cultural immersion" (Leane, 2016, para. 17), and the essay accordingly makes claims about the novel's narration, about what it says the haze, the scheme and Country do, and not about what Waanyi law holds. A large scholarship on possessive whiteness, recognition and Indigenous economic development bears on these questions; the essay draws chiefly on Watson's account of law and recognition and does not claim to settle where that wider debate stands. Within those limits the stakes can be put simply. A novel that lets Country take the market's money while refusing anyone title to Country tests whether the opposition between Indigenous authority and green capital, on which ecocritical readings of Wright have largely relied, can hold.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

The donkey enters Praiseworthy with a settler history attached. The animals "were first imported in substantial numbers into Australia in 1866 by Sir Thomas Elder" as pack and draught animals for the inland freight trade, and, once motor transport displaced them, many were released; "the first record of feral donkeys is from the Kimberley in the early 1930s" (Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development [DPIRD], n.d., para. 1). Since 1978 about 570,000 have been culled in the Kimberley alone (Brann, 2020). The animal on which Cause stakes a post-carbon future is settler property gone feral: a working asset, then a pest, never held in common by anyone.

The town lives inside a second history, that of the Northern Territory Intervention. Announced on 21 June 2007 in response to the Little Children are Sacred report, its measures were excluded from the operation of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth) until 2010 and carried forward by the Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act 2012 (Cth) (Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee, 2012), which itself sunset on 17 July 2022 (Joint Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, 2023, Appendix C). The Swan Book answers the Intervention (Renes, 2021); Praiseworthy, published the year after its successor law lapsed, returns to its apparatus of emergency and rescue and joins it to the language of climate crisis. Behind both lies land. Mabo v Queensland (No 2) (1992) and the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) recognized Indigenous title within, and subordinate to, settler law, and the Waanyi claim in the Gulf country, bound up with the Century zinc mine, reached the High Court in North Ganalanja Aboriginal Corporation v Queensland (1996), a conflict that informs Carpentaria.

The novel also reached readers inside a dispute about recognition. In 2017 the Uluru Statement from the Heart called for "a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution" (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017); on 14 October 2023 Australians rejected the proposal, with a No vote recorded in all six states (SBS, 2023), and Gleeson-White (2023) heard in the novel's repetitions an urgency sharpened by the approaching vote (para. 45). Constitutional recognition was thus asked for and refused in the year of the novel's publication, and that refusal shapes what its closing treaties can mean.

3. Literature Review: From the Earlier Novels to Praiseworthy

Criticism of Wright's earlier novels has established that Country in her fiction is an agent, not a setting. Huggan and Tiffin argue that in Carpentaria "it is the land itself that is the true centre, the main character, of Wright's novel" (2015, p. 84), and recent ecocritical work finds that "Agency and sovereignty are assigned to land in these novels" (P G & Navaneeth, 2025, Section 3, para. 8). That agency is political: Renes reads The Swan Book as, finally, "a literary equivalent of a songline" (2021, Section 4, para. 4), and Huggan and Tiffin call Carpentaria an "anti-colonial attack on indiscriminate resource extraction (commercial mining operations)" (2015, p. 146, n. 1). The reviews of Praiseworthy extend this Country to the market without theorizing the meeting. Garas (2024) frames Cause's plan as one of two paths the novel sets against assimilation and reads his refusal to complete a council form as a refusal of assimilation itself, the strongest counter-reading to the one advanced here; Saunders (2023), writing as an Aboriginal reader, centers the children and the stories that shape them; and Saunders (2025) places the novel among First Nations works that "expose colonial greenwashing" ("Ecocide, extinctions & settler-colonial climate washing" section, para. 2). Saunders's reading already calls the haze ancestral, so the extension proposed here is narrower than a new discovery: it concerns the haze's

jurisdiction, the language of sovereignty, title and government in which the novel narrates it, and the satire's reach to an Aboriginal enterprise. The criticism has followed Wright's Country from the mine to the edge of the market; what it has not asked is what happens when Country pays.

