

Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), Judith Wright and Decolonised Transcultural Ecopoetics in Frank Heimans' *Shadow Sister*

PETER MINTER

1. *Minjerriba*

About half-way through Frank Heimans' classic 1977 documentary *Shadow Sister: A Film Biography of Australian Aboriginal Poet Kath Walker*, an intriguing segue shifts the focus from the figure of Walker the Aboriginal Australian poet and activist to Walker the close friend of Anglo-Australian poet Judith Wright.¹ Wright's appearance follows a segment in which Walker speaks frankly of her move in 1968 to live in Brisbane's Holland Park, the prejudices of her white neighbours and her profound sense of alienation from 'white suburbia.' Dressed in a bright pink kaftan-style gown, Walker cleans and works around a campsite. In a voiceover she declares 'I found that I couldn't emerge as an Aboriginal. I was an imitation white.' She describes how she has returned to Minjerriba (North Stradbroke Island) to 'live in a gunyah' and dwell authentically again on her traditional land. The scene then moves inside. Walker is sitting by an open fire composing a poem

¹ Frank Heimans, *Shadow Sister: A Film Biography of Australian Aboriginal Poet Kath Walker, M.B.E* (Sydney: Cinetel Productions, 1977), Videorecording. While acknowledging that today Walker is properly known as 'Oodgeroo Noonuccal', throughout this essay I follow Heimans' title and use 'Kath Walker'. See *Australian Poetry Library*, 'Oodgeroo Noonuccal,'

<http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/noonuccal-oodgeroo>. 'In 1988, as a protest against continuing Aboriginal disadvantage during the Bicentennial Celebration of White Australia, Walker returned the MBE she had been awarded in 1970, and subsequently adopted the Noonuccal tribal name Oodgeroo (meaning 'paperbark').' Indigenous historian and activist Gary Foley also writes that Walker had publicly used Oodgeroo Noonuccal since at least 1970, once she had returned to her traditional lands on Minjerriba (North Stradbroke Island) and established the cultural and education centre Moongalba. See Gary Foley, 'Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal),' <http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/heroes/kath.html>.

with pencil and paper. Over scenes of sand-mining, water pollution, industrial decay and rusting cars, she reads ‘Minjerriba’, a poem that rallies against the environmental destruction caused by extractive industries like sand mining while reminding us of the centrality of traditional Aboriginal stories and knowledges to a native Australian mode of environmentalism:

Minjerriba was a giant in the sun
 His green back coated with cypress and gum,
 Belly bloated with rich grains of sand,
 Eyes brimming with waters so cool,
 He stretched for miles in the sun.
 And Pacific on the east
 Quandamooka on the west
 Bathed this giant in the sun.

But Minjerriba's back is now broken,
 Men came and tore out his guts,
 Stole his rich grains of sand,
 Stripped his cloak of cypress and gum,
 Drained water from his ageless eyes
 And weakened this giant in the sun.

Oh man, with your machinery and science,
 Your greed and callous disregard,
 When your savage looting and lying is done,
 Will the Gods in the future,
 If future there is,
 Spare you your place in the sun?²

The poem ends as the camera focuses on a close-up of a tall green weed growing from the broken shell of car, sunlight shimmering in cobwebs.

Judith Wright’s arrival on the ferry from the mainland, over the choppy green waters of Quandamooka, signals both a bifurcation and intensification of the black activist environmentalism underpinning ‘Minjerriba’. The moment of arrival is an embrace, as Wright bounces chirpily from the ferry to the Dunwich wharf and into Walker’s arms. It is also a challenge. Wright’s appearance on Minjerriba and the scenes that follow say much about the

² Oodgeroo Noonuccal, ‘Minjerriba,’ *Creative Moment : World Poetry and Criticism*, no. 13 & 14 (1976).

