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Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

A self-governing literature that belongs to place

Anne Le Guellec-Minel

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Introduction

1 Asked to celebrate Oodegeroo Noonuccal's poetry in 2008, Alexis Wright presented the poet as a "fearless warrior" of the 1960s whose work was "heroic and full of confidence [1]", yet also expressed deep frustration that so many decades later, political procedural inertia and damaging interventionism [2] had prevented any improvement in the material or legal situation of the people Noonuccal had used her pen to defend:

> [Aboriginal people] are still struggling for the same rights [Noonuccal] and others fought for, against policies that are re-labelled as 'self determination,' 'self management', 'shared or mutual responsibility' and 'intervention'. [...] I am blown away by the inability of this or previous governments to work on a settlement of Indigenous rights with recognition and compensation for decades of damages, and tired of politicians taking their time to plan yet another process to look at a process of how to be involved in a process for anything to get done [3].

2 In the face of such relentless governmental obstructionism, however, Wright reasserted the power Noonuccal's poetry had to "hold back the full effect of colonialism [and] reinvigorate the sovereignty of the mind":

> Oodgeroo absolutely understood the power of belief in the fight for sovereignty over this land – that if you could succeed in keeping the basic architecture of how you think, then you owned the freedom of your mind, that unimpeded space to store hope and feed your ability to survive [4].

3 Rage, disillusionment and weariness in the face of a long history of defeat can lead to despair, but Wright exalts the power of storytelling as that which makes it possible, against all odds, to believe in the unbelievable [5], and to maintain an Indigenous "sovereignty of the mind". Far from representing a withdrawal into abstraction or mental isolationism, the phrase, as Philip Mead puts it, represents a break from the "narrow, legalistic and constitutional history" of the concept of sovereignty, and refers to a "much more expansive and wholistic understanding of Indigenous self-determination [6]". Aileen Moreton-Robinson's often quoted definition of Indigenous sovereignty, for instance, contrasts the expansive, existentially and spiritually situated form of sovereignty to the one defined by Locke and Rousseau, that is exercised within the state or nation:

> Our sovereignty is embodied, it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and it is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land. In this sense, our sovereignty is carried by the body and differs from Western constructions of sovereignty, which are predicated on the social contract model, the idea of a unified supreme authority, territorial integrity and individual rights [7].

4 Such a grounded and interconnected concept of sovereignty proudly challenges the culturally depleting force of colonial rule, and the history of dispossession and marginalization it has brought about. As Wright has forcefully explained, writing for her was a way to

> reach above the extremities of our capture by trying to portray our humanity as people who are capable of having great and little thoughts that are constantly being analysed and internalised in the Indigenous state of mind [and to] question the ideas of boundaries through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world [8].

5 Wright's rejection of predetermined categories of any kind (be they dictated by colonial biopolicies, postcolonial identity politics, definitions of cultural authenticity, or by the laws of the publishing market), and her use of writing as a way to break down boundaries and create new spaces where silenced stories can be heard [9], both resonate with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of a revolutionary "Minor Literature [10]". The concept has been criticized [11] for its philosophical rather than literary grounding, as well as for its amalgamation of different forms of minority writing: marginal literatures of minorities, secondary literatures of minor nations or movements writing back to a larger tradition, but also experimental literatures "deterritorialising" a major language. Its focus on the revolutionary performativity of language, the connection of the individual concerns to political issues [12], and the collective value of utterance [13], however, seems to provide a valid theoretical framework for the study of Wright's work. Indeed, as Victoria Addis argues, "in stressing the revolutionary nature of minor literature and its role in visualising and thereby creating new futures over and above differentiating factors such as nation or race, minor literature carries fewer problems than terms such as "third-world" literature or even "post-colonial" literature [14]."

6 Yet the suggestion of the primacy of innate and integral politicization of minority writing in the Deleuze-Guattarian definition, which might also be reminiscent of Sartre's less nuanced definitions of engaged literature [15], is disclaimed by Wright on two counts. The first is that "most of all, *Carpentaria* was written with the desire to create a work of art", rather than "a political manifesto [16]". The second is that, as Wright is well aware, stories of oppression can be commodified by publishing markets in a way that is "inherently repeating a vicious cycle of oppression in a new framework [17]":

> The storytellers who cross boundaries, will soon learn in almost vigilante fashion to guard their work from being tampered with or altering its meaning, in the process of publication where decisions are more often than not made to suit market interest. We learn how to preserve the integrity of our work by becoming more skillful as writers, negotiators, fighters for words, fighters for truth [18].

7 Rather than risking "sequestering Aboriginal experience and literature" in a politically restrictive definition of minor literature, Lynda

Ng and the contributors to *Indigenous Transnationalism*[19] point to the "innate cosmopolitanism" of Wright's literary influences (ranging from Seamus Heaney to Carlos Fuentes, and from Salman Rushdie to Günther Grass) as well as to the global reception of her work, and prefer to resort to Glissant's theory of relational poetics "to show the ways in which *Carpentaria* bypasses the standard national Australian framework, to reposition Aboriginal experiences and identity within global coordinates[20]."

8 Philip Mead understands why "dislodging literary sociability and modes of interpretation from [...] from geopolitical bounds and limits of space and history" might seem like a "liberating move", particularly in the case of Indigenous literatures, whose minority status within the settler nation is always presumed:

> Critical decolonisation or de-nationalisation, here, seems to hold out the promise of local self-determination for the Indigenous text: its governance of itself, the recognition of its unpatrolled citizenship, not of a postcolonial nation, or a postcolony, or even of a 'First-World' World Literature, but of a trans-Indigenous first-nation of letters[21].

9 But Mead expresses concern that "this reterritorialising turn may discount and distort some core realities of Indigenous life and thought[22]."

10 I would argue that comparable "reterritorialising" effects of the scholarly literature published in the wake of *Carpentaria*'s nomination to the syllabus of the Agrégation occasionally manifest themselves when one compares work published by Australian and European, and more specifically French literary scholars who are also lecturers preparing students for that competitive examination. In order to delineate what in classic Jaussian terms could be referred to as the "horizon of expectation" of this body of distinguished researchers and dedicated educators, of which I am a humble member, more, perhaps, needs to be said about the institution of the Agrégation itself.

11 As a national competitive examination, it has quite a long history in French pedagogical policies. Founded in 1766, its aim has been to guarantee teaching excellence in the French Education civil service

system, but also to recognize the nation's intellectual elites [23]. The ratio of success is only of one candidate in 10 or one in 15. Yet because of the salary and teaching-conditions advantages associated with the Agrégation qualification, as well as the fact that the examination serves as unofficial national ranking system, several thousand students dedicate a whole year of study to prepare for it each year.