4. Theoretical Framework: Recognition, Ancestral Time and the Limits of Possession

To ask what happens when Country pays is to ask about recognition and property together, and I take Watson's critique of recognition as the engine of this reading. Recognition by the colonizer, she argues, "inevitably reinstates colonial law"; First Nations experience it as "the recognition of our sovereignty only when that recognition enables the 'native' to transfer our sovereignty, our territories and natural resources", so that "Recognition only falls to First Nations at the moment we become dispossessed" (Watson, 2015, p. 2). Native title is her central case: "a superficial recognition of Aboriginal relations to land in one move and the extinguishment of that recognition in the next" (p. 3), which "became 'known' as that which will 'save' Nunga people from the trauma of terra nullius" (p. 19). Against it she sets Raw Law, which "inheres in all things and is alive in all things" (p. 12), and a relation to land for which "ownership of the land is an alien idea. In capitalist thought, ruwe becomes 'property', a commodity, which can be traded or sold" (p. 15). Watson writes from inside her own law and sets limits on what she will say, declining to "speak of the sacred" (p. 24); a reader outside that law has stronger reason to observe such limits. Her account offers, in short, a single mechanism in which recognition, rescue and the property form move together, and it is this mechanism that binds the novel's scheme to its rescues.

Watson's critique is not the only Aboriginal account of sovereignty, and treating "Aboriginal thought" as one position would flatten a real disagreement. The Uluru Statement describes sovereignty as "a spiritual notion", the ancestral tie that is "the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty", a sovereignty that "co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown" and that the Statement sought to express through a constitutionally enshrined Voice (First Nations National Constitutional Convention, 2017). Watson, by contrast, asks why "there are those among us who continue to try gaining protection and the recognition of 'rights' from the muldarbi, which continues to oppress us" (2015, p. 20), the muldarbi being her figure for the destructive colonial power. The difference is between seeking a voice within the constitutional order while affirming that sovereignty was never ceded and treating recognition by that order as a renewed capture. Praiseworthy stages both positions without adjudicating them, and the reading below follows where it does so.

Two further frames are used for narrower tasks. Kyle Powys Whyte, writing from Potawatomi contexts, supplies a way of reading ancestral time: Indigenous "spiraling time" may be lived "through narratives of cyclicality, reversal, dream-like scenarios, simultaneity, counter-factuality, irregular rhythms, ironic un-cyclicality, slipstream, parodies of linear pragmatism, eternality" (Whyte, 2018, p. 229), and Indigenous science fiction guides its readers "through the ancestral dystopias we continue to endure" (p. 233). He also observes that "even the green solutions to climate change commit and risk environmental injustice against Indigenous peoples, no different from the fossil fuel industries" (p. 237). Patrick Wolfe's structural account, in which "invasion is a structure not an event" (Wolfe, 2006, p. 388), is used only where its terms fit the novel: his list of the positive outcomes of the logic of elimination includes "child abduction" and "resocialization in total institutions" (p. 388), which bear on the state's rescue of children. His mechanism for converting collective land into private holdings does not fit feral donkeys, which were never held in common, and it is not applied to them. Taken together, these frames shift the question to be asked of a green remedy from whether its harm can be seen to the law under which its claims fall, and it is in Cause's scheme that the question first bites.

5. The Scheme: Self-Sufficiency, Native Title and the Mine

Cause Man Steel's scheme begins as a refusal, and no government offers it to him: it is his own invention. A second-person address that mimics his pitch presents it as one of two futures: "You can either decide to assimilate and follow the aimless who are in charge of the world, or try following an unprecedented miracle man's blue-sky vision of saving his people's cultural future with a pack of donkeys" (Wright, 2023, pt. 1, ch. 9).[1] He will not be "a perpetual trainee on an Australian government handout scheme" (pt. 1, ch. 5), and he tells his donkey that "they would not be asking the Australian government for money" (pt. 4, ch. 11). The donkey is to be "not owned by government or white money, but as it should be, as Aboriginal private property" (pt. 1, ch. 22). Garas is right that the scheme stands against assimilation; the difficulty lies in the last phrase of that sentence, where the refusal of the state takes the form of a property claim.

