Motifs
ISSN : 2726-0399

6 | 2022
Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*: "A self-governing literature that belongs to place"

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https://lodelpreprod.univ-rennes2.fr/blank/index.php?id=806

DOI : 10.56078/motifs.806

Samuel J. Cox, « The Dust of *Carpentaria* », *Motifs* [], 6 | 2022, 19 décembre 2022, 11 avril 2025. URL : https://lodelpreprod.univ-rennes2.fr/blank/index.php?id=806

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Samuel J. Cox

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1 Writing from an overlooked region of Australia, in both literary and cultural terms, the emergence Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* onto the stage of world literature has arguably been as unexpected as the "dust storm [which] thunder[s] in from the south" to subsume Uptown in Wright's novel[1]. Infinitesimal particles of dust are easily overlooked, but a focus on the granular in *Carpentaria* opens up an aperture into the ways in which the author, writing as an Indigenous Waanyi woman, inverts Western understandings and relation to environment and establishes the tiny particles of Country as epic storytelling matter. I will begin this article by giving a brief account of dust in the Western tradition, which has settled into settler-colonial views of land in Australia, largely represented in *Carpentaria* by the residents of Uptown. Then I will set out an alternative reading of dust as Country, which importantly connects ecosystems across northern and central Australia. Moving through *Carpentaria*, I will trace a dusty pathway from the arrival of Elias Smith, through Mozzie Fishman and Will Phantom, to the destruction of the Gurfurritt mine near the novel's conclusion, before (un)settling further into the dust to explore how the material, the political and the textual might permeate each other, as is suggested by the dust of *Carpentaria* and Wright's concept of the ancient library.

2 My focus on dust is not intended to exclude other elements of Country, which is a "holistic indigenous paradigm[2]", on the contrary, by focusing on dust as a materiality of Country, I set out to show the all-inclusive nature of Country in Wright's *Carpentaria* and expand knowledge on her unique poetics embedded in place. As an element of Country, I also suggest that dust has something unique to teach us – like Wright's storytelling and aesthetics it crosses boundaries,

moving through fences and across Country and between realms of earth, fire, water and air. As imperishable matter, it also suggests the all-time of Indigenous storytelling, the "larger space" Wright wanted her story to inhabit, by being both an archive of the past and the ancient continent, and part of the vital dynamic forces which stimulate Country in the present. By following the dust of *Carpentaria*, I will approach the novel using an alternative paradigm to "the containment of thought and idea [3]" which Wright has argued defines the English and Australian traditions.

3 In this paper I seek to explore the dust of *Carpentaria* using a multi-layered approach, embracing the movement of our material, while acknowledging that at its broadest ecocriticism is, in Cheryll Glotfelly's influential definition, "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment [4]". Seeking to complicate the predominant Eurocentric focus of ecocriticism, Elizabeth Deloughrey and George Handley [5] establish a confluence between the states of alterity and other the postcolonial seeks to explore and the altern characteristics of the land itself, quoting Edward Said's elaboration that efforts of postcolonial writing, aimed at recovery, mythmaking and identification are, first and foremost "enabled by the land [6]". This connection is only amplified by the specifics of Indigenous relation to land and Country in Australia which is considered to be at the centre of being. Indigenous legal scholar Irene Watson has summarised it thus: "we are not merely on and in the land, we are of it, and we speak from this place of Creation, of land, of law [7]". Land, even in its most minute form cannot be separated, for as Aileen Moreton-Robinson clarifies: "Our ontological relationship to land is a condition of our embodied subjectivity [8]."

4 Deborah Bird Rose has pointed out that this identification between Indigenous people and land also existed in reverse, having shown that settler societies were established through a "dual war" waged against both nature and Indigenous people [9]. I propose we consider the dust of *Carpentaria* as Country in minutiae, and consider how it eludes our grasp and refuses to remain within the territorial boundaries, either physical or intellectual, we erect around it. Dust is deterritorialised terrain, the material of life and death, "matter on the brink of spirit [10]", and of ontological importance. Tracing the dust of *Carpentaria*, I propose we erode the boundaries between established

fields of ecocriticism, new materialism and postcolonial studies to immerse ourselves in the granules of Wright's story.

5 The figure of the cyclone has featured prominently in the study of *Carpentaria*[11], but the dust of the dry and the desert also descends upon the town, at times violently with the chaos of the tempest, in other moments falling softly onto the skin. If we place ourselves in Wright's Waanyi Country in the south of the Gulf of Carpentaria we find a region punctuated by saturating wetness and parching dryness. As the narrator states in the novel's opening, this is Country of distinctive variation, being "sometimes under water and sometimes bone-dry" (p. 3). I can vividly remember, traveling through the Gulf of Carpentaria during the dry season as a child, the juxtaposition of the dry red dusty earth beside the road alongside debris from wet season flooding wedged in plants metres off the ground.

6 Chrystopher Spicer has shown that the tropics have been an alien region within the European imagination, long characterised in opposition to temperate regions deemed civilised[12]. In *Carpentaria*, the narrator comments on these tropes and outside perceptions of the region by describing TV viewers across the country "gandering at the still untameable, northern hinterland" (p. 398). In the year the novel was published, Darwin-based author Nicolas Rothwell connected central and northern Australia, arguing both lie largely beyond the literary and cultural margins of the settler-colonial states metropoles, motioning towards the possibility of an "alternative literary history" in which the "central and western deserts, and the savannahs and the tropics play their part[13]." It is equally worth identifying that northern and central Australia contain the highest proportions of Aboriginal people demographically. As both a writer and an activist, Wright has found herself working across these regions, with her non-fiction book *Grog War* (1997) emerging through connections with northern and central Australian Indigenous communities; experiences which influenced the writing of *Carpentaria*.