12 Compulsory subjects for the Agrégation for English include Literature, "Civilisation" (which encapsulates socio-political history studies), and Linguistics. Once selected, each book stays on the syllabus for two years. In 2021, *Carpentaria* was one of the five works selected for the 2022 examination, along with Shakespeare's *King Henry* V, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, and for those students specialising in literature, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*. Although the great majority of authors chosen come from the British Isles (and Ireland) or the United States, it has become customary for one "Commonwealth", or "post-colonial" work to be selected as examination material each year. In this geographically and culturally vast, but institutionally (as defined by the Agrégation syllabus) minor category of writers, Alexis Wright has joined, among others, Anita Desai, Alice Munro, Ben Okri, Caryl Philips and Nadine Gordimer, in the postcolonial literary canon. As there are in France comparatively few academics specialising in Australian studies, and therefore in a position to champion an Australian writer before the Agrégation examination board, Australian writing has so far been underrepresented, compared with Nigerian, South African, Canadian or New Zealand literatures. Before *Carpentaria*, Patrick White's *Voss* was the only other Australian literary work ever to feature on the Agrégation syllabus, back in 1977, after White was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1973. At the time, the Swedish jury saluted White for "an epic and psychological narrative art which has introduced a new continent into literature [24]", a mention which possibly triggered more irate reactions in Australian literary circles than it flattered national pride. In the next decades, it is *Carpentaria*, rather than *Voss* (or any of Tim Winton's novels) that will stand for Australian literature in the minds of hundreds of French teachers of English. This is quite an ironic reversal of the situation *Carpentaria* opens on, the incipit portraying the nation as hostile to

the narrative about to unfold: "A NATION CHANTS, WE KNOW YOUR HISTORY ALREADY[25]". But in spite of the relative weakness of Australian studies in France, in terms of the current politics of education that are reflected in the Agrégation examination material, Alexis Wright was a strong candidate as a counterpoint to the predominantly British and, to a lesser extent, American "dead white male" canon that the highly elitist institution of the Agrégation continues to uphold[26]. Notwithstanding other, purely literary and educational considerations, for literary scholars and educators specialising in the cultures of former British colonies and finding themselves on the periphery of 'English' Studies, the postcolonial, the Deleuze-Guattarian 'minority' approach gives weight to the push for increased academic visibility[27].

13 In the last decades, settler nations like Canada, New Zealand and South Africa, have been represented by the female practitioners of minor genres: before Wright's novel, only short story collections by Mansfield, Frame, Atwood and Gordimer were chosen. As a female and also Indigenous author, Alexis Wright was therefore a powerful champion for those working to get Australian literature onto the Agrégation syllabus. *Carpentaria* pushes far back the 'minor literature' horizon of expectation, considering it is a vast epic novel celebrating mainly male heroes. But in many other regards, including its episodic structure and the deep respect it evinces for the "little" stories as well as the big ones (p. 12), it radically subverts the totalizing, monological epic form, thus lending itself to post- or decolonial readings.

14 Yet, quoting Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vasquez's view that the "epistemic coloniality of the university [leads to] the reproduction of monocultural and extractivist approaches to knowledge[28]", Fiona McCann is justly concerned by the risk

> of subjecting Alexis Wright's novel to precisely this "monocultural and extractivist approach" when we put it on a syllabus in France which in turn generates a considerable amount of research[29].

15 McCann partly lays her own ethical doubts to rest by interestingly turning from the question of knowledge to that of pedagogy, proposing that *Carpentaria* introduces the Western reader to a

"decolonial pedagogy which is predicated on an ethics of care [30]". This, she argues, could help the future Agrégation laureates to find new, diversity-sensitive pedagogical practices, that could ultimately be conducive to positive social transformation [31].

16 The potential reproduction of monocultural and extractivist approaches associated with studying *Carpentaria* from a postcolonial perspective within the institutional framework of the Agrégation is indeed concerning. The Deleuze-Guattarian theoretical model which has proved so operational in the past is still implicit in a number of recent publications dedicated to the study of forms of resistance to colonial violence in *Carpentaria*. While this evidently a vitally important dimension of the novel, mainly looking at how *Carpentaria* writes back to the process of colonisation arguably entrenches a centre/periphery model which Wright clearly rejects.

17 In 1993, Raphaël Confiant proudly asserted that, thanks to trailblazer Aimé Césaire, he and other creolity authors no longer considered themselves a minority in Martinique [32]. *Carpentaria* makes the same point. The Rainbow Serpent creation story which constitutes the real opening of the novel, sweeping away and drowning out "a" nation's chant, similarly opens a space in which the stories that truly belong to this place can unfold.

18 These stories are not all wise nor epistemologically sound, however. The world of *Carpentaria*, Pricklebush as well as Uptown, is awash with rumours, gossip, slander, jokes, dreaming stories, testimonies, lies, so that, to paraphrase Wright's narrator: "it takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with [these stories], whatever [their] mood [33]". And there is one particular piece of knowledge that could help correct the view that Agrégation students may be led to hold, namely that all the in-fighting in the novel is due to colonial dispossession, and this in spite of the narrator's repeated allusions to clan wars going back four hundred years [34]. It is simply that the land was not always peaceably "shared [35]" among Indigenous peoples for thousands of years.

19 In the novel's ambivalently epic narrative of the battle at the dump, it is clear that Angel Day's inflammatory use of divisive Native Title rhetoric is responsible for starting the fight. Furthermore, because the Pricklebush people are so poor, it is easy to understand why they

are reduced to squabbling over items of waste. However, it seems safe to think that the narrator wants to make it very clear that in the mind of the participants, this piteous battle is meaningful as part of an ancestral tradition of tribal warfare. As the narrator tells us, "precarious modernity", along with the idea of Aboriginal "community" government policies have imposed, are "squashed" instantly when Angel Day describes an antagonistic neighbour as "a fat white pig eating up the traditional owner's country":

> "What happened then was the war started again. Imagine that. Precarious modernity squashed by hostilities dormant for four hundred years. […] Everyone began picking up weapons the ancient way, arming themselves with whatever they could lay their hands on. […] You see, all the alliances had to be weighed up then and there and on the spot. People who had been getting on well, living side by side for decades, started to recall tribal battles from the ancient past. […]

> The old people […] said the flies had been drawn up through the centuries to join the battle. They claimed the spirits would never let you forget the past. They drew lines in the dirt, calling people out from the shadows of complacency, Get it straight where you belong. People must have felt the chilly spike prodding them to arm, to prepare them to add another chapter in the old war. Otherwise they might never have known how to go to war in the way of the old people. Living in harmony in fringe camps was a policy designed by the invader's governments, wherever shacks like Angel Day's swampside residences first began to be called a community. The old people wrote about the history of these wars on rock. (pp. 25-26)

20 While the spark that starts the big fight at the dump can certainly be traced back to the colonial dispossession of Angel Day's "community", and the divisive Native title procedures set up by the Howard government, "the old people" of Pricklebush seem to almost to welcome the fighting as a way to acknowledge and even celebrate an epic tradition of warfare, which the younger generations must emulate. Although the exact degree of narratorial irony is difficult to determine, "know[ing] how to go to war in the way of the old people" is evidently considered by the elders to be culturally very important. A revealing consequence of the war between the West- and Eastside mobs is

their sudden and utter disregard for the Uptowners' presence. This is duly noted by the settler community, who swear to avenge themselves of what they perceive as errant behaviour, oblivious to the fact that the incident only brings to light the Indigenous protagonists' true sense of sovereignty:

> Nor did the straggle-taggle give one iota to the peace and quiet of the town. Whatever! Nevermind! as if the town with all of its laws and by-laws for inhabitation did not exist. […]

> No, no coloured person was ever going to forget about this incident of lawless carrying-on like they owned the place. (p. 31)

21 As for the narrator's earlier reference to the state's attempted homogenisation of Indigenous peoples into a manageable minority group, it echoes the effects of settlement on Indigenous polities that early 20th century observers could note:

> In former days such battles were, according to all accounts, of fairly frequent occurrence, but nowadays, no doubt largely due to the interference by European settlers, and the smaller number of natives, one very rarely hears that any warfare is conducted on a large scale. Indeed, many of the one-time bitterest enemies […] can now be seen living in close proximity to each other, and apparently on the best of terms [36].