The scheme's first idiom is self-reliance, and here the novel lets Cause's refusal and the state's program converge. Reasoning that "Aboriginal survival since time immemorial had always been about economics", Cause asks "why should he not help wonder about how to make money out of the new doom times of global warming" (pt. 1, ch. 8). The town hears him as the state's echo. Tired of being "preached to by Widespread about building their economic independence in the new era", they remark that "They already had that kind of talk from the Australian government for the Aboriginal people – saying they had to become self-sufficient", and they add that "the only way you could become self-sufficient would be when you were dead" (pt. 2, ch. 24). The joke is the town's, and it falls on both speakers at once. In free indirect discourse the pitch turns green, "Imagine! A donkey could replace Qantas itself and be far more sustainable, then what?", and it is also a pitch of acquisition, "a total dream of a business with free feral donkeys by the millions out there for the taking" (pt. 1, ch. 9). The satire's target, then, is less carbon capital than a discourse of Indigenous economic independence, now joined to climate adaptation, which the settler state and its would-be critic share.

The second idiom, native title, carries the scheme from speech to instrument, and it is here that Watson's critique does its work. Cause is no friend of recognition. In the street he "ripped the local treaty-mongers, the reconciliation faithful, the recognition front line", deriding "treaties worth nothing" and warning, "Don't forget Aboriginal sovereignty knowledge" (pt. 1, ch. 4). Yet the same man tells the town that would-be property developers need only "think of feral donkeys as property development", and he confides to his donkey "business partner" that he is "figuring out how to stake a Native Title property right claim over the ownership of the country's five million donkeys" (pt. 4, ch. 11). The critic of recognition reaches for recognition's own instrument, and he reaches for it to make property. Watson's account explains why the move reads as satire, and not as mere inconsistency: if native title is a recognition that extinguishes in its next move, and "the killer of Raw Law because native title continues to dispossess us from cycles of Nunga being" (Watson, 2015, p. 19), then a Native Title claim over animals that came to Country as settler property completes the circle, converting the residue of one settler economy into the title form of another. Even Dance, in her own flight from the town, speaks of moving "the true Native Title family" (pt. 4, ch. 12), as if the state's category had become a surname.

The novel does not keep the scheme's costs abstract. Cause wants "Enclosures!" to "demonstrate real economic progress, that the things don't run around freely" (pt. 4, ch. 12), and Dance answers him with the ground itself: kicking the dust, she claims "you have ruined the ancestry, these donkeys eat everything", and she names "fouling up the place feral donkeys" as the reason the police pursue him (pt. 4, ch. 12). In the final chapter travellers complain of "putrid donkey muck stinking in the air", and the narration judges that "Cause Steel's donkeys trampling cabbages was not right at all" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The scheme does harm, comic and small in scale, and the harm follows from its form, from the herding and enclosure of what had ranged freely; it is here, arguably, that the novel's satire is most concrete. Mary Graham, a Kombu-merri philosopher, draws the line the novel dramatizes: "Custodianship is thus a philosophy, not just a green solution to environmental degradation" (Graham, 2008, "Exemplars" section). Cause offers the green solution without the custodianship.

Nor does the green scheme leave the mine behind. Cause's pitch defines itself against extraction, "Why pay billions of dollars to foreign people for burning every last gasp of fossil fuel from the planet, or letting white mining companies rip up your traditional country and blow your sacred sites apart?" (pt. 1, ch. 9), but mining runs through the novel as a presence the scheme never displaces. The elders' free mobile phones are "gifted from international mining companies wanting to dig up their sacred sites" (pt. 1, ch. 2), and when the conglomerate finally thrives, "The mining industry wanted donkeys to cart the iron ore" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The post-carbon enterprise becomes the mine's haulage. Whyte's observation that settler colonialism "can enact violence against Indigenous peoples through the views and actions of persons who seek to expand fossil fuel extraction or curtail it" (2018, p. 238) describes the structure the novel stages: the mine continues inside the remedy designed to replace it.