close friendship between the two women and how their shared interest in (and sharing of) poetry sustained broader engagements with political issues such as Aboriginal land rights and the conservation movement.³ But over the many years of their friendship, perhaps emblematically their relationship always seemed to have a sense of mutual entanglement and dutiful negotiation. Still embraced on the Dunwich wharf, for instance, Walker lovingly hands Wright what she calls a ‘Stradbroke Island Orchid’, a gesture that sets off a profoundly interesting tussle between the two women over the name of the flower. They disagree. As we shall see below, Wright expresses her delight for the gift then immediately corrects Walker, naming the flower ‘Galeola.’⁴ This very discrete moment of disagreement, its signalling of a seemingly intractable cultural difference over the body of a gifted flower, is probably the true subject of this essay. Wright’s appearance cues a complex set of deeper themes and questions in which Walker and Wright’s personal and poetic relationship can be read as thoroughly symbolic, firstly of a unique, feminist mode of decolonised transcultural environmentalism, and secondly of the markedness of the appearance and intensity of this mode of environmentalism during the decade from the mid-1960s, and what this can tell us about a late modernist or perhaps even postmodernist Australian sensibility.

My focus on a decolonised transcultural environmentalism is aimed at contributing an ecocritical perspective to readings of Walker and Wright’s friendship.⁵ Recent scholarship has faithfully examined the personal,

³ From the early twentieth century, terms such as ‘conservationist’ and ‘the conservation movement’ were commonly used to denote what would today be known as ‘environmentalist’ or ‘environmentalism’.

⁴ My sincere thanks to Dr Bruce Gardiner for helping identify the species as *Galeola cassythoides*, first described by early colonial botanist Allan Cunningham.

⁵ While at the time of writing, ‘transnational’ is used far more commonly in, for instance, comparative and modernist literary studies, here I prefer ‘transcultural’ is it specifically suggests that which exceeds cultural division, especially at points of cross-cultural resonance in which cultural material is shared beyond the temporal, geographic and political imperatives of ‘the nation’. The ‘transcultural’ may indeed offer new horizons in what Susan Stanford Friedman calls a ‘*transformational planetary epistemology*’ (original emphasis). See Susan Stanford Friedman, ‘Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies,’ *Modernism/modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010), 474. On decolonisation and transcultural environmentalism in literary studies, see for example Chadwick Allen, *Trans-Indigenous Methodologies for Global Native Literary Studies*, Indigenous Americas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London: Routledge, 2010) and Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey and

political and cultural bonds between them; for instance, Brigid Rooney's 'Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright' examines the sincere 'mutual narrative' of their personal friendship alongside the 'inter-racial' and political complexities of their 'public sisterhood.'⁶ An ecopoetic appraisal of Walker and Wright's dialogue adds a dimension that can tell us a great deal about a transcultural (and counter-cultural) environmentalist sensibility in Australia, and how it has contributed to a uniquely Australian environmentalist poetics. Central to my discussion is the principle that the marrying of the conservation and Aboriginal land rights movements in Australia can be understood as a local, antipodean exemplar for interactions between larger cultural frameworks at work in global late-modernism, especially those to do with post-war decolonisation and the western environmentalist movement. Walker and Wright's friendship developed amidst the convergence of counter-cultural and activist politics in the late 1960s and early 1970s, coincident with various other progressive political vanguards (anti-Vietnam war; anti-nuclear; feminism; the sexual revolution; black power) at the cusp of economic and technological globalisation and the space-age. As a synthesis of local conservationist and land rights movements, however, Walker and Wright's transcultural environmentalism is uniquely Australian. I argue that it can be understood as an idiosyncratic mode of decolonisation, one in which a burgeoning western environmental movement intersects with the local Aboriginal land rights movement and a political agenda that is anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, ecocentric and pro-human rights.

Of course, in their own way, decolonisation and environmentalism, while emerging in counter-cultural and indeed 'counter-modern' contexts, are in themselves instances of the field of the modern. Rallying against modernist internationalism while appealing to a revitalised planetary postmodernism, the counter-cultural promise of Walker and Wright's friendship is representative of the proliferation of modernisms in the post-war period, a local manifestation of what Peter Nicholl's and others have

George B. Handley, *Postcolonial Ecologies : Literatures of the Environment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ Brigid Rooney, 'Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright,' in *Literary Activists : Australian Writer-Intellectuals and Public Life* (St Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 2009), pp.59–77. Rooney also writes on Heimans' documentary and its pre-Mabo contribution to the lobby for permanent traditional Aboriginal tenure at Moongalba.