7 While we could conceive dust and water, the wet and the dry, as oppositional to each other, they are, like all aspects of any ecological system, interrelated. As this paper will bear out, dust troubles the systems of dualism which eco-philosopher Val Plumwood has identified as essential to colonialism[14] and the partitioning impulse Bruno

Latour has positioned at the heart of the modern project.[15] Dust flows freely between the human and non-human worlds, undergoing metamorphoses between the elements, which are evoked in *Carpentaria's* epigraph taken from Seamus Heaney's "The First Words". Wright is working across such lines, even as she employs "the strength of these elements to invoke a knowledge and a mythology as old as time itself that resists European attempts to know, claim and control" the region[16].

8 Before we pursue our dusty pathway through *Carpentaria*, I propose to dive under the prevailing winds and trace our way back to the genesis of dust in the Western tradition, which begins not in the wetter climes of Europe but in the deserts and ancient sagas of the East. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* features the "House of Dust" as a place of the dead[17], while in the *Iliad* dust denotes the limits of the human as the epic gains inhuman weight from this most infinitesimal matter[18], but it is the Bible which has had the greatest enduring textual influence. In the Old Testament, humanity is created from "the dust of the ground", only to be raised above it, though when Adam and Eve are cast out of the Garden, it is pronounced menacingly: "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return[19]." Thus, dust is associated with not only with the incipient moment of creation, but death, sin, contamination, and the Fall. Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad detects a turn within Genesis, from a solidarity between soil, dust and human beings, which almost immediately gives way to alienation as the earth is cursed[20]. Equally, it cannot escape association with the desert, the untamed wilderness which is oppositional to civilisation[21].

9 Tracing the word dust through its etymological pathways, however, reveals a Germanic origin, related to the Old High German *tunst* meaning storm or breath, and the German *Dunst* for mist or vapor. While these both have intriguing connections to the Biblical story, and Wright's own poetics, the etymology does not suggest any direct linguistic connection. In Latin, *pulvis*, the root of pulverise, is the primary translation for dust and suggests something different to the English. However, there is another Latin word for dust, *afa*, which does not share a Latin origin but rather derives from the Hebrew *aphar* for which "dust" is deemed the best translation. Rabbi and scholar Chaim Bentorah poses that *aphar* remains somewhat myster-

ious, it is not land (*eretz*) nor fertile soil (*adamah*), and its Canaanite origins suggest the particles which formed the natural world, though the dust human beings are formed from appears connected to the *adamah*, and yet the serpent is also eternally cursed to it [22].

10 If dust is a site of separation from the material earth in the Bible as much as it is a point of connection, then this partition is compounded in the European tradition by the otherness of the desert, an alien and seemingly hostile environment. This response to dryness, dust and the desert finds fertile ground within the settler-colonial literature (and culture) of Australia. Despite noting that dust storms predated white settlement, environmental historian Tom Griffiths offers the generalised settler-colonial view of dust and dry country as a hostile element: "When soil defies its nature and takes to the air, it becomes dust. Soil sustains, dust can kill [23]". Perhaps exemplifying this perspective is Henry Lawson's characterisation of dust storms and "Drought" as the "red marauder", enacting land as an implacable enemy [24]. Dust is entwined with the ecological destruction wrought by settler-colonialism, but on the driest continent on earth in which seventy percent of the landmass is arid or semi-arid, it is also an inevitable, and thus important, part of country. It also suggests an unwillingness of the country to conform to European expectations, for as the *Bulletin* wrote of far-western New South Wales and Queensland amid great dust storms in 1901:

> [T]he West seems to have broken loose, and to have become movable instead of fixed, and to be wandering about casually, and liable to fall on other parts of the country and overwhelm them, and no one has any certain ideas how to catch it and chain it up again [25].

11 This passage reveals how dust not only suggests difference, but a potentially transgressive materiality of the country, which refuses to settle down and be contained.

12 In *Carpentaria*, Wright shows us that in her imaginary, dust is not exterior or separate from Country. Although by tracing and returning to the dust of the Bible, we have moved geographically and environmentally closer to the world of the novel as Mozzie Fishman, in his "dusty R.M. Williams boots" (p. 133) reminds us that "Biblical Stories lived in somebody else's desert" (p. 137). The desert dust arrives not

only in storms but caked and matted upon the Fishman, Will Phantom and their convoy, arriving on lines of flight and travel which circulate through the dry country. Like the serpentine river and tidal mudflats, the ebbing and flowing gulf and raging cyclone, dust permeates *Carpentaria*'s poetics and Wright's "aesthetics of uncertainty[26]": storytelling which is incessantly "rebeginning[27]" in a novel noted as a "boundary crosser[28]".

> Dust Country
> Country is red dust gathered—
> formed to rocks, sculpted to mountains,
> hollowed to gullies—dug to rivers—
> breathes life shapes her children to walk
> leaving only dust—ashes to scatter
> in the wind—to take only memories
> gather up stories—track through
> Country—tread lightly—carefully
> across its Dreamings[29].

13 This excerpt from Jeanine Leane's poem "Yulany Dhabal" (skin and bone) allows us to sift through and find an entry pathway into the radically different view of dust as Country. The poet establishes that this minuscule material gathers into the material heft of Country: forming "rocks", "mountains", "gullies" and "rivers". Even as it "tread[s] lightly", it carries the weight of memory and stories, the sprinklings of the past which enable life and meaning in the present. Rose has written that "[C]ountry flourishes through looped and tangled relationships[30]" and dust suggests how the dynamic material present is permeated by and circles through the remains of the past. Although Leane is a Wiradjuri woman from south-west New South Wales, her evocation of red dust as Country, subsumes the reader within an Indigenous conception of land relevant to our immersion in the dust of *Carpentaria*. The movement of dust from inland Australia outward, an example of when "Gods move the country" (p. 473), connects Leane's Country with that of Wright, as dust finds its way into the nooks and crannies, and allows for the slippage between Country and country - Indigenous Country and the nation or continent.