The strongest objection to this reading is that the scheme is authorized by Country itself, and the novel says so. Cause "believed that the country ancestors kept instructing him about what to do", and the narration confirms the election: "But, what can you do? The old ghost ancestor mob had chosen run-down Planet of all people to save the culture" (pt. 1, ch. 20). The election is the claim's first test, since an ancestral choice might seem to make the scheme Country's own. The passage, however, separates choosing from possessing. The ancestors choose a man; what the man does with the choice is narrated in his own idiom of ownership and fame, for "You would not have to tell him twice that he was a black saviour of the era", "particularly when he knew it would make him the richest black man in living memory" (pt. 1, ch. 20). The election grants Cause a mission, not a title, and it is the gap between Country's choice and Cause's appropriation of it that carries the satire. The scheme is ancestrally sanctioned and personally possessed at once, and the claim survives its first test because the sanction never becomes ownership: the novel's ancestors choose the entrepreneur while its narration declines to give him title to the donkeys or the meaning of what he builds.

6. Rescues and Exits

What the scheme seeks through enterprise, the state offers as rescue, and Watson's observation that native title was "known" as that which would "save" its holders (2015, p. 19) names the shared form. The state's rescue begins in denial. "The Canberra politicians accused the traditional owners of being deranged, of seeing things that only they could see, a haze" (pt. 1, ch. 2), and its second response is to fund the Mayor, giving him "a grant of a sizeable amount of money . . . to build a monstrous scarecrow to frighten the haze away" (pt. 1, ch. 7), a hologram of himself that ancestral lightning destroys. The Mayor, Ice Pick, is an Aboriginal politician, and through him the state's program is voiced from inside the community, in the form Watson calls the management of colonialist policy by Indigenous people. Holding up a document on the beach he announces, "See this piece of paper? That's me . . . I am the Commonwealth Government of Australia's forward plan for Praiseworthy" (pt. 5, ch. 11); help, he says, will not come "if you do not assimilate and be white" (pt. 1, ch. 2), and his vision of rescue is itself a market, a "colossal go-to type of economic powerhouse for trading Aboriginal knowledge" (pt. 1, ch. 2).

Ice Pick's claims to Country are contested in the passage that makes them. He calls a golden beetle his totem because "It came from my traditional country", and the narration answers at once: "The 'real' elders said, more bullshit" (pt. 1, ch. 2). The elders refuse him the beetle's story, and the narration adds that "No one could own the law beetle" (pt. 1, ch. 2). The rebuttal bears directly on the argument, for Ice Pick's totem is a possession of Country asserted by the state's spokesman, and the novel lets it stand only as an assertion that the community's law-holders reject.

The savior's role proper belongs to the state, and here the satire is least forgiving. When "the natives were stirring over their loss of Aboriginal Sovereignty", the elder son whose disappearance the town mourns,[2] an official instructs the investigator Maximum

Security Service, the "cop analyst of one of the world's greatest slave-master nations", to "make this Aboriginal Sovereignty business go away", adding that "The government was not really interested in kids suiciding" (pt. 3, ch. 8). The government that is uninterested in the children's deaths is, in Tommyhawk's imagining, the one whose Minister must "save all Aboriginal children from their parents" (pt. 5, ch. 1). Wolfe's list of the positive outcomes of elimination, which includes "child abduction" (2006, p. 388), fits this rescue, and the novel supplies its history through the boy's own knowledge of removal: "Nobody could stop the government. They would take them kids either physically, take them mentally, and take them both ways" (pt. 1, ch. 13). Tommyhawk nonetheless wants to be taken. He fixes on "the golden-hair Minister for Aboriginal Affairs whom he had been watching faithfully on the ABC News" (pt. 1, ch. 13) and imagines her "composed of priceless gold nuggets mined from his own traditional lands" (pt. 2, ch. 12). The savior is made of extracted Country, so that rescue and the mine meet in a single image, and the Stolen Generations return in the form of a child's desire.