22 Later on, the narrative voice again expresses irony at other instances of ill-informed disregard for ancestral feuds: "Praise men of ambition who strive for newfangled ideas like reconciliation in old Australia" (p. 309).

23 We are not told, in the novel, why Joseph Midnight's people left their distant ancestral lands the old man himself has never seen but still perfectly remembers the ceremony for, without having ever performed it (p. 360). But linguistic archaeology can find evidence of and possible explanations for precolonial movements of Indigenous populations in the Gulf of Carpentaria. According to the findings presented by Ilana Mushin and Maïa Ponsonnet, the shifting watercourses and unstable coastline in the Gulf are likely to have greatly impacted the peoples living there:

> [D]ifferent language groups at times found themselves isolated on islands that could support reasonable populations, while at other times, the ancestors of the Aboriginal people in Carpentaria may have found themselves competing with other groups for resources. […] There is linguistic evidence that in the past Waanyi country lay away from the coast […]. Speakers of Waanyi replaced coastal people from another language group around 400-800 years ago [37].

24 Taking into account the idea that colonisation is not shown to be the *only* cause of infighting amongst Aboriginal peoples by no means casts any doubt on the novel's denunciation of the colonial refusal to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignty. However, to do justice to the integrity with which the novel explores the fraught issues of ownership and entitlement, the narrator's ambivalence towards Angel's priorities during the battle at the dump should be noted. On the one hand, her respect for "the inheritance of antiquity" and the "legacy of ancestral creation" embodied by the people who seek refuge in Pricklebush seems to be presented as entirely commendable:

> She welcomed those who walked heavy with the inheritance of antiquity stashed in their bones. Pride swelled up inside her when she saw those with a landscape chiselled deep into their faces and the legacy of ancestral creation loaded into their senses. She guarded those whose fractured spirits cried of rape, murder and the pillage of their traditional lands. (p. 26)

25 On the other hand, however, the narrative voice seems to struggle to understand her obsession with traditional ownership, as it makes her indifferent to the graphic scenes of violence her claims have led to:

> It is hard to determine how sides were forged, but when the fighting began, the blood of family ties flew out of the veins of people, and ran on the ground like normal blood, when face and limbs are cut like ribbons with broken glass, or when the body has been gouged with a piece of iron, or struck on the head over and over with a lump of wood. […] 'What about the traditional owner?' She was still screaming out her esteemed rights. *Maybe she did not register the carnage* [38]. (p. 26)

26 As a child, Will is the one who protects his mother from harm during the battle at the dump, but as a grown man, he has no time for the ancestral family feuds that oppose the Phantom and Midnight clans. Understanding that the mine is waging against the world of the Gulf a war the likes of which has never been seen before [39], Will sees his father and old Midnight as "[s]tubborn old mules who anchored their respective clans in the sordid history of who really owned different parcels of the local land. […] The old war went right up the coastline to Desperance and out to sea." (p. 410)

27 Of course, at the end of the novel, Will is later set adrift on a floating island of refuse, helplessly awaiting rescue, perhaps for having relied too much on his own powers of understanding and his determination to set things right according to his own views. And it is Norm – who is well versed in "the old wars of families" (p. 251), who understands why the atavistic conflict between "land woman devil Gardajala" and the cyclonic "sea woman" can never be resolved, and who, like the Gundugundu spirits, "the unhappy warring spirit warriors of the old wars", is himself constantly "riled up" (p. 254) – who is allowed to return "home", to the place where Desperance once stood and where the cyclone has reinstated the natural diversity of the land. But Norm can only return home because he is accompanied by Will's son Bala, whose very existence proves that old family feuds can and should be mended, since Hope, his mother is old Joseph Midnight's granddaughter. Besides, however much Norm railed against Will for consorting with the enemy, he himself is a rather inconsistent gatekeeper. Riding in his boat *Trespass* with his murdered friend Elias whom he has decided he will bury in the sacred resting place of the giant groper fish, although to do so, he will have to enter "spiritual country forbidden to all men and their wives and their children's children" (p. 256), Norm is led to reflect on the "perplexing word trespass":

> Trespass had been a big word in his life. It protected black men's Law and it protected white men. It breathed life for fighters; it sequestered people. The word was weightless, but had caused enough jealousies, fights, injuries, killings, the cost could never be weighed. It maintained untold wars over untold centuries – *trespass*. Trespassing was the word which best described his present situation, and it occurred to him that he was wrong to have taken

> this journey with Elias in the first place. He should have just let the girls dispose of the body. Yet he called, 'Push the boat Elias and don't worry about me.' (p. 256)

28 Norm's meditation on the ambivalence of the word trespass and his decision to bring Elias' remains to their final resting place, regardless of known boundaries, gives an insight into why it is he who will walk in the flattened landscape at the end, on country that is being sung afresh by the "mass choir of frogs" (p. 99). Before he took on what the title of chapter 8 clearly presents as his "responsibility", Norm had grown so dissatisfied with the world, with his unfaithful wife and his once-favourite son Will (guilty in his eyes of errant behaviour, having married Hope and sabotaged the mine), that he cut himself off from friend and foe to dedicate himself to his art, a form of alchemy consisting in magicking dead fish back to enchanted life in stuffed and brightly coloured form. But Elias' death brings him out of his self-imposed isolation and leads him on a mission that will also entail, as he discovers to his great surprise [40], the rescue of both Bala and Hope, who in turn, as the end of novel suggests, will eventually bring Will back from his own exile.

29 What the narrative arc of *Carpentaria* points to, therefore, is not a return to precolonial forms of entrenched sovereignty, but to more open and holistic vision of how to inhabit the world. When asked where the idea for *Carpentaria* had originated from, Alexis Wright mentioned seeing "the mighty flow of an ancestral river rushing" through invasive weeds, and supposed that the moment of "realising the largeness of standing where countless generations of people whose ancestry [she shares]" had stood was what prompted her to "return something of what [she had] learnt and to continue the story of this country of [her] forefathers [41]". This vision of "largeness" is also what allows Will to dismiss his father's obsessive and soul-destroying search for the snake Norm is convinced lies beneath their house, in evil connivance with his temptress of a wife:

> Will did not believe the snake lay in the ground under their house. The snake he once saw was the living atmosphere. Its body stretched from horizon to horizon, covering each point of the compass, and encasing them all. His father looked in all the wrong places, for the

> air flowing and out of his nostrils was the snake. Will dismissed the vision, but he could call it up, if he wanted to. (p. 193)

30 Arrente activist and Aboriginal Civil Rights campaigner Tracker Tilmouth, with whom Wright spent many years working, and whose collective biography she authored in 2017, had a favourite saying, which was that Aboriginal people had to believe in a "vision splendid [42]". Uptown too is offered a "vision splendid" in the novel when Elias Smith walks in from the sea, bringing with him the possibility of a tolerant, undogmatic form of wisdom (p. 59), but the townspeople's minds are too shuttered and paranoid to understand what Elias stands for. *Carpentaria* shows, however, how believing in a vision splendid can move people to work towards an appeased, more hopeful and sustainable world.