14 The first half of Leane's poem interpolates Wiradjuri alongside English, including "bunhaan" and "dhaagun" which are approximately translated to "dust and ash[es][31]". Wright occasionally intersperses Waanyi language into *Carpentaria*, but due to the small number of current speakers the only readily available translation I am aware of is a lexicon sample by linguist Gavan Breen featuring 179 words. Dust does not feature in this small selection, though related terms do appear, such as wind – *wurrarrra*; ground – *jamba*; notably instead of dirt, sand – *kalabi*; and red ochre – *malala*[32]. Over 250 Aboriginal languages exist across the continent, and each are uniquely adapted to specific environments, so making sweeping statements is unwise, but every language I have come across which has an accessible dictionary into English has a word for dust and many have very differentiated language connected to environment. For example, the lexicon of the Kaytetye people, whose Country approaches the town of Tennant Creek where Alexis Wright was based when writing *Grog War*, includes: dust and fine dirt – *atnmerrnge* and *kaperle-kaperle*; soil and dust – *aherne*; amidst the dust – *ahernele-rarre*; dust off – *apanpanpetnhenke*; dust, dust cloud – *errmetyine*; and dust storms which come before rain – *alharrkwe*, signified by a linguistic connection to *alhwerrke* for muddy water[33].

15 Relational knowledge such as this permeates Wright's fictional world, as relation to environment is established as a key difference between Uptown, the predominantly white town, and the Pricklebush mob who are the Indigenous inhabitants and live on the town fringe. Uptown is resistant to and disrupted by the movement of Country, whereas Pricklebush is empowered by this movement. At the beginning of the novel, Uptown is holding an event when:

> […] everything [is] ruined by a normal sort of dust storm thundering in from the south. A thick wall of red dust […] damaging the cut sandwiches […sending] the fidget prone adults […] running for cover. (p. 9)

16 Just as the rivers of the region changing their course appears unnatural to *Carpentaria*'s inhabitants of European heritage, a perfectly "normal" dust storm is cause for panic. Dust storms are indeed a perfectly normal phenomenon, with the Australian continent the largest dust producing region in the Southern Hemisphere.[34]

Although these dust events have been exacerbated by land management practices since white settlement and colonisation, similar land processes and dust pathways appear to have existed for hundreds of thousands, if not millions of years.[35] The annual dust from inland arid regions can far exceed the regional sediment load of river systems,[36] though the sediments themselves are often the alluvial product of waterways, suggesting how these systems are interconnected. Dust from the Australian continent provides essential nutrients to fertilise surrounding oceans, with the Gulf of Carpentaria believed to be an important dust sink where large amounts of sediments are deposited.[37] Across the continent dust is acknowledged as an important link between the lithosphere, hydrosphere, atmosphere and biosphere,[38] or to put it more poetically the realms of earth, fire, water and air which are integral to life.

17 However, despite dust being a natural part of local ecosystems, it suggests for Uptown fearful alterity because the modern nation state has an established connection (and legal basis) in tillable and productive soil. In the wake of the dustbowl which engulfed the Great Plains of America, Franklin D. Roosevelt would declare: "A nation that destroys its soil, destroys itself[39]." By drawing upon the writings of 17th century Swiss philosopher and theorist on international law Emer de Vettel and French philosopher Baron de Montesquieu, Watson has shown that the productive cultivation of a land's soil, in ways defined by European civilisation, formed the legal basis for claims of sovereignty[40]. These ideas enabled the concept of *terra nullius*, meaning empty or nobody's land, analogous to the Biblical empty wilderness, which justified the colonisation of Australia, but also its limits. Indeed, viewed through these Western paradigms which define Uptown and the modern settler-colonial state of Australia, dust resembles Mary Douglas's description of dirt as "matter out of place[41]". Bronwyn Lay has described dust as "matter gone renegade[42]", it gets in the way of cut sandwiches and the orderly running of things. This is confirmed by the fact that on mining sites in Australia, which *Carpentaria*'s Gurfurritt mine draws on, these particles are called fugitive dust, as though it was escaping from its internment in the soil.

18 If the dust of *Carpentaria* suggests for Uptown the alterity of the northern Australian environment its residents are enmeshed in,

Wright deploys it not only forcefully as thundering in, but as subtly infiltrating Uptown's world. Shocking red skies mark the coming of Elias Smith, with Wright writing that when the residents of Uptown "looked at their own fair skin, it was another shock of their lives to see their skin was red" (p. 45). If whiteness is an ideal, this dust disrupts it. Michael Marder has argued that ideals and ideal entities neither accumulate nor produce dust as they are detached from material reality [43]. Wright parodies Uptown's desire to separate itself from the world, by having them erect an invisible boundary wall, "like stonemasons" so they could be "masters of their own dreams" (p. 57). This wall represents Uptown's barricaded imaginary, "puerile dreams of stone walls, big locked gates, barred windows, barbed wire" (p. 57) which is based upon exclusion of both the other and the environment.

19 In *The Great Derangement* Amitav Ghosh implicates the temporally and spatially enclosed nature of the realist novel, which constricts around the idea of the human, in the partitioning project of modernity, writing: "It is through [...] boundaries [in] time and space, that the world of the novel is created: like the margins of a book [44]." I propose reading the dust of *Carpentaria* as Country in minutiae, suggestive of the repressed outside and other, which through its temporal and spatial movement, moves out across the margins to disrupt the partitions of modernity. Tracing this dust compels us to turn the page on bounded ideas and instead be permeated by what Wright describes as the "ancient knowledge of interconnectedness that you will find in Indigenous storytelling [45]."