Dance has two plans of escape, and they answer different pressures. The first turns toward Country's other creatures. Left to bear the town's abuse over her husband's donkeys, she "turned to the wisdom of moths, of butterflies, while hatching her own plan to escape from the known world", to live "flamboyantly lepidoptera-ism, in a poem for a chrysalis hatching into the glory of a simple butterfly" (pt. 1, ch. 11); her moth-reading remains the novel's most patient attention to a Country that "always tells its people that there are endless ways of reading its world" (pt. 5, ch. 15). The second plan is flight from racism. Dance decides "This whole racist thing is costing us mob too much" and tells her husband to pack for China, and the town's response shows what she is escaping: "Pack your bag and go to China. We don't want any Aboriginal Chinamen-looking people here, and you look a bit Chinese to me" (pt. 4, ch. 12). She imagines that emigration would let her family "forget the historic racial profiling of her family that was killing their soul", and she writes daily "to the Chinese government pleading for asylum", "pleading for refugee status in the land of the long-ago ancestor whose name she did not know" (pt. 4, ch. 12). This plan is no savior fantasy. It is a refugee's response to abuse at home, and the satire falls on the community that abuses her, not on her wish to leave. The rescues of the state and the Mayor imagine improving Aboriginal people by removing them from Country or from themselves, while Dance's exits register what makes staying unbearable, and the novel's distinction between rescue and flight is one of its sharpest political judgements.

7. The Haze and Country's Jurisdiction

If enterprise and rescue both claim to act for Aboriginal people, the haze is where the novel narrates the authority that judges them, but it is first of all a material thing. The novel opens with smoke: "endlessly wandering fragments of ancient words were coming together, and forming the lines of stories entombed in smoke clouds circumnavigating the planet", until "dust, ash, memories written on broken butterfly wings with black soot" are "all backed up into an ochre-coloured haze that ended up sitting permanently over the flatlands" (pt. 1, ch. 1). The haze gathers particulate and remembered matter together, and it is most often plainly pollution, "so much like the polluted smoke wafting from a rubbish dump" (pt. 1, ch. 4). Across the novel the material register predominates; the ancestral and juridical register is a minority, but a persistent one, and the reading that follows rests on that minority register, not on any count of it.

Its decisive feature is that the novel gives sovereignty to Country before it gives it to anyone else. In the second chapter Country is the subject that suffers attack: "hearing that there were more attacks on its sovereignty – land bulldozed here, mines shafted and blown to smithereens, ancestors falling into the mine pit over there – the old country was awoken, re-awakened, eternal sleep impossible in the anger world" (pt. 1, ch. 2). The sentence makes "its sovereignty" Country's own, makes mining the injury to it, and makes the response, the thunder and the storm that parts "like a curtain around the Praiseworthy haze" (pt. 1, ch. 2), an act of the offended sovereign. The haze is narrated in the same grammar. It is a "cloud of haze pushed by the great ancestral government" (pt. 1, ch. 1); it is once said to be "claiming ultimate sovereignty of the flatlands", in a passage that goes on to say it "was really killing the weeds, the wildlife, and just about everything else" (pt. 1, ch. 3); and it is claimed in turn when the old people tell the state's investigator that "they owned the haze in all its manifestations through their traditional law title for this sphere of country" (pt. 3, ch. 10). That title claim is delivered across mutual incomprehension, with stories made up "for a laugh" on one side and "to put cash in his pocket" on the other (pt. 3, ch. 10), and the Latin property maxim the elders invoke, cuius est solum, phrases their title in the idiom it resists; the passage leaves the claim standing amid the irony, and the reading need not settle its tone. Watson's account of Raw Law makes the attribution of law to weather less strange than it may seem, for there "Songs can be sung to bring rain, stop flood, change the direction of the wind, or sing a heat wave" (2015, p. 32), and ceremony is "an agreement with the spirit world, the air, earth, water" (p. 31). Read in these terms, the haze is less an image of sovereignty than a party to a jurisdictional dispute, and the novel's comedy of claims and counter-claims is the form that dispute takes.