31 On October 19 and 20, 2021, an international conference was organised at the University of Western Brittany, Brest, France, to discuss *Carpentaria* in the light of Wright's dedication to writing a "self-governing literature [43]" that honours her traditional homeland and allows herself and her readers to understand "the deep cultural depth of who [her people] are":

> People who are comfortable with the gravity of responsibility to country, people and to ourselves, and in our deep understanding that country is always alive and forever powerful, and which, if its deep laws are broken, can turn against us [44].

32 The two-day, online and in person conference brought together researchers, academics and students from France, Australia, and other places around the world. Several Indigenous, writers, poets and academics – Alexis Wright herself, Jeanine Leane, Sandra Philips, Kim Scott, Anita Heiss, Philip McLaren, Ellen van Neerven, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Romaine Moreton – also took part in the conference, generously sharing readings and performances of their work with a mainly French audience. The articles that follow are some of the proceedings of this wonderfully rich and powerful event.

33 The article that opens the conference proceedings, Geoff Rodoreda's study entitled "Sovereignty in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", provides a useful summary of the history of Indigenous struggle against, and

rejection of the forms of sovereignty defined and imposed in Australia by settler-nation law. Rodoreda looks at how *Carpentaria* mocks and sweeps aside the still dominating social and culture discourses about *terra nullius*, to present the reader with a representation of Indigenous Australian sovereignty that is itself an enactment of this sovereignty. The article, which in a sense constitutes the framework of, or springboard for the whole collection of articles, makes clear that Alexis Wright's novel should not be read as a political roadmap for the achievement of sovereignty, but as a performative narrative of sovereign place defined as the "uninterrupted maintenance of laws, routines and cultures of governance over lands and seas stretching from time immemorial to the present day".

34 The first group of articles that follow focus on particular elements present in the diegetic world of *Carpentaria* – namely dust, cyclones, songs – and explore how these elements branch out factually, metaphorically, structurally, through time and space, establishing lines of semiotic travel and strings of aesthetic resonances.

35 Sam Cox's contribution, "The Dust of *Carpentaria*", is an etymological, material, and symbolic exploration of dust in the world of the novel. The article sifts with great virtuosity through the layers of connotations of the word in different languages and traditions, then traces the whirling connections it weaves through time(s) and place(s) in *Carpentaria*. As Cox shows, unassuming dust links the microscopic with the cosmic, signifies a forgone past while embodying its presence in vestigial form, and above all, resists any form of containment. In Wright's epic storytelling, dust leads the reader on circuitous journey towards a richer and deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of place.

36 Chrystopher Spicer builds on Alexis Wright's assertion that "place extends," no place being "separate and just of itself[45]" to situate *Carpentaria* within the climate change literature produced in Australia specifically about its tropical North. In "Plenty of business going on": The apocalyptic cyclones of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* as trope of real, imagined, and spiritual Australian place", Spicer examines the structural and symbolic role played by the apocalyptic cyclone in the novel, and analyses how the destructive, deeply transforming force of the cyclones that move through it also energize and

regenerate its geographic, social and spiritual space. As a northern Australian himself, Spicer expresses his intimate conviction that storytelling is a way to find an explanation of our world, and sees *Carpentaria* as a powerful challenge to other, less comprehensive representations of the tropical North, and as an opportunity to move forward, towards a better understanding that all Australians can live with.

37 In "*Heartbeat*", or singing the novel afresh: the role of popular song and songsters in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", Adrian Grafe explores for his part the role played by popular song (country and western, rock-n'-roll, reggae) and songsters in *Carpentaria*. These are shown to be the expression of collective forms of enjoyment, heartache or resistance in the Gulf country, and the article pays close attention to the way the titles and lyrics of popular songs are often rewritten or creatively mis(quoted) in important passages of the novel. Far from proposing that the presence of such songs in remote parts of Australia signals a loss of Indigenous authenticity or of narrative seriousness, Grafe argues that they constitute a rhythmic and melodic subtext which makes the silent reader aware that song is indeed the "medium of performance of epic poetry". The continuity between ancestral and contemporary song ceremonies celebrating the interconnectedness of all life is thus enacted by the patterns and rhythms that make up the musical composition of the novel.

38 The second group of articles considers *Carpentaria* as a vast, layered and vibrantly complex narrative which contradicts master narratives of conquest and mastery, pushes back generic boundaries and conventions, and encourages a thorough rethink of the distribution of power and responsibility among the publishers and translators of works of fiction that so absolutely resist commodification.

39 In "The Spell of Place in *Carpentaria*", Christine Vandamme sets the novel against real-world climate-change challenges which are often considered to be the outcome of a master narrative of progress expressed in terms of competition and conquest. In line with David Abrams' notion of the "spell of the sensuous", which reveals our "interdependence with that which we cannot fathom, cannot determine, and cannot control [46]", Vandamme sees Wright's novel as a variegated and polyphonic deconstruction of monological narratives

of nation, time, space and truth, and as a call to posit Country and its attendant laws at the heart of a new Australian national narrative.

40 In "Epic, Trauma, and Affective Practice in *Carpentaria*" Meera Atkinson looks into Sneharika Roy's discussion of the epic genre's compatibility with postcolonial literature[47] and combines Roy's findings with her own work on transgenerational trauma to provide the framework for her study of *Carpentaria*. The article shows how the novel is a harrowing testimony of historic and contemporary trauma in the Gulf country, yet also how Wright uses humour as affective practice, and makes a case for defining *Carpentaria* as a piece of narrative art belonging to an innovative postcolonial literary category that Atkinson labels "epic trauma" writing.

41 Lastly, in "Translating Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. An Interview with Italian Co-Translator Andrea Sirotti", Margherita Zanoletti reviews the technical difficulties as well as the ethical and practical choices related to the translation process of a novel that is such an exemplary instance of polyphonic writing. The account Sirotti gives of his work in this interview draws attention to the role of translators as "readers, interpreters, mediators, and co-authors", and offers some insights into the questionable dynamics of the publishing industry which seeks to 'domesticate' narratively-diverse writing into readily marketable products. The article provides an alternative literary approach to what makes *Carpentaria* so resistant to standardising generalisations, but also shows why it is so important to make more visible the work of translators, whose status in law, publishing, and education is often badly underrated.

42 The conference proceedings gathered here reveal a whole range of new and original approaches to the inexhaustibly wise and ever-unsettling world of *Carpentaria*. As Alexis Wright forcefully put it: "In these times of the world sitting on the precipice of an uncertain future and our civilisations frittering away in the ruins of our spirit, Indigenous wisdom matters[48]."