Mozzie Fishman and the Convoy

20 The opening of Chapter Five introduces Mozzie Fishman, leader, "religious zealot" and law man who incessantly travels the drylands, onto the dusty stage: "From out of the dust storms the Fishman drove home. A long line of battered old cars heavily coated in the red-earth dust of the dry country" (p. 114). The dust storms which Uptown found so disruptive, elicit a very different response for Pricklebush, which "waited [...] for the red wall [...] when the breeze picked up and turned into a wall of red dust spanning from left to right across the southern horizon [...] Then they really knew Fishman was

coming home" (p. 126). Indeed, for the men of the Fishman's convoy "the dust storm was expected to appear", marking their arrival and instead of being a burden it swallows up "the weight in their heavy minds" (p. 115).

21 In contrast to Norm Phantom, who is a "follower of spirits out in the sea", and in spite of his partly aquatic name, Mozzie Fishman is described as a "failure as a water man" who has instead turned to the dry country, though he remains "unbeaten" as a water diviner (p. 124). Nonetheless Norm and Mozzie remain "the best of friends" and the narrator refers to them as two "Uncles", a term of endearment and respect in Aboriginal English, who are "shining stars" for the children of the community. (p. 133) These men personify connection to two aspects of Country. Whereas Norm exemplifies the time-honoured connection to waterways and the sea which stretches out into the Gulf of Carpentaria, Mozzie embodies connection to the dry arid country to the south, and the ancient dreaming tracks which connect the entire continent. Indigenous artist Judy Watson, who shares Waanyi heritage with Wright, identifies that one of these important routes which ties her Country to the interior is the wild dog dreaming [46].

22 Wright translates the Fishman's storytelling gravitas into Western terms, writing that "once upon a time, his name might have been Paul, or something Old Testament like Joshua." (p. 116) Resembling a prophet of dryness, the Fishman declares simply: "I am ordinary for dry dirt." (p. 468)

23 The text emphasises that the Fishman's pilgrims of perpetual movement were "covered with days and months of dust" and that the "long dusty convoy… seemed to have risen out of the earth." (p. 114) Whereas the dust is disruptive to whiteness, the men of the convoy carry it on their bodies as a signifier of their journeys across sacred Country. Eva Knudsen has observed that through the Land's connection with ancestral bodies ensures it "becomes a mythic text of Aboriginal culture" [47], and the Fishman's men bear its tracings on their bodies. This is not Douglas's "matter out of place", but the dust of Country or matter *in* place. Through the men's movement they have accumulated dust on them, suggesting their knowledge of "almost every desert in the continent." (p. 119) When Wright refers to

the convoy as the "breath of the earth"[48] she appears to be referencing the Biblical creation story in which God breathes the breath of life into humankind created from dust of the ground[49]. However, she has inverted it to represent the sacredness of Country, suggesting perhaps, it is the dust of the earth, and its circulation, which breathes life and ancient times.

24 Deepening the "breath of the earth" image, the convoy is playfully described as the "red ochre spectacle" (p. 114) establishing a symbolic connection between red dust and red ochre. Red ochre has been described as the "single common element" which unites the greatly different material cultures of Aboriginal language groups across time and space[50]. It holds special significance for its connection to the Dreaming[51], with ochre being associated with the blood of ancestral beings who created the land; it is thus deeply enmeshed with story and creation. Nonetheless, due to its cultural significance ochre remains a material central to the dreaming tracks and old trading routes which crisscross the interior of Aboriginal Australia.

25 In describing the perpetual movement of the convoy across the continent, Mozzie Fishman's convoy is retracing song lines and migratory routes of the past which permeate the present: "the men in this moving mirage of battered vehicles felt they had well and truly followed the Dreaming" as they "crossed the lost dusty roads of ancient times" (p. 119). Dust is not only evocative of age but contains physical traces of the past, even as the convoy is retracing routes of the past.

26 Archaeologist John Mulvaney has identified that key routes utilised by explorers, which later became the telegraph lines and roads of the settler-colonial state, were in fact Aboriginal lines of travel of deep environmental, social, cultural and economic significance.[52] He notes with irony that it remains:

> [a] little acknowledged truth, that the routes of our iconic explorers frequently followed the routes of Aboriginal people, who followed, in turn, the epic routes of their own iconic continental explorers, the ancestral Dreaming creation beings[53].

27 Mozzie Fishman's dusty convoy is retracing these epic routes, though Wright reminds us they equally contain practical knowledge, as she

explains that the Fishman's water divining abilities might simply be superior knowledge, as after all he "knew the country [...] like the back of his hand." (p. 124) The Fishman reads the Country in granular detail, as if it were "a book of another kind covering thousands of kilometres" (p. 119).

28 As for Will Phantom, he emerges into the tale as part of Mozzie's convoy, "with bare chest [and] weeks of accumulated desert dust, his jeans, no longer blue, were ingrained with dirt from months of travelling through desert country" (p. 160).

29 Françoise Palleau-Papin argues that this lyrical passage almost ingrains the dirt and dust of Will's journey onto the reader, leading us towards "an emphatic understanding, at once physical and emotional [54]". These particles reference an ancient and time-worn connection to land, still dynamically in the making, which troubles the enclosed and segregated history and imaginary of Uptown. Noting the significance of this image, Palleau-Papin writes: "[Will] does not wear a shirt; he wears Country, a country which he embodies and personifies in the dry dust covering his torso and jeans [55]".