The haze's grief is aimed first inward, which keeps it from becoming the town's ally against the state. The old people lament how little they can do with "an atmospheric ancestor gone roguery because she had become too lonely for her neglectful people" (pt. 1, ch. 3); the neglectful people are the townsfolk who "had really tried to turn themselves into white-type superior people" (pt. 1, ch. 3), and the town answers with "the campaign to fight the atmosphere", declaring that "They were not going to be governed by some jacked off spirit" (pt. 1, ch. 2). The verb is exact. The town understands the haze as a government it refuses, and the novel's comedy lies in a community fighting the jurisdiction it belongs to. In the town's "boxing match with the haze's curse", a "creepy haze spirit" enters the Mayor's lungs and leaves him "obsessed by whiteness" (pt. 1, ch. 2); the haze does not judge assimilation from outside but makes the town's own desire for whiteness visible.

The obvious objection is that the haze is comic. The shire council invites the world to experience "the perpetual dust storm they had created" (pt. 1, ch. 4), Cause will not waste his time "enticing tourists to visit the man-made haze monument" (pt. 1, ch. 5), and the haze is also the town's product and commodity. This should be conceded. Yet the comedy in the elders' exchange falls first on the investigator, while the narration credits them with "holding all the laws of atmospheric air pressure" (pt. 3, ch. 10). Comedy in Praiseworthy is a register in which law is spoken, not proof that there is none, and the reading claims a narrative grammar rather than a solemn sovereign.

Here the novel does something that Rob Nixon's account of environmental harm points toward but does not imagine. Nixon's "slow violence", "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight" (Nixon, 2011, p. 2), poses a problem of visibility, and he locates the deeper contest in "who bears the social authority of witness, which entails much more than simply seeing or not seeing" (p. 16). For Nixon that authority belongs to people, to communities and to the writers and activists who mediate their testimony. Wright's haze is in plain view, and the contest it provokes is over its classification: Canberra pathologizes those who see it, much as the colonists described by Ambelin Kwaymullina (identified in her article as an Indigenous lawyer from the Bailgu and Njamal people of the Pilbara), "Believing that language, culture, knowledge lived only in human forms", "named Mother's cries just the wind" (Kwaymullina, 2005, para. 12); the town fights it; the elders claim it. What Praiseworthy adds to Nixon's account is a witness neither human nor merely evidentiary. The haze testifies as a party with standing, claiming sovereignty, bearing title and governing, so that the question of who may witness becomes the question of under whose law the witness speaks. Kwaymullina describes Country as "filled with relations speaking language and following Law" (2005, para. 3), and Wright's own account of storytelling gives the structure its local ground: she calls "the Law stories of our culture" "the ancient library" (Wright, 2019, para. 8) and writes that "our country hears its people, it is listening all the time, and it speaks back to us" (para. 30).

That witness is not partisan. Cause hears the haze give him the idea of an ancestral economy, a door "similar" to "the one his ancestors had built over aeons through their economies", until "it felt as though the haze had indeed spoken" (pt. 1, ch. 7); yet ancestral powers also turn against him, as the ancestral serpent travels "to the haze of Praiseworthy" to "worsen the mood of Cause Man Steel's people towards this donkey get-rich scheme" (pt. 1, ch. 28). Country speaks to the entrepreneur and against his scheme, and the haze weighs on market, state and town alike because it belongs to none of them.

8. The Ending: Country Pays

It is in the final chapter that the claim meets its hardest evidence, and the chapter must be read in its frame. It opens, "A moth once took Dance on a big spirit journey into the world of butterflies and moths…And, this was what it ended up looking like" (pt. 10, ch. 2), and what follows may be read as that journey's vision or as a projection of the town's future; the text frames it without fixing its status. Within the frame the enterprise succeeds, and the narration's sequence matters. Demand comes first. Churches and houses must be moved; "There were businesses that required a transport industry that did not cost the earth"; "The supermarket chains wanted to relocate"; "The mining industry wanted donkeys to cart the iron ore" (pt. 10, ch. 2). Then the demand reaches law. Praiseworthy's people travel to ceremonies on "the ancestral roads", and "other people in the country who were not the traditional owners wanted to become part of the ancestral roads too, and to be part of the ancient laws, and they could not make treaties that recognised Aboriginal sovereignty and Aboriginal government quick enough" (pt. 10, ch. 2).