Note on authors

43 Meera Atkinson (https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=866) is an Australian writer, interdisciplinary researcher, and educator. Her

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alist with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in Adelaide and Darwin before moving to Europe in 1996. He completed his PhD in English literature in Stuttgart in 2016. The resulting monograph, The Mabo Turn in Australian Fiction (Peter Lang, 2018), won the Association for the Study of Australian Literature's Alvie Egan Award 2019, a prize for the best first book of literary scholarship on an Australian subject. He is also the editor (with Eva Bischoff) of Mabo's Cultural Legacy: History, Literature, Film and Cultural Practice in Contemporary Australia (Anthem, 2021).

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48 Christine Vandamme (https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=853) is a senior lecturer at Grenoble Alps University. Her field of expertise is that of space, place and literature but also space, place and identity, with a particular interest in the ideological, political, social as well as ethical implications of such spatial representations. She has published extensively on modernism and the question of colonization (Joseph Conrad) as well as modernism and its discontents (Malcolm Lowry) but also the representation of space and place in postcolonial literature and more particularly Australian fiction and iconography (Patrick White, David Malouf, Russell Drysdale). She published a book on Conrad's *Lord Jim* in 2004 and co-edited a volume on *Tropes and the Tropics* in Conrad's fiction in 2010. She co-edited *Science and Empire in the Nineteenth Century* in 2010. She then coedited a volume on spatial representations and mobility in 2019, *Mapping Mobility*. And her latest co-edited book *Space, Place and Hybridity in the National Imagination* (2021) dealt with the "third space" of national representations and discourses.

49 Margherita Zanoletti (https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=876) is a graduate from the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan and

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NOTES

1 Alexis Wright, "A Weapon of Poetry", *Overland Magazine*, https://treatynow.wordpress.com/2009/01/17/alexis-wright-remembers-oodgeroo-noonucal/.

2 Wright was referring to the controversial policy package introduced by the Howard government in 2007, following a report on the neglect and sexual abuse of children in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory.

3 Alexis Wright, "A Weapon of Poetry", *op.cit.*

4 *Ibid.*

5 Title of the book Wright published in a French translation: *Croire en l'Incroyable*, Sabine Porte (trans.), Arles, Actes Sud, 2000. In *Carpentaria*, the decisive epic moment when an "unbelievable miracle" revives the dying flame that it will spread and ultimately destroy the mine is triggered by Mozzie's men refusing to give in to defeat, and believing instead in "their own sheer willpower" as well as in "magic" (Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London, Constable, p. 394.

6 Philip Mead, "Sovereignty of the Mind", Philip Mead and Gareth Griffiths (eds.), *The Social Work of the Narrative: Human Rights and the Cultural Imaginary*, Hannover, Ibidem-Verlag, 2018, https://www.academia.edu/35463427/Sovereignty_of_the_Mind.

7 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin, 2007, p. 2.

8 Alexis Wright, "On Writing Carpentaria", *HEAT*, n° 13, 2007, pp. 79-95, p. 81.

9 “The idea of the novel was to build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side. The overall aim of the novel was to create a memory of what is believed, experienced and imagined in the contemporary world of Indigenous people in the Gulf of Carpentaria. My hope was that the novel would allow a space where Indigenous heroes were celebrated.” *Ibid.*, p. 85.

10 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* [trans. Dana Polan], Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1986.

11 Pascale Casanova, « Nouvelles considérations sur les littératures dites mineures », *Littératures Classiques*, n° 31, 1997 ; Rony Klein, « D’une redéfinition de la littérature mineure », *Littérature* « Déplacements », n° 189, mars 2018.

12 “In major literatures, [...] the individual concern (familial, marital, and so on) joins with other no less individual concerns, the social milieu serving as a mere environment or a background [...] Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern thus becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it.” *Ibid.*, p. 17.

13 “The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. [...] what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement.” *Ibid.*

14 Victoria Addis, “Deleuze and Guattari: ‘Minor Literature’”, http://www.victoriaaddis.com/blog/gilles-deleuze-and-felix-guattari-minor-literature/.

15 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature and Other Essays*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1988.

16 Wright, “On Writing Carpentaria”, *ibid.*, pp. 83, 85.

17 In a lecture on censorship, Wright referred to an article by Sanaz Fotouhi, *Commodification of Censorship in Iranian Writing in English*, Monash University: *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry*, 2016. Fotouhi explains that “where a cultural product/idea that has been oppressed, banned or censored in Iran is taken up vicariously in the West under the illusion that it has overcome that censorship/oppression by the virtue of being presented in the West, only to be read again in a definitive

and biased framework that identifies it as a censored or banned piece of work [it merely contributes to] stereotypical understandings and power relations between the East and the West", "Telling the Untold Stories: Alexis Wright on Censorship", *Overland Magazine*, 8 Feb 2019, https://overland.org.au/2019/02/telling-the-untold-stories-alexis-wright-on-censorship/, p. 114.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Lynda Ng (ed.) *Indigenous Transnationalism: Alexis Wright's Carpentaria*, Atarmon, Giramondo, 2018.

20 Lynda Ng, "Looking Beyond the Local: Indigenous Literature as a World Literature", *ibid.*, p. 5.

21 Philip Mead, *ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

23 The names of current French politicians, academics and writers feature in the list of Agrégation laureates in various disciplines, alongside the names of internationally famous personalities like Claude Levi-Strauss, Leopold Sedar Senghor, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

24 https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1973/press-release/.

25 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London, Constable, 2006, p. 1. Future references to *Carpentaria* will appear between brackets in the body of the text.

26 Fiona McCann speaks of the need to "decolonis[e] the curriculum": Fiona McCann, "*Carpentaria* (Alexis Wright) and the Agrégation: Navigating the Paradox", Estelle Castro-Koshy et Temiti Lehartel (ed.) *Alexis Wright, Carpentaria*, Ellipses, 2021, p. 117.

27 Alice Michel has analysed the choice of literary works put on the Agrégation syllabus in the last sixty years, and shown how the Commonwealth/postcolonial body of works has increasingly served as a corrective to more conventional definitions of the canon: Alice Michel, "Anglophone Literature in the Recruitment Exam of English Teachers in France: an Empirical Analysis of the Programmes of the 'Agrégation' from 1946 to 2016", 2016, https://univ-orleans.academia.edu/AliceMichel.

28 Rosalba Icaza and Rolando Vasquez, "Diversity or Decolonisation? Researching Diversity at the University of Amsterdam", Gurminder K. Bhambra et al. (eds.), *Decolonising the University*, London, Pluto Press, 2018, p. 114.

29 Fiona McCann, *ibid.*, p. 118.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 129.

32 Raphaël Confiant, "Nous autres, auteurs de la créolité, ne nous considérons pas du tout comme une minorité, mais bien comme une majorité (dans notre pays, la Martinique). […] Pour nous, il n'y a pas (ou il n'y a plus) de centre de la langue française qui serait Paris, dont nous, Martiniquais, serions, à l'instar des Suisses, des Québecois, ou des Maghrébins, l'une des nombreuses périphéries." Raphaël Confiant, *Aimé Césaire : une traversée paradoxale du siècle*, Paris, Stock, p. 122.