described as ‘multiple modernisms’.⁷ As Susan Stanford Friedman writes, ‘modernity ... has no single meaning, not even in one location’.⁸ Indeed, Walker and Wright’s counter-modernism and its transcultural, decolonising and environmentalist intersections, while being always-already implicated in the modern, mark an antipodean turn away from hegemonic modernity, perhaps in a manner equivalent to what Ralph Maud has described as the ‘archaic postmodern’ and its projection of a post-modernity that draws upon forms of anterior or pre- modernity.⁹ In doing so, Walker and Wright’s friendship and its nuancing of environmentalism and land rights is noteworthy not only for its localised (and localising) transcultural intersections and intensities, but also for its complex figuration of deeper cultural formations that were at work more generally in post-war Australia.

2. *The Golden Orchid*

When Kath Walker hands Judith Wright a stem of flowers to welcome her to Minjerriba, she initiates a conversation that demonstrates not only the cross-cultural, sisterly complexities of their friendship, but which also sheds light on some of the key historical and political discourses at work in the emergence of a counter-cultural late modernism in Australia during the 1960s and 1970s, one that is especially inflected by a decolonising and feminist environmentalist sensibility. By the middle of the 1970s, when *Shadow Sister* was produced, it was widely acknowledged in Australia and internationally that Walker and Wright were among the leading Australian women poets of their generation, and they were both highly respected for their work as ‘writer-intellectuals and writer-activists’.¹⁰ It can also be said that they were each representative of very particular cultural paradigms that were part of the fabric of twentieth century Australia, formations about race, gender and class that had roots in colonial and nineteenth century Australian

⁷ See Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms : A Literary Guide*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and more recently Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms : Provocations on Modernity across Time*, *Modernist Latitudes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁸ ‘Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies.’, 473.

⁹ Ralph Maud, ‘Charles Olson’s Archaic Postmodern,’ *Looking for Oneself: contributions to the study of Charles Olson* [Published in Minutes of the Charles Olson Society #42 (September 2001)] (2001), <http://charlesolson.org/Files/archaic1.htm>

¹⁰ Rooney, ‘Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright.’ 61

culture that were inflected by complex sets of historical, political and ideological forces. Walker, of course, was an Aboriginal woman of the Noonuccal people of Minjerriba. Remarkably, she grew up freely, escaping the fate of so many others in Queensland and around Australia who were forcibly relocated onto missions and reserves. Walker's biographer Kathie Cochrane explains that, as a result of the failure of the Stradbroke Island mission, Walker's parents 'lived a free life' and brought up six children in the family home at Dunwich. Walker 'never experienced the heavy, paternalistic hand of mission rule. She grew up with a strong sense of her Aboriginal identity and the determination to fight for the rights of all her people.'¹¹ Conversely Wright, daughter of the colonising Anglo-Christian pastoral 'squattocracy' that had occupied south-eastern Australia from the early nineteenth century, spent much of her life deliberating on what Rooney describes as 'her haunted sense of complicity' in her family's role in Aboriginal dispossession and environmental harm.¹² Walker and Wright are curiously entwined, as representatives of the racial divide and as breakthrough transcultural interlocutors, Walker bearing the conscience of Aboriginal activism after growing up unusually free of white subjugation, and Wright the free settler daughter who grew up burdened by the cross-generational guilt of her ancestors.¹³

Sometime in 1976 (in an early-career shot by renowned Australian cinematographer Geoff Burton) all these factors suddenly coalesce on the Dunwich wharf.

Kath Walker (KW): Hi!

Judith Wright (JW): How are you?

KW: A famous Stradbroke Island orchid ...

JW: Oh! Well that's fantastic. I've come at just the right time.

KW: It's all in full bloom especially for you...

JW: Thank you

KW: When we go in, I'll show you where it is, and it's all over a big tree.

¹¹ Kathie Cochrane, *Oodgeroo* (St. Lucia, Qld.: University of Queensland Press, 1994), pp.7, 3.

¹² Rooney, 'Networks and Shadows: The Public Sisterhood of Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Judith Wright.', 73.