The treaty sentence reverses the direction of recognition without exempting it from satire. In the fourth chapter of the first part Cause had mocked the "treaty-mongers" who went "running on your bellies – lower than a snake for treaties worth nothing" (pt. 1, ch. 4); now treaties are sought by non-owners, and what they recognize is "Aboriginal sovereignty and Aboriginal government" (pt. 10, ch. 2), the jurisdiction the state denied. Watson's dictum that recognition "only falls to First Nations at the moment we become dispossessed" (2015, p. 2) is inverted: here recognition falls to Country at the moment others want access to it. Yet the sentence's last words, "quick enough" (pt. 10, ch. 2), put the treaties in the idiom of the queue for donkey carts and the rush of the supermarket chains. Recognition arrives as demand, a commodity rush in which settlers buy into the ancient laws as they buy transport, and the novel's most utopian sentence is also its sharpest joke about the recognition debate amid which it was first read. The Uluru Statement's coexistence of sovereignties and Watson's suspicion of recognition both find a reflection here, and neither is endorsed: the treaty that the state would not make is made at last, but by a market that wants in.

Then the narration names the financier: "You want to know who paid for all this? Country. Country coughed it up. Coughed up the money" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The flash floods and "fat cyclones" through which the ancestral powers wash the country are said to have "coughed money too", and the passage concludes, "What couldn't a great ancestor of country do? So, it was exactly like what the old law people had always said would happen if you look after country, country will look after you" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The money pours into Cause's pockets "from the ancestral government which had more riches than a government developed by colonialists" (pt. 10, ch. 2). Country here does not stand outside the market as its moral opposite. It absorbs the market, paying for its demand, drawing its customers onto the ancestral roads and obliging its treaties, and in doing so it outbids the colonial state on the state's own terms of wealth and government. Absorption is the first half of absorptive sovereignty; the narration's refusal to let anyone own what Country absorbs is the second.

The narration does not, however, let Country's account stand alone. It gives three explanations of the success and lets them compete. The first is the market's demand, already narrated. The second is Cause's: "These days, he called his success as a hauler the result of his careful breeding program from day one" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The third is the ancestral mob's: "These days it was raining

cash in Praiseworthy, and the ancestral mob called that the power of country pure and simple as proof of its age-old wisdom, where country was actually integrating feral donkeys as countrymen" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The parallel verbs, he "called" and the ancestral mob "called", place the second and third accounts in the mouths of claimants, and the first is told as a catalog of appetites. The satire lies in the competition: entrepreneur, market and ancestral mob each claim the success, and the narration grants none of them the last word on what the success means. What it does grant is a further movement that none of the claimants controls, for "it was only these donkeys incorporating themselves into the song cycles of the old laws" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The donkeys, settler property gone feral and nearly made Native Title property, end as countrymen, claimed by Country's kinship rather than by any title.

The settler economy then presses to capture the success. Qantas seeks a merger; "Poor old Planet was not a merger man"; and the questions put to him are "about how donkeys could be converted into some kind of new jet fuel" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The town, for its part, wants the state's model back, complaining that Cause could have built them a terminal "while using one of those perpetual government trainee labour schemes to make Aboriginal people economically independent" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The success does not cleanse the place. Dance's cabbages become "the source of plague insects", "the haze became polluted", and "The dome transformed into an aerial cemetery" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The ancestral and the toxic registers end fused.

Here the claim stated at the outset meets its test. If any possession settled the meaning of Country, it would be in this chapter, where Cause grows rich and the market arrives in force. The narration instead refuses each possession: the market's merger is declined and its demand recast as a rush toward Country's law; Cause's breeding program is one claim among three; the state's trainee schemes survive only as the town's complaint; and the donkeys pass from property to kinship. Cause profits, and the novel says so, but profit is not title. The claim holds, then, in its strong form only for possession by the state, by Cause and by the market. The elders' "traditional law title" to the haze (pt. 3, ch. 10) is a claim of ownership the novel does not refute, but it is a claim made under Country's law, not against it; the reading's distinction between possession and law-title is the point at which it is most exposed, and a reader who held that title to be one more possession would have the strongest case against it.