33 Wright, *Carpentaria*, p. 3. For instance, in spite of his own strong resentment against Norm, Will does not allow himself to be convinced by old Midnight's story about Norm throwing stones at Bala, when the boy was sent over to Norm's house to bring about a reconciliation between East and Westside: "This was where the ambiguity lay in Midnight's story. There were no stones to be found on the claypans over Westside." (p. 366).

34 See for example pp. 25, 194, 195, 364.

35 Vanessa Castejon, "Dépériphéries politiques, résilience et résistance, souveraineté autochtone en Australie", Estelle Castro-Koshy et Temiti Lehartel (ed.) *Alexis Wright, Carpentaria*, Ellipses, 2021, p. 268.

36 Herbert Basedow, *The Australian Aboriginal*, 1925, Adelaide, Hassel Press, pp. 183-184, https://archive.org/details/b29824989. Quoted in Christophe Darmangeat, *Justice et Guerre en Australie Aborigène*, Toulouse, Smolny, 2021, pp. 96-97

37 Ilana Mushin and Maïa Ponsonnet, "Country, People and Language in Carpentaria", Estelle Castro-Koshy & Temiti Lehartel (ed.) *Alexis Wright, Carpentaria*, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

38 Italics mine.

39 "Life had no meaning in this new war on their country. This was a war that could not be fought on Norm Phantom's and old Joseph Midnight's terms: where your enemy […] knew the rules of how to fight. This war with the mine had no rules. Nothing was sacred. It was a war for money." (p. 363)

40 "Now, way out in the bloody woop woop of Christ knows where, sorry Lord but it was true, Norm told himself, 'I finds some kid who happens to be my grandchild.'" (p. 271).

41 Alexis Wright, “On Writing Carpentaria”, *ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

42 In *Tracker*, Central Australian Aboriginal economist Owen Cole says of him: “I have often thought about what had nurtured the way he looked at the world. He was a visionary. He had seen the vision splendid. Whereas us people tend to look through a very narrow perspective, Tracker had seen endless possibilities.” Alexis Wright, *Tracker*, Artarmon: Giramondo, 2017. Online copy.

43 Alexis Wright, “A Self Governing Literature”, *Meanjin*, Winter 2020, https://meanjin.com.au/essays/a-self-governing-literature/.

44 *Ibid.*

45 Alexis Wright, “A Journey in Writing Place”, *Meanjin*, Winter 2019, vol. 78, n° 2, pp. 44-53, https://meanjin.com.au/essays/a-journey-in-writing-place/

46 David Abram, “Between the Body and the Breathing Earth: A Reply to Ted Toadvine”, *Environmental Ethics*, n° 27, 2005, pp. 171-190, p. 185.

47 Sneharika Roy, *The Postcolonial Epic: From Melville to Walcott and Ghosh* (1st ed.), New Delhi, Routledge India, 2018.

48 Alexis Wright, “A Self Governing Literature”, *op. cit.*

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I - Performing sovereignty through literature

Sovereignty in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006)

Geoff Rodoreda

TEXTE

1 Waanyi writer, activist and academic Alexis Wright tells a story that reflects the importance of the creative imaginary in Indigenous efforts to achieve sovereignty in Australia. She says it is vital that Indigenous people maintain what she calls a "sovereignty of the mind", even if sovereignty of the country or the land—in Western terms—has not yet been achieved [1]. She goes on to recount hearing an Indigenous leader tell a meeting of Aboriginal people, "if you think you are a sovereign people, act like it [2]". The enactment of sovereignty —the performance of it in public life, in discourse and in literature— thus becomes an important mechanism of empowerment for Indigenous people, and an indicator of their never having ceded sovereignty to European colonisers. Wright says of her 2006 novel *Carpentaria* that it "imagines the cultural mind as sovereign and in control, while freely navigating through the known country of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds". She continues: "Parallel to this aim of portraying the sovereignty of the mind was another, to try to create in writing an authentic form of Indigenous storytelling that uses the diction and vernacular of the region [3]." Wright's stated purpose with *Carpentaria*, then, was to portray a sovereign Aboriginal mindset in an authentically Indigenous storytelling mode. This essay seeks to examine representations of an Indigenous Australian sovereignty, the *performativity* of sovereignty, in *Carpentaria*.

2 Sovereignty, in general political and legal parlance, is about who holds supreme authority. Those who are sovereign are the ultimate overseers or hold ultimate power in the decision-making processes of any nation-state [4]. While Indigenous peoples in other settler-colonies of the British Empire, in North America and in New Zealand, signed treaties with the British and other European powers and thereby gained recognition of their traditional sovereignty over the

land, this never happened in Australia. Even today, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the Australian continent are not officially recognised as ever having been sovereign. In legal terms, the Australian continent was deemed to have been "practically unoccupied, without settled inhabitants or settled law" when the British arrived in 1788 [5]. This later became known as the doctrine of *terra nullius*, the idea that the land belonged to no one before Europeans claimed it. There were inhabitants, went the logic in thinking, but these inhabitants had no recognisable polity or law:

> In its simplest form, the British justification was that the Aborigines had never actually been in possession of the land. They ranged over it rather than resided on it. The Europeans, therefore, acquired the unassailable legal position of being the first occupants [6].

3 What is known in legal terms, then, as the doctrine of *terra nullius* became a *discourse* of *terra nullius*, that is to say, a settler-Australian way of thinking about, talking about and acting against Indigenous peoples as if they had never existed. This discourse of *terra nullius* became what Michel Foucault would have called a "regime of truth" and it remained a dominant discourse in Australia for such a long time [7]. It allowed for First Nations peoples to be violently dispossessed of their lands, to be ignored completely in the Australian constitution of 1901, for their children to be stolen and institutionalised, for their claims for land rights and justice to be ignored.

4 In grand, exuberant and ambitious terms, Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* sets out to challenge both the legal doctrine and the dominating social and cultural discourses of *terra nullius*. It rejects as ridiculous the idea that the lands, the seas, the waterways, and the skies on the landmass now known as Australia belonged to no one before Europeans arrived. What's more, in setting her story in contemporary times, Wright reveals that these sovereign societies of peoples, with their own laws, customs and cultures, have survived. Despite all the injustices and adversities that Indigenous people have faced and continue to face, they remain a sovereign people, and in *Carpentaria* leading Indigenous characters act like they are sovereigns of the land. Sovereignty in *Carpentaria* is shown to continue to operate both in defiance of and parallel to the sovereignty of the nation-state in Australia today. But before I examine representations of sover-

eignty in *Carpentaria*, it is important to make clear that sovereignty is a not a theme only taken up by Alexis Wright or other Indigenous intellectuals in the twenty-first century.