¹³ These issues were always central to Wright's writing, from her first collection *The Moving Image* (1946) and the poem 'Nigger's Leap: New England', to her family history *The Generations of Men* (1959) and later essays such as 'Landscape and Dreaming' (1985).

JW: I'll tell you one thing: it's Galeola, the Golden Orchid.
KW: It is an orchid? It's not a bean?
JW: It's an orchid. Galeola.
KW: I heard it was a bean [scene shifts from Dunwich Wharf to forest] Oh isn't it a marvelous specimen.
JW: Beautiful one.
KW: And you think it's Galeola?
JW: It's very interesting with a dark brown stem.
KW: Yah...
JW: I think it's related to it.
KW: There's two varieties.
JW: This one is the Golden Orchid and ours was yellower than this.
KW: A different variety.
JW: This one I think seems very much the same as our flower.
So, you will wanna watch that one like anything.
KW: Oh I only let special people come in and see that one!
JW: Good!
KW [off camera]: I first met Judith Wright at a writers' do, and she came out to me, and she said 'I think your poem 'Son of Mine' is really beautiful', and she said she envied me having written it. And we've been very very firm friends ever since.
We share so much in common with each other.
We're poets. We fight the mining companies because of the terrible battering they give to the country. We fight for a better way of life, for the heritage that all Australians are entitled to in Australia, and I think this is what binds us very very closely together.¹⁴

This friendly horticultural contest over the name of a plant broaches the contours of a transcultural environmentalism with roots in both settler and Aboriginal histories, associations and epistemes. On film, Walker and Wright embrace, their arms crossed affectionately behind one another's backs, their warmth 'in full bloom' as they begin to walk toward the camera. However, as Wright interjects to correct Walker's 'Stradbroke Island Orchid', their arms drop and they face one another. Wright gently insists, re-

¹⁴ Heimans, *Shadow Sister: A Film Biography of Australian Aboriginal Poet Kath Walker, M.B.E.*, transcript from 24:35 to 26:04.

naming the flower ‘Galeola’, a quibble that continues in the following scene in the forest at Moongalba as Walker shows her the flower in its native setting growing along the large branch of a tree. Here I wish to make a detailed appraisal of the content and tenor of Walker and Wright’s dialogue, especially to trace and distinguish its unvoiced blend of intimacy and interstitial fragmentation. The discourse might best be figured as a ‘cleaving’, a curious entanglement of synthesis and difference, a simultaneous splitting away from and a joining and faithful adherence. The hinge of this congenial incongruity is to be found in two subtle conditions in Walker and Wright’s exchange. On one hand, in their different senses of the normative object-hood of the flower, they demonstrate a cleaving-away. On the other, and perhaps less obviously, in their shared, feminist commitment to a transformative decolonising choreography, which is aimed at unsettling the very conditions of a normative colonial ontology, they demonstrate a cleaving-toward.

From Walker’s perspective, the gift of the ‘Stradbroke Island Orchid’ functions as an invitation for Wright to join her in an affectionate filial bond with one another and, significantly, with Minjerriba itself. She says ‘it’s all in full bloom especially for you’, a generous gesture of welcoming from Minjerriba and Walker as its emissary. Walker is welcoming Wright to country, bearing its perfume and fertility to the Dunwich wharf, entreating Wright to join her in a privileged sororal space in which the flower is synecdoche for a transcultural kinship with both herself and Minjerriba. Wright’s approach to the flower is, at first, awkwardly imperious. Her insertion—‘I will tell you ...it’s an orchid, Galeola’—declares not only a susceptibility to bossiness but also a reflexive allegiance to the normative epistemologies of western science and the logic and nomenclature of Linnean botanical codification. Walker backtracks, ‘I heard it was a bean’, but the discrete rebuff is consequential. Essentially, Wright’s ‘it is’ aligns her with the western episteme’s assumption of the right to objectify, name and catalogue, while Walker’s ‘I heard’ reifies a relational, quotidian reality in which naming and situating are radically localised, always in flowing networks of conveyance and reciprocity. Wright’s ‘it’s ...Galeola’ rests on the laurels of colonial Australia and the imprimatur of the European Enlightenment, while Walker’s ‘I heard’ defends indigeneity and the embodiment of a sonorous, neighbourly kinship with others and country.