In a closing run of conditionals ("Or, if he were elsewhere"), Cause "knows that Aboriginal Sovereignty is not dead" (pt. 10, ch. 2), and the narrator turns:

Finished up? Fancy thinking it could be like that! Of course, the spirit of Aboriginal Sovereignty never dies, for you cannot destroy what was infinitely existing in the law of country that always is, and always will be governing itself. (pt. 10, ch. 2)

The irony of "Fancy thinking" falls on the idea of a finish, the tidy success and the tidy grief, and not on the closing claim, which the narrator introduces with "Of course". The sentence holds both senses of the name, a father's refusal of his son's death and a political principle, and it gives that principle a jurisdiction, a law of country "governing itself" (pt. 10, ch. 2). The chapter's form is the one Whyte describes, a narrative of "counter-factuality" and "eternality" (2018, p. 229) in which the conditionals of a father's grief and the permanence of law share a sentence. The convergence with Watson is close: "The idea that the law could end or be finished does not occur within First Nations' languages or the law itself", for "As the law lives in the land it cannot die" (2015, p. 39). The novel's last word is not that Country defeats the market but that Country governs whatever enters it, including the market's money.

9. Conclusion

Praiseworthy satirizes an Aboriginal green enterprise that refuses the state while speaking the state's language of self-sufficiency and reaching for native title's property form; it shows the mine continuing inside that enterprise; it distinguishes the state's rescue, which removes, from Dance's flight from racism; and it narrates the haze as a party to a dispute over jurisdiction. Its ending, however, does not oppose Country to the market. Country pays, the market rushes in, and non-owners make the treaties the state would not, while no possession by state, entrepreneur or market is allowed to settle what Country is.

Watson's critique supplies the terms for naming this structure. She describes recognition as capture: sovereignty is recognized only at the moment it is transferred. The novel imagines the obverse, a sovereignty that takes in what the settler economy brings, its money, its animals, its customers and its treaties, without transferring itself. This is the structure I have called absorptive sovereignty. The concept reveals one thing the received opposition between Indigenous authority and green capital conceals: that Wright's satire spares no form of recognition, even the one that runs toward Country. Read as the triumph of Country over capital, the treaty sentence would be a utopian settlement; read through absorptive sovereignty, it is a joke about recognition as a commodity rush, in which settlers hurry to buy into the ancient laws and Country remains the party that governs the exchange. The concept also offers a way of reading Aboriginal fiction after the 2023 referendum that does not oblige the novel to take a side between the Uluru Statement and Watson's critique, because it locates authority neither in the constitution's recognition nor in its refusal but in a law that absorbs both.

For postcolonial ecocriticism the broader point is that Indigenous fiction can satirize not only extraction and settler greenwashing but the inclusion offered in their place, and that the habit, in readings of Wright, of treating Country as the market's pure outside cannot account for a novel in which Country pays. Whyte observes that green remedies can repeat the fossil economy's injustices (2018, p. 237); Praiseworthy imagines a remedy authored inside an Aboriginal community whose risk lies in its form, and a Country

strong enough to take the remedy's money without yielding it title. A literature of environmental justice must then say not only what harm is done but under whose law value, title and recognition fall.

The reading has limits. It rests on one novel, on a narration whose ancestral claims a non-Indigenous critic can report but not adjudicate, and it makes no claim about how green economies work in practice, which is a matter for communities and social research. Its claim is literary: Wright's novel shows how a remedy can carry the form of the wrong it would cure, and how a Country that governs itself can take the market's money without letting anyone take Country.

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Notes

[1] Quotations from the novel are from the first edition (Wright, 2023) and are cited by part and chapter, so that passages can be located in any edition. The first part opens under a Waanyi epigraph, "Kulibibi. Baba yalu kurrkamala, jaja," glossed "(butterflies are flying everywhere)" (pt. 1, epigraph), which the novel's note on sources attributes to the Waanyi dictionary; the butterflies of the final chapter return to that opening.

[2] The elder son, Aboriginal Sovereignty, disappears early in the novel and is presumed dead; the town's grief over him is part of the novel's account of the state's indifference. In keeping with media guidelines on the reporting of suicide, the essay does not describe the circumstances of his disappearance.