5 Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out that Indigenous sovereignty arose as a more assertive political discourse in the 1960s[8]. Appeals for Indigenous sovereignty found voice, among other places, in the push for self-determination and for statutory land rights throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, in the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy in Canberra in 1972, as well as in calls for a treaty in the late 1980s. During the 1988 Bicentenary, commemorating 200 years of European settlement, Wiradjuri poet and activist Kevin Gilbert produced a book titled *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Justice, the Law and Land*. It proposed a treaty recognizing Aboriginal sovereign domains, and described the Australian nation's claim to sovereignty as "fraudulent [...] illegal and completely untenable in International Law[9]". In the same year, Aboriginal leaders presented Prime Minister Bob Hawke with a document known as the Barunga Statement. It also called for a treaty which would recognize Aboriginal "prior ownership, continued occupation and sovereignty[10]". Hawke famously promised to negotiate a treaty but never fulfilled that promise. Then there was the High Court of Australia's landmark Mabo decision of 1992, which is important in relation to the recognition—or lack thereof—of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia today.

6 In the High Court decision on *Mabo and Others v Queensland* (No. 2) of 1992, a group of Torres Strait Islanders, led by Eddie Koiki Mabo, successfully argued that from time immemorial to the present day, they as Indigenous people held rights to use the land for hunting, fishing and traditional cultural purposes[11]. The Court called these rights native title rights. The Mabo decision, as it became known, was a turning point in Australian law and culture because for the first time in Australia's colonial history, Indigenous people were officially recognised as the first legal possessors and occupants of the continent[12]. A year after the decision, the federal government introduced legislation, the Native Title Act (1993), aimed at regulating native title claims from Indigenous groups across Australia. Since 1992, many Indigenous communities have been able to claim native title rights to land. However, native title rights do not involve any recognition of exclusive Indigenous ownership of land, let alone Indi-

genous sovereignty. Holders of native title enjoy only minimal rights to use the land for traditional purposes, and such rights can only be claimed by Indigenous groups who are able to prove before the courts that they have maintained an unbroken attachment to their land since colonisation. These and other restrictions on native title claims rule out the vast majority of Indigenous Australians—communities who've already been dispossessed of their lands—from ever being able to lodge a land claim.

7 Another problem with the 1992 Mabo decision relates to the judges' ruling on sovereignty. While the High Court recognised native title rights to land in Mabo, it also confirmed the British "Crown's acquisition of sovereignty" upon settlement, ruling that sovereignty could not be contested in any Australian court[13]. In other words, Indigenous people were said to have gained the right to possess, occupy and use the land, as they had done for millennia (i.e., they had native title property rights), but if they ever had sovereignty or supreme title over the land, they were deemed to have lost it under international law to the British in 1788. We might see this as a cruel colonial game of give and take: here, we give some of you some rights to use the land in accordance with traditional customs, but we take from you any right to claim ultimate authority over the land. Indigenous lawyer and novelist Nicole Watson argues that "native title rights and interests [...] linger at the bottom of the hierarchy of Australian property rights", and that the Mabo decision has failed "to translate into meaningful change[14]". For Watson, the gains of native title have been "meagre at best, illusory at worst[15]". Ben Silverstein contends that the Australian settler-state's continuing ideological investment in what he calls "the doctrine of native title" has worked to "capture, contain, and subsume Indigenous sovereignties[16]". In "narrating a story of triumph and redemption" in the guise of native title, the settler-state has "insulated the question of sovereignty from contemporary challenge[17]". For the historian Henry Reynolds, while the Mabo judgement was "a major landmark in decolonizing the Australian law and society", it was "only a beginning to the process of redressing the legal injustice to Australia's indigenous people. Now the time has come to move on to tackle the question of Aboriginal sovereignty[18]".

8 Indeed, since the start of the new millennium, Indigenous academics, activists, lawyers, artists and writers, as well as their supporters, have

been working to remove the question of sovereignty from capture and containment. And to some extent, they have succeeded. The Uluru Statement from the Heart, signed by a gathering of more than 250 Indigenous Australians at Uluru in May 2017, begins by asserting that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples "were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands". It goes on to describe sovereignty as "*a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land* […] *and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples*" that provides "*the basis of the ownership of the soil* [19]". Sovereignty is something that "has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown". The Statement calls for the establishment of "a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution" and "a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations". The signatories to this historical document state that such constitutional change and agreement-making can allow a specifically Indigenous form of sovereignty to "shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood [20]". In the Uluru Statement, then, the goal of Indigenous sovereignty, in co-existence with Crown sovereignty, is named as a concrete political goal.

9 Legal scholar Irene Watson points out that "Aboriginal sovereignty is different from state sovereignty […]. The white way of knowing country is forged by ownership, possession and control. The Aboriginal way of knowing comes through spirituality, identity and traditions of historical connectedness [21]". According to Moreton-Robinson:

> Our sovereignty is embodied, it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and land. In this sense, our sovereignty is carried by the body and differs from Western constructions of sovereignty, which are predicated on the social contract model [22].

10 It is this embodied sense of sovereignty, grounded in a communal connection and relation to the land, that is storied in *Carpentaria*.

11 First, Wright establishes a foundation for sovereignty—for supreme authority over the land—not in the law of kings, courts, or written constitutions but in the law of the land. The narrator asserts an Indi-

genous sovereignty counter to that of Australian nation-state sovereignty on the opening page. The title of the first chapter, "From Time Immemorial", pushes the story of the creation of known Australian place immeasurably back to well before, "billions of years" before, the establishment of the Australian nation[23]. The first actor in the narrative is not a human character but the ancestral serpent. (Jeanine Leane refers to the serpent "the first character of the story[24]"). This ancestral serpent is "laden with its own creative enormity" (p. 1). We learn that the "serpent's covenant permeates everything" (p. 10). It is said to have shaped the land "all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria" which becomes the setting for the novel (p. 1). But humans, the first humans on the continent, have come to know of the serpent's agency, for what is called the "inside knowledge" of the serpent's covenant is retained in "Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began" (p. 2). Aboriginal Law, written with a capital L here, is instituted at the beginning of this epic story as a founding constitution for interaction with the land and the seas of the Gulf country. This Law provides the foundational basis for living on the land. The machinations and the history of the 'white' nation-state, which came much later, are subordinated to Aboriginal Law in this novel, and the carriers of Aboriginal Law are established as the first sovereigns of this place.

12 Another manifestation of Indigenous sovereignty can be seen in various Aboriginal characters' relationality with the land as lawgiver. Anne Brewster argues that *Carpentaria* articulates Indigenous sovereignty via "its fashioning of an indigenous world view" through a portrayal of "the cosmological relationship that indigenous people have with the land, the sea and spirit beings[25]". Instances of intimate Indigenous relations with the lands and seas are seen in actions of the novel's protagonist, Normal Phantom. Norm retains a vast knowledge of Aboriginal Law. He can "grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him." (p. 5) Later, we are also told that men like Norm,

> kept a library chock-a-block full of stories of the old country stored in their heads. Their lives were lived out by trading stories for other stories. They called it decorum – the good information, intelligence, etiquette of the what to do, how to behave for knowing how to live

> like a proper human being, alongside spirits for neighbours in dreams. (p. 207)

13 With this knowledge Norm is able to trek across the land, navigate his way in a fishing boat across the seas of the Gulf of Carpentaria, communicate with the spirits of the land and the seas, and is able to live out Aboriginal Law in daily practice. This reveals his own embodied sense of sovereignty over space as an Indigenous person in contemporary Australia.