At this point in the documentary, the exchange between Walker and Wright, precipitated by Walker’s gentle gesture of welcoming, reveals a precipitous divergence between colonial and Indigenous sensibilities.

However, the dissension is short lived. In the forest at Moongalba, looking at the orchid growing on a tree, Walker and Wright's discourse again grows closer. Wright tempers her position by suggesting her 'Galeola' may be homologous to the 'Stradbroke Island Orchid', saying 'I think it's related to it' and that it only 'seems' a match. Wright's ontological certainty is subtly deferred in a moment of shared scepticism and a re-alignment of her discourse with Walker's rhetoric of sisterly being-related. It is significant that this 'cleaving-toward' occurs in a private, demarcated space somewhat hidden in the trees. Walker declares that she 'only let[s] special people come in and see that one.' While in the end, between them the name of flower remains uncertain, Walker's emphasis of a concealed, secret opacity, over which she, ultimately, has sovereign control, re-marks her invitation to Wright within a transcultural economy of female intimacy and regard, for each other, for the flower and for Minjerriba, which remains opaque behind a veil of sisterly exchange ('shadow sisters') but which looks forward to a shared and very visible feminist environmental sensibility.

Walker's modest invitation for Wright to join a privileged sororal space is underscored by an off-camera voiceover in which she describes their first meeting and enumerates their activist credentials. It is here that we can observe the description of a decolonised environmental sensibility in which transcultural female coterie inflects both respectful sisterly regard and an ethically attuned veneration of nature. Walker declares they are united as activist poets in a 'very very firm' friendship inaugurated over a poem about motherhood (Walker's 'Son of Mine') and strengthened by a shared dedication to environmentalism. Walker says Wright 'came out to me' at a 'writers' do' and together they 'fight the mining companies because of the terrible battering they give country.' Anchored in a trope of domestic violence, the 'terrible battering' genders country in the feminine, reinforcing Walker's sense of sisterly camaraderie and the stronghold of filial (and territorial) kinship. And, in a significant gesture that underscores Walker's decolonising framework, she asserts that the fight is 'for all Australians', the protection of the environment from extractive industries a transcultural responsibility to preserve 'the heritage that all Australians are entitled to in Australia'. Walker's all-inclusive gesture underscores the earlier symbolic significance of her presentation of the flower. For Wright, having at first demarcated a singular capacity to know and to name, Walker's invitation to an ethically responsive space of feminine transcultural kinship presents the possibility of a nurturing sororal relation to nature and, finally, the means to circumvent and partly resolve her family's legacy (as a daughter of the colonial 'squattocracy') of patrilineal environmental and interracial

violence. For Walker, it reaffirms her authority as a sovereign speaker in her country. These factors are crucial to the documentary's following scene, in which Walker and Wright's sisterly vanguard is positively affirmed.

3. 'Still bearing'

[By a stream and lake]

KW: ... and gather here, and you can see over there the shellfish we used to eat, for our lunches. Here was the—the men would put up a nice waterfall for us. People used to come here. They used to, of course buy the white man's food, and that's a date palm that was one of the dropped seeds, and the date palm grew there. And the old grannies used to bring the lemons, and they used to plant the seeds, and there's lemon trees in there.

JW: Still bearing?

KW: Still bearing. Still bearing. They always planted wherever they went, for the next generation of children.

JW: Yes...

KW: Which was, you know, a marvelous way of [unclear].

JW: Well that's what we used to do too, up to a point, with apple seeds and things.

KW: Yes.

JW: Now, nobody, nobody ever does it now.

KW: Nobody bothers now. No.

JW: Too difficult.

[dialogue obscure as they cross the waters]

KW: ... no nobody seems to know what the meaning of balance with nature is all about anymore. You know they look at this [pointing to midden] and say, you know, Aboriginal kind is tardy, look at the mess they made with those shells. Ha!