30 Transformed by his dusty odyssey with the Fishman, Will represents not just the timeless relation to land, but reflects the dynamism of Country in Aboriginal ontology. If the land is a text entwined with story, it is an active one forever rewriting itself upon the shifting sands. As Knudsen has highlighted, Aboriginal literature reveals storytelling immersed in movement, passage and transformation as integral aspects to culture and creativity [56]. This dynamism is exemplified by Mozzie's dusty convoy and flows into a text, which as Alison Ravenscroft has noted, "moves and morphs [57]". Just as dust moves along what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari deem lines of flight [58], the convoy moves across well-trodden lines of travel, with these serpentine movements reflecting for Wright the imagery of the serpent. The novel describes how the "convoy crested spinifex-covered hills, dipped into red rock valleys, curved round the narrow bends, and created a long snake of red dust in its wake." (pp. 115-116)

31 The primordial matter trailing the convoy is a creative evocation of the rainbow serpent, an ancestral being which interconnects diverse Indigenous groups across the continent and is more commonly asso-

ciated with water [59]. Nonetheless, even in absence the connection is there as dust sediments are primarily the product of rivers, while tiny particles of dust are essential for the condensation of rainfall. As the opening pages of *Carpentaria* show, the serpent embodies the creative and destructive forces of Country, with a being that is "porous [… and] permeates everything." (p. 2)

32 The convoy's lines of flight and travel are relationally interconnected to the environment they are moving through. Perhaps foreshadowing *The Swan Book*, the text states that "the journey undertaken by the Fishman's convoy was as pure as the water birds of the Wet season's Gulf country lagoons flying overhead, travelling through sky routes of ageless eons to their eternal, ancient homes." (p. 115) Here we are reminded that the convoy's journey is embedded within other routes and pathways, reflecting the ancient flight path of birds. Just like the birds, land in the form of dust is driven along ancient routes defined by environmental weather systems, nomadic particles which follow their own meandering pathways across the continent. Mozzie Fishman's nomadism is not only linked to the formerly nomadic ways of Indigenous people, but to the nomadic nature of the land itself. Yunkaporta has surmised that the stories and ancient narratives of Aboriginal Australia share a foundational idea imprinted across deep time: "[…] *if you don't move with the land, the land will move you* [60]." As a self-described "*nuclei*" (p. 129) Mozzie Fishman is trying to move people, even as he is moved by the land. The movement of dust and Mozzie, Will and the convoy, within an interconnected world contrasts dramatically with the boundedness and wall building of Uptown.

33 Although the dust storm announcing the arrival of the convoy might appear fantastical, this could again just be a case of the Fishman's more granulated knowledge of the Country. In Northern Australia dust storms intensify across September through to November during the build-up to the wet season [61].

Wright's Epic Matter(s)

34 At the beginning of Chapter Ten, the November build-up is personified into an epic elemental force of a giant wearing a cloak:

> […] if you were to see miracles happen, look to the heavens in November. See him properly for yourself in those dark, stormy skies of the wet season build-up. Look for the giant in a cloak. Brace yourself when he comes rolling through the dust storm, spreading himself red, straight across those ancient dry plains, heading for town. (p. 295)

35 The giant's cloak is the red dust lifted off the "ancient dry plains" (p. 295) and he spreads himself red across the margins of the novel. I find Ghosh's reading of the epic, as embracing the "inconceivably large […] to the same degree the novel shuns it [62]", enlightening here. Although not specifically referring to Wright's work, Ghosh identifies that, in contrast to the modern novel, various epic storytelling traditions from across the world never lost knowledge of the non-human world and argues that in the cultural and imaginative crisis of the Anthropocene these narrative traditions have never been more important [63]. Indeed, Wright's work embraces Indigenous storytelling traditions, immersed in relation and interconnectedness, which she has explained, "ties us with land and the environment through stories and Aboriginal law [64]."

36 These ties enacted through storytelling are reflected in the novel which alternatively refers to the storm or giant in the cloak as the "giant sugarbag man of the skies" (p. 295). Sugarbag is a type of honey made by native Australian bees in northern Australia and which is traditionally harvested by Indigenous people. In this way, the storm is manifested into a familiar and relational form, interconnecting Indigenous story and environment. It is these ties which persistently expand Wright's story beyond what Ghosh refers to as "the discontinuities and boundaries of the nation-state [65]", and the modern conventions of the novel; we are forced to confront elemental forces, what Thoreau called "vast, Titanic, inhuman nature [66]", permeated by ties to the ancient past and heritage of Country.

37 When the German explorer Ludwig Leichhardt reached the plains of Kakadu in what is now the Northern Territory, having spent the best part of eighteen months travelling across Aboriginal land, including the Gulf of Carpentaria, he described seeing "many columns of dust raised by whirlwinds" and wrote that "it seemed as if the giant spirits of the great plain" were dancing before them [67]. Leichhardt's invoca-

tion of the epic and spiritual to comprehend this dynamic combination of particularised matter and atmospheric elements, indicates an incapacity of a rational humanist frame to contain them. Yunkaporta has explained that the spiritual properties smoke is deemed to have in Indigenous culture stems from its liminal state, being "neither earth nor air but part of both [68]", and dust moves into the same between space.