[They wander along together collecting rubbish from the lakeside]

KW [off camera]: Judith gave me something very special. She gave me a beautiful poem she called 'Two Dreamtimes'. In it she says:

*My shadow-sister, I sing to you
from my place with my righteous kin.*

*You were one of the dark children
I wasn't allowed to play with—
river bank campers, the wrong colour,
(I couldn't turn you white).*

That is part of the poem. And, in my answer to this very beautiful poem, I write:

*Sister poet, this I know,
Your dreams are my dreams,
Your thoughts are my thoughts
And the shadow that made us sisters
That binds us close together
Together with us cries.¹⁵*

In a scene that unfolds alongside bodies of water, estuarine interzones consisting of a small stream and an inland island lake, Walker and Wright's decolonised environmentalism is given further nuance. Walker and Wright emerge from a deeply shadowed bush track, Walker touring Wright about country. She points to a shellfish midden and narrates childhood memories of gathering together with her family to eat, emphasising how the older women would intentionally propagate new trees from fruit seeds. It is at this moment that the considerable depth and value of Walker and Wright's transcultural sisterhood is fully brought to bear. Until now, Walker and Wright's relationship in the documentary has been textured by Wright's interjection and its suggestion of an imbalance founded in distinctly different, and indeed oppositional, histories and epistemologies. In this scene, any divergence is rescinded under the sign of a truly transcultural feminine ontology that looks beyond colonisation and invites the sense of a new stage in a decolonised historical dialectic.

The pivotal moment is Walker's telling the story of her 'grannies' planting lemon seeds to grow new trees for the future, and Wright's leading question: 'Still bearing?' Walker responds in the affirmative: 'Still bearing. Still bearing. They always planted wherever they went, for the next generation of children.' Here we can observe, in the figure of intergenerational reciprocity, the natural conclusion of Walker and Wright's repartee. Their shared embrace of maternal fertility is a moment of complete

¹⁵ Transcript from 26:05 to 28:00. In Cochrane, the third last line reads 'And our shadow that made us sisters'. See 'Sister Poet', Cochrane, *Oodgeroo*, 97.

understanding and pride (note in the film, when Walker confers, Wright's proud turn of the head at 26:35) in a real-life contribution to the expression, sustenance and maintenance of life and culture. 'Still bearing?' is both recursively and proleptically loaded, reaching back to a fecund and solicitous past while projecting a bounteous present and future. The transcultural dimension is amplified by Wright's agreement that 'that's what we used to do too ... with apple seeds and things', a sensitive, indeed collaborative gesture of entwined existential realities. For both Walker and Wright, 'still bearing' forms the basis of a properly decolonised cultural kinship in which care for country and filial generosity are combined to propagate a sustaining feminist vision of transcultural and intergenerational well-being. It also conveys a redemptive function, redeeming any personal or indeed historical division between the settler's daughter and the Aboriginal activist, sublating their shared anger and guilt over invasion, disenfranchisement and displacement.

Of course, 'nobody ever does it now.' Walker complains that 'nobody seems to know what the meaning of balance with nature is all about anymore', returning us to the political realities of modernity and alienation from nature, and the need for a transcultural environmentalist activism aimed at recuperating and restoring a balanced material, cultural and aesthetic ontology. Walker and Wright stroll beside the lake collecting bottles and plastic rubbish, and we are returned to the story of colonisation, disconnection and pollution. In another off-camera voiceover, Walker again appeals to the powerful remedy of a sororal transcultural affiliation. Walker retells the story of Wright's gift of a 'beautiful poem ... 'Two Dreamtimes'' and her reciprocative 'Sister Poet'.¹⁶ Wright's poem is exemplary for its declaration of settler guilt and her heartfelt aspiration to find a meaningful personal and historical resolution to the impact of colonisation, her resounding '(I couldn't turn you white)' unequivocally signalling her rejection of white assimilationist ideology. Walker's response (unpublished during her lifetime) is typically unfeigned. 'Your dreams are my dreams, your thoughts are my thoughts' announces the embodiment of a (possibly utopian) transcultural space in which racial difference is collapsed and 'dreaming' and 'thinking' are exchangeable. Walker underlines her sense of kinship between herself and Wright, a cultural, philosophical and poetic reconciliation which, while admitting the suffering of inter-racial conflict, is aimed ultimately at the resolution of histories of colonisation and violence under the rubric of a feminist decolonised environmentalism.