38 It is this liminality and movement beyond human bounds, an encounter often mediated and comprehended through the sacred, which functions as a key ingredient of the epic. In *Carpentaria*, dust presages not only the infinite bounds of Country but the enduring relation to this colossal force, a relation which itself takes on epic heft through its existence since "time immemorial". (p. 1) Relation to Country and opening the novel to these non-human forces necessitates a reversal in power dynamics, evidenced elsewhere through Wright's language. While the giant in the cloak represents this shift in a personified being or force, in other places the imagery is more subtle, for example describing an "exodus of dust heading down the south road" or "the heavy clouds moving their empire south." (pp. 190, 333) Such language repurposes anthropocentric terms of epic reach to represent the vast dynamic forces of Country and reorient the human and novelistic world as subject to these forces.

39 The movement of dust, linked to the cyclical patterns of Country offers perhaps the most suggestive link to the epic. In the opening chapter of *The Swan Book*, entitled "Dust Cycle", Wright establishes a link, hinted at in *Carpentaria*'s convoy, between the "migratory travelling cycles" of birds and circulating dust, albeit in a dystopian future where the natural patterns have been devastatingly disrupted by climate change [69]. Not only is the epic narrative tradition migratory, but its logic is cyclical, bringing, as Ghosh argues, "multiple universes" and the forces of nature into conjunction with the narrative [70]. Joseph Campbell, who was familiar with traditional epic narrative traditions from across the world, identified at the most basic level three stages integral to this narrative form: a departure, followed by a series of challenges and, finally, a return [71]. I would argue, not only are these cyclical story patterns suggested in Wright's work by the migration of birds, but by the cycles of dust. As a materiality of Country, dust in *Carpentaria* is associated with climatic cycles

and changing seasons, movement and transformation, chaotic and destructive forces which also bring renewal, always connected to the traces of the past. In this sense, it suggests, not only the circle, arguably the most important symbol in Indigenous culture, but the cyclical patterns of Country.

40 It is this logic that ensures the dust of *Carpentaria* permeates any perceived boundaries between wet and dry: the desert, and the tropical coast. Such connections are established by language and imagery, describing how, for example, the "[s]and flew up from the beach like little dust storms" or likening the ocean to a "sea desert". (pp. 61, 370) Conversely, even when Will is "way out in the desert [...] a thousand miles away from the sea, he [still] felt its rhythms." (p. 385) In the novel, two characters personify connection to the wet and the dry, the riverine coastal and the desert: Will's father Norm and his mentor the Fishman. Will Phantom, who emerges into the story covered in dust, is also "mud", (p. 174) thus sharing a connection to both and completing the circle.

41 In a dusty crescendo, dust is stirred up by obliterating destruction before shrouding the story in an unsettled fecundity. Will and the Fishman's party, with the assistance of the elements, blow up the Gurfurritt mine, as dust is connected to the destruction of the mine and its aftermath by being a product of the destruction and its pollutants, yet also shielding the men in its cloak:

> When the explosions stopped, the Fishman's men picked themselves up from the ground. They agreed that only the greatness of the mighty ancestor had saved them. It was a miracle they were still alive after the earth shook so violently underneath them, they thought it would go on forever. A heavy red fog of dust and smoke hung in the air as they moved away, their visibility limited to just a few metres. The fine dust fell slowly, and when it settled on those men who were trying to regain a sense of enormity of what had happened, they took on the appearance of the earth itself. One by one, camouflaged by dust, they began spiriting themselves away, quickly, carefully, as dust covered their tracks, back to the lagoon of the dancing spirits. (p. 399)

42 Here dust interconnects the ancestral past with the present and the creative destructive potential of the land, manifested by the great

ancestor, which has been harnessed by the devoted acolytes of the Fishman. The liminality of dust is fused with that of smoke and vapour, in a "heavy red fog", which suggests the men's enmeshment with the beyond human world of the ancestors. Dust acting as a protective shroud of the earth suggests not only connection and intimacy with the time-worn and storied land, but with its cyclical potentiality. While in ancient Greek Epic Iliadic dust is connected with human limits, death and destruction [72], Wright's use of dust as not just an agent of destruction but as a protective envelopment which implies connection and relation to Country, suggests this is epic matter of a distinct hue. Propelled by the mine exploding like "burnt chop suey", (p. 395) the dust of the land and destruction falling slowly to camouflage the party and cover their tracks, suggests their bond with the chthonic powers of the epical earth.

43 These connections deepen when Will and the Fishman's men take the bodies of the three dead boys to be buried, entering a "red-ochre-walled cave": "On the floor of the cave lay a heavy coating of dust which when moved by their footsteps, flew into the stale air like red powder, revealing it antiquity" (p. 419). The ancient dust, ochre and soot covered walls bear the remnants of "one hundred thousand years of dreams" (p. 420), linking dust and the deep time memory of Indigenous storytelling. After all, as the narrative voice declares: "our country is a very big story" (p. 395). The continuing immersion in dust and entry into this subterranean chamber, likened to the "under-world's belly" (p. 420), evokes not only burial and passing, but a returning: the rebirth of this story, by circuitous, even serpentine movements.

Dust and The Ancient Library

44 In a 2019 essay, Wright likened the storytelling heritage of Indigenous Australians to a vast ancient library bound with the continent:

> The long vision is integral to our regenerative story-telling practices, with its foundations deep in our knowledge of the Law stories of our culture – the ancient library, the oldest surviving library on Earth [...] These important stories of deep knowledge in our culture have always helped us to understand the creative and regenerative powers

> of this Continent, and to know how country is always alive, and can catastrophically change the world around us [73].

45 As we have traced, the dust of *Carpentaria* suggests not only Country in minutiae and motion, but that it bears vestiges and fragments of the deep knowledge of embeddedness retained in "the oldest surviving library on Earth". I propose to finish this article by turning over the dust of *Carpentaria* to explore an idea of dust as the material remnant of this library and how it might interconnect ideas of a written book-centred culture with an oral land-based culture and suggest a mode for understanding land as text or library. As Knudsen has noted, orality has been "othered" by modernity, deemed unreliable and associated with myth and superstition [74]. Meanwhile, literary criticism struggles to account for any influence which is not connected to prior forms of textual representation, despite the efforts of ecocriticism and new materialism to expand the scope beyond the human. Anthropologist Peter Sutton has summarised that in Indigenous Australia, "the land is already a narrative – an artefact of intellect – before people represent it [75]".