¹⁶ On the exchange of the poems, see Cochrane and Rooney.

4. *Sister Dreamtimes*

Writing on ethics and ecological theory in her volume *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, internationally acclaimed Australian philosopher Val Plumwood distinguishes between an Indigenous ‘ethics of virtue’ and a western ‘ethics of reason’:

There are many good reasons to avoid building an account of ecological morality on ethics in its usual rationalist conception, and to move in the direction of an ethics of virtue. Rationalist-inspired ethical concepts are highly ethnocentric and cannot account adequately for the views of many indigenous peoples. The attempted application of these rationalist concepts to their moral life tends to lead to the view that they lack a real ethical framework ... Alternative virtue-based concepts such as care, respect, gratitude, sensitivity, reverence and friendship seem more applicable.¹⁷

Plumwood’s ‘ethics of virtue’ echoes Walker and Wright’s shared fidelity to an environment that is ‘still bearing’ and a sororal kinship to country that incorporates (and relies upon) modes of reciprocity, mutuality and care. It seeks to contain or surpass an instrumentalising rationalist ethos, in which ‘ethics and morality are equated with duty, sermonising and self-sacrifice, in effect Kantian ethics, which operates as a prohibition on desire’¹⁸, reflecting Wright’s revisionist and decolonising yearning to reimagine her patrilineal settler endowment by sharing in, and personally encouraging in her own work, the propagation of a feminist, transcultural ecology of enrichment, conservation and justice.

In Heimans’ documentary, the sequence between Walker and Wright lasts for three and a half minutes, enough time to say a great deal about a particular mode of Australian late-modernism. At the heart of Walker and Wright’s ‘cleaving’ is the figure of an idiosyncratically antipodean counter-culturalism that, especially in the decade between 1965 and 1975,

¹⁷ Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), p.183. At Chapter 7, note 12, Plumwood reminds us that although ‘virtue ethics are Aristotelian and Aristotle is usually counted as a rationalist, this is one of a number of areas in which his work is not typical of rationalist thought.’

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.182–183.

synthesised western environmentalist and Aboriginal land rights movements to form a decolonised transcultural environmentalism that was radically ecocentric and variously anti-hegemonic. Their sororal habitus emerges, not only in the film but, of course, throughout their friendship, as the cornerstone of an inter-racial, anti-racist environmental activism in which the politics of anti-mining, for instance, is allied with a practical and philosophical engagement with the material, ethical and cosmological dimensions of Indigenous responsibilities for country.

The sequence ends as Walker recites the final lines of her poem ‘Sister Poet’ in voiceover — ‘and the shadow that made us sisters, that binds us close together, together with us cries’—as she is shown walking with Wright along an avenue of tall, sweeping paperbarks growing beside a lake. As we now know, Walker’s tribal name Oodgeroo, which she used publicly from 1988, means ‘paperbark’. The closing image is deeply resonant, the sunlit trunks and branches of the paperbarks vibrating in reflections on the surface of the rippling water. Wright has been absorbed utterly into Walker’s home and the name, character, and ethos of her identity, while Walker wills the coalescing of her identity, its dreams and thoughts, with Wright’s. The effect is a kind of shared sovereignty of the imagination. Walking side-by-side in an opaque but Sapphically refined, interior sororal space beneath the trees, Walker and Wright finally demonstrate a uniquely antipodean ‘*transformational* planetary epistemology’ and its radical promise.

Peter Minter teaches English and Indigenous Studies at the University of Sydney. His recent books include the edited volumes *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature* (Allen & Unwin Sydney 2008) and *The Literature of Australia* (Norton New York 2009) and works of poetry including *blue grass* (Salt Cambridge 2006) and *In the Serious Light of Nothing* (Chinese University Press Hong Kong 2013). He has been poetry editor of *Meanjin*, is currently poetry editor of *Overland*, and is a founding member of the First Nations Australia Writers Network.