46 Intriguingly, in European thought dust has been conceptualised as analogous to the repository of human history, though lacking the interconnected depth and grandeur of Wright's ancient library. English essayist Augustine Birrell once referred to "that great dust heap" which was called "history [76]", presaging philosopher Walter Benjamin's description of history as a great storm of debris which propels us into the future, a storm that he notes, not without irony, "we call progress [77]". Such conceptualisations stem from the association of dust with ruin and decay and appear umbilically bound to the modern causation which envisions "time as an irreversible arrow" of "capitalisation" and "progress [78]". It is the dominance of these paradigms which have ensured that in the chronicle of Australia, Indigenous culture and Country have been cast upon the dust heap. Irene Watson has likened this process to being buried alive [79], and Wright has similarly evoked an imaginary emerging from the rubble [80]. Well aware of the power of history, she has cited African American writer James Baldwin's declaration that "it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations [...]", setting

out a desire for her stories to unsettle and reframe established histories [81].

47 If the Gurfurritt mine in *Carpentaria* represents progress for Uptowners, then its utter obliteration into a great storm of dust and debris is a refutation of the causality which underpins this idea of progress. Indigenous knowledge and storytelling, bound to Country at the granular level, understands the world through a causation which is cyclical, knowing the regenerative power which comes from catastrophe [82]. Wright reminds us of this fact through what author Alex Miller has described as her "energised [… and] huge act of imagination" which is *Carpentaria*, emerging out of this "amazing place" which is a place of waste and the discarded: "the town dump [83]". The novel returns us to the dust to reread it and immerse us in its storm of creative, destructive, and regenerative potential.

48 We could consider the ancient library's enmeshed material counterpart to be the great dust library, the totality of which always eludes the grasp. Dust is not only evocative of age, both ancient landscapes and dust-covered libraries, but is a material repository of past, both human and non-human, containing the remains of "planets, animals, humans and […] objects [84]" coalescing together. In *The Archaeology of Australia's Deserts* Mike Smith likens the landscape to a historical document with complex records of interaction:

> Stratified in time, stacked one above another, each one has its own climates, physical landscapes and environments; each its own social landscapes and people […] features of earlier deserts project through these layers to become part of the fabric and cultural geography of later deserts [85].

49 Dust is the "fragmenting skin of the Earth [86]", the layered past rising to permeate the present. To dry out a metaphor Carolyn Steedman's offers, there is the great, red, slow moving dust storm of Everything, and then there are the seemingly infinite heaps we have collected are just the remnants and fragments which remain legible [87]. And to paraphrase Heraclitus, we never stand in the same dust storm twice [88].

50 Dust is the movement of this dynamic fabric, and the sheer multitudinous vastness of these tracings suggests the incalculable cham-

bers, vaulting skyward and plumbing subterranean depths, a true library of the land might contain. Only such a largesse could hope to encompass "one hundred thousand years of dreams" (p. 420). Dust is the detritus, even the waste of things and in a library the very books themselves are decaying, decomposing, disrupting the enforced stasis of the printed word and the written histories. Dust contains the creative forces of transformation, and yet it also holds the traces of the past, barely legible perhaps, but there, and importantly, indestructible. Furthermore, the red dust of the Australian continent is uniquely pervasive and suggestive. As has been printed in a collection of Waanyi artist Judy Watson's work, the "history of Australia, a dry, hot, dusty continent, has been written in dust and blood, the red sand of the desert staining our accounts of ourselves [89]". Leane has argued *Carpentaria* reveals settler-colonial history to be only the "shallowest layer" subsumed within a "bigger past [90]".

51 This is where the dust begins to gather weight, as the very nature of dust itself, if examined in greater detail appears to erode and destabilise the notion and causality which underpins progress and the straight arrow of time. In her work on the archive and cultural history, Steedman has found in dust insight into new ways of working and thinking through history and finding what has been cast off and left behind, remarking:

> Dust, you see, will always do this: be both there and not there; what is left and what is gone [...] It is not about rubbish, nor about the discarded [...] it is not about Waste [...] Dust – the Philosophy of Dust – speaks of the opposite of waste and dispersal; of a grand circularity, of nothing ever, ever going away [91].

52 Thus, dust impels a circuitous causality, in which the dust of the past cannot be liquidated, but rather awaits to regather into the present. If we consider dust as Country, we can envision the fundamental indestructibility of Country, constantly being able to redefine and regather itself. It equally reflects the cyclical logic and knowledge of Country, which as Wright explains has been ingrained within Indigenous storytelling over deep time.

53 These essential connections between land and story have been identified by other influential Indigenous writers. Discussing Rachel

Perkin's documentation of her Arrente people's knowledge of language and songlines, Noel Pearson notes that:

> [T]he songlines of the women of central Australia are also the heritage of non-Aboriginal Australians. It is this culture that is the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Australia. It is these mythic stories that are Australia's Book of Genesis. For the shards of the classical culture of this continent to vanish would be a loss not only to its Indigenous peoples but also to all Australians, and to the heritage of the world generally [92].

54 In response, Kim Scott has suggested that Pearson's use of the word "shards" is suggestive of the cultural renaissance which followed the northern hemisphere's discovery of shards of ancient pottery and language [93]. However, due to the oral nature of Aboriginal culture, Scott argues instead that the "stimuli are not shards of pottery or statues, but topographical features pulsing with story, song and language [94]." What if we consider these stimuli as Country in its most minuscule form, the tiniest fragments of this ancient continent: dust? Stephen Muecke has written that "even the smallest sites contain masses of knowledge, and perhaps power, a power of resurgence [95]." This knowledge, as *Carpentaria* illustrates, is entangled with the flight paths of birds, the elements and seasons, the storms and rivers and rains and the beings which have lived and died. Dust contains the barely legible past regathering to give shape to the present. If the land is a vast library, dust is the fragments and tracings of its jottings, its endless telling.

55 Yet even in a material sense we cannot consider dust apolitical because human beings have not just been consigned to the dust but have stained it too. Scott has stated that the "continent" is "black country [96]", and this is true in a more material sense than we might imagine. Mulvaney once estimated that over one billion Aboriginal people have lived and died on this land, what Perkins refers to as the "depth of Australia's humanity" is borne in the dust [97]. But it is not just material remains which are sedimented in the dust but the traces of systems of cultural and environmental interdependence which bear testament to Wright's "time immemorial". Prior to *Carpentaria*'s publication she declared: "I want to explore the gift of

our true inheritances by disallowing memories of times passed to sink into oblivion [98]."

56 And yet, dust suggests the very impossibility of complete oblivion, for as Steedman reflects in her dusty musings:

> The fundamental lessons of physiology, of cell-theory, and of neurology were to do with the ceaseless making and unmaking, the movement and transmutation of one thing into another [...] Nothing goes away [99].

57 Indeed, the death of the material body was but "a final restoration of the compounds of the Human Organism to the Inorganic Universe [100]." Yunkaporta characterises what he terms the "First Law", of Aboriginal ontology, in similar terms: "[n]othing is created or destroyed; it just moves and changes [101]." It is an ancient, embodied relationship to land across these cycles which Moreton-Robinson has argued establishes Indigenous claim to Country, declaring:

> Our ontological relationship to land is a condition of our embodied subjectivity. The Indigenous body signifies our title to land and our death reintegrates our body with that of our mother the earth [102].

58 With such movement, we have rather appropriately circled back to the start, from dust to dust. If we consider the ancient library as being ground in the dust, we can recognise both the impossibility of its destruction and its cyclical movement between past and present. As Steedman elucidates: ""Dust" is one of those curious words that in its verb form, bifurcates in meaning, performs an action of perfect circularity, and denotes its very opposite [103]." Likewise, if we consider the etymology of a word that describes the tendency things to become dust - entropy - we find, like the word tropic, it derives from the Greek derived *trope* which denotes a turning. Dust, it appears, is always turning the page. "The story has to go on" remarks Mozzie Fishman, (p. 413) and so it inevitably does, with a return of the land to its "naked earth form [104]." In *Carpentaria*, the movement from the Fishman to Will, with the destruction of the mine and town and clearing of its dusty wreckage and detritus into the ocean, is all a mere turning of the page, just another page-stained dust-red in the timeless annals of Country.

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English

While waterways and tempestuous, cyclonic forces have dominated former readings of *Carpentaria*, this paper places its focus on another elemental presence embedded in the environment of northern Australia: dust. The south highlands region of Alexis Wright's Waanyi Country is bound by ties which not only flow out into the ocean to the north, but to the desert and dry country to the south. While dust in Western literature, has predominantly signified human limits, death, absence and fear, this paper illuminates how the dust of Carpentaria denotes connection to the past, the time immemorial of Indigenous relation to Country, through which the dynamic forces and regenerative powers of catastrophe can be comprehended. Tracing pathways of dust through the novel and across its landscapes reveals the powerful role this infinitesimal substance occupies in the story's ecology. From the dust storms which strike the story in primeval fury, to Mozzie Fishman's dust-covered convoy from which Will Phantom emerges, to the final climatic obliteration of the mine, dust assuages the threat of destruction and fragmentation through its connection to what Wright has described as the ancient library, the deep knowledge and epic storytelling traditions ingrained in Country.

Français

Les cours d'eau et les forces cycloniques dans *Carpentaria* ont fait l'objet d'études approfondies, mais le présent article met en lumière une autre présence élémentaire ancrée dans l'environnement de l'Australie du nord : la poussière. En effet, les plateaux sud du pays Waanji d'Alexis Wright sont reliés non seulement à l'océan au nord, mais aussi au désert au sud. Bien que la poussière dans la littérature occidentale ait principalement symbolisé les limites humaines, la mort, l'absence, et la peur, il sera ici question de la façon dont la poussière de Carpentarie évoque la connexion au passé, aux temps immémoriaux de la relation aborigène au Pays, à travers lesquels les forces dynamiques et les pouvoirs régénératifs de la catastrophe peuvent être compris. Suivre la circulation de la poussière à travers le roman et ses paysages permet de comprendre le rôle important que cette substance infinitésimale joue dans l'écologie de l'histoire. De la tempête de poussière qui intervient avec une fureur primordiale dans l'histoire, au convoi poussiéreux de Mozzie Fishman dont Will Phantom surgit, à la destruction finale de la mine, la poussière atténue la menace de la destruction et de la fragmentation en établissant une connexion avec ce que Wright décrit comme l'ancienne bibliothèque, constituée par la connaissance ancestrale du lieu et les traditions de la narration épique enracinés dans le Pays.

Mots-clés

poussière, écocritique, Carpentaria, Wright (Alexis), épopée, mondes aborigènes, littérature australienne

Keywords

dust, Aboriginal Country, ecocriticism, Carpentaria, Wright (Alexis), epic, indigenous studies, Australian literature

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