14 Early in the novel, Norm declares that what happens to the sea affects all people. He tells his family: "We are the flesh and blood of the sea and we are what the sea brings the land." (pp. 28-29) This is a key statement in the narrative, a reference on the one hand to the ancient connection all humans have to the seas, and a more direct allusion, on the other hand, to the links shared between the giant serpent that creates land and Law (and which moves, like Norm, from sea to land, and back to sea again) and Norm as Law holder. But this statement also alludes to the journey Norm will make out to sea later in the story to meet his own flesh and blood—his grandson, Bala—and bring him back to land to help renew Country. Norm earns his living as a taxidermist of fish. When he's not in his workshop bringing fish back to life, he's usually out at sea in his fishing boat. He converses with the sea and communes with its creatures, especially the giant gropers who school around Norm's boat at times. He interacts with swells, currents, winds and waves. He can read them; he knows the sea's dialects or what Greg Dening calls, borrowing from Pacific Islanders, the "language of the sea [26]". This is a language that is spoken and understood by coastal Indigenous cultures in Australia, whose "ancestors [...] created not only the landscape but also the seascape [27]". The Gay'wu Group of Women, from Arnhem Land, in the north of Australia, refer to their known watered spaces as "Sea Country", and talk of "Sea Country rights", explaining:

> We belong to the sea and the sea belongs to us, just as with the land. We don't see any clear distinction between land and sea, rivers and mangroves, earth and sky; they are all connected through relationships. That is the basis of our authority, our land rights and sea rights [28].

15 In one scene in *Carpentaria*, Norm takes the body of his good friend Elias out to sea for burial. The giant gropers guide Norm on his journey, "steering him along a corridor above a steep underwater canyon". Then Norm sees subtle shifts on the surface of the water, noticing "a different breaking pattern in the current line," and when he touches the water he feels its temperature has risen. Norm is guided further by the sun, "spreading and hovering" above the water, flashing and lighting up the wings of sea birds. The birds hover in a hot breeze about the boat, and land on it; the now green-coloured water begins to swell, forced to surge up over "underwater reefs". The fish then create "a circle of clear water around the boat," and Norm knows this is the exact spot in the ocean he has sought to commit his friend's body to the deep (pp. 211-213). In this scene, Norm's sense of sight, touch, sound and smell allow him to read animals, wind, current and swell, within a seascape that is readable not only across a horizontal plain, out across the sea, but up and down a vertical axis as well, through depth of sea to height of sky. Contours exist beneath and above as well as out beyond the water; signs are all around, just as they are on land.

16 Norm is not the only knowledge-holder of the seas of the Gulf region. Other elders know stories too, and pass them on to the next generation. Old Joseph Midnight, despite being a sworn enemy of Norm's, gets on well with Norm's son Will. At one point in the story, Will, who's on the run from the police, needs to make a quick getaway at night, across the sea in a boat. Old Joseph helps him, passing on his knowledge of this stretch of water to Will. We read that, "The old man gave [Will] the directions to the safe place in his far-off country – a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen" (p. 316). Midnight's song is said to recount "hundreds of places" in a long journey. And Will will arrive safely in his boat only if he remembers the song that Old Joseph now recounts for him. He has to sing this song properly, as he travels, in order to navigate. The old man instructs Will:

> 'Sing this time. Only that place called such and such. This way, remember. Don't mix it up. Then next place, sing, such and such. Listen to me sing it now and only when the moon is above, like there, bit lower, go on, practice. Remember, don't make mistakes...' The song was so long and complicated and had to be remembered in the

> right sequence where the sea was alive, waves were alive, currents alive, even the clouds. (p. 317)

17 This is a demonstration of what are commonly known as Songlines, songs that are stored in memory and which function, among other things, as direction finders for Indigenous people across the landscapes and seascapes of Australia. A Songline is "a knowledge system—a way of retaining and transmitting knowledge—that is archived or held in the land. [...] Like libraries, [Songlines] contain stories in which knowledge is embedded [29]". The existence and ongoing upkeep of Songlines across Australia is evidence of "perhaps the most ancient form of indexing" of Aboriginal Law in the land, and of Indigenous sovereignty over Australian space [30].

18 In the scene above, with Joseph Midnight, Wright seeks to represent something of the epistemologies of Indigenous seafaring. For Joseph, and then Will, these navigational narratives or stories are remembered and recalled, when needed, in song. It is important that these stories and songs are passed on to the next generation, just as the ancestors who created and practiced Aboriginal Law passed such vital stories and songs on to the present generation. In *Carpentaria*, then, both Norm Phantom and Joseph Midnight are senior elders, keepers of Aboriginal Law (though there are others), who propagate and practice and then teach sovereign ways of knowing and acting. To return to Moreton-Robinson, this is sovereignty embodied, ontological and epistemological, grounded within complex relations with ancestral beings, humans and land.

19 What's important to recognise in the representation of Indigenous sovereignty in *Carpentaria* is that it functions *irrespective* of the operation of the sovereignty of the nation-state, or of the nation-state's claims to sovereign power, within the storyworld of the novel. When state authorities seek to ingratiate themselves with Aboriginal leaders—and with Normal Phantom in particular—they decide to officially change the name of the local river "from that of a long deceased Imperial Queen, to 'Normal's River'" (p. 8). But the locals "belly-laughed themselves silly" at the state's attempt to impose its own names and authority over already-Indigenous-known Country, "because the river only had one name from the beginning of time. It was called Wangala." (p. 8) Aboriginal Law rules above all.

20 A particular enactment of Indigenous custodianship over land occurs early in the novel in the actions of Norm's wife, Angel Day. In a comedic scene, she claims herself to be sovereign over the "dominion" of the rubbish dump located at the edge of the white-dominated town of Desperance (p. 23). She warns off other Indigenous claimants to the land:

> 'Hey! What are you people doing here?' she hollered. 'What's wrong with you people? You people don't belong here. Who said you got any normal rights to be hanging around here? On other people's laaand for? Just taking what you want, hey? What about the traditional owner then?' [...] Angel Day was mouthing off again about the poor old traditional owner being bypassed – once again. (p. 21)

21 These statements and her action of standing firm on the land trigger "tribal battles from the ancient past," as people begin drawing "lines in the dirt" to claim a part of the rubbish tip for themselves (p. 23). The "war of the dump" follows (p. 27). This "war" over land foreshadows the battles that will ensue later between Normal Phantom's Pricklebush mob and Joseph Midnight's Eastside mob over support for the mine as well as native title rights to the land around Desperance. But this scene also signals that Lawful and mutually recognised claims to land on the Australian continent will be (and always have been) determined by Indigenous people themselves, not by the more recently-arrived nation-state. Angel Day's claim to sovereignty is made not via appeals to title deeds or a written contract but to ancestral-custodial rights or what the narrator refers to as "the inheritance of antiquity," which reigns supreme over all else:

> [She] believed she filled the shoes of Normal's grandfather, who had been the keeper of this land. No one entered these parts without first speaking their business to the keeper, and to her mind, she was it. She welcomed those who walked heavy with the inheritance of antiquity stashed in their bones. Pride swelled up inside her when she saw those with a landscape chiselled deep into their faces and the legacy of ancestral creation loaded into their senses. (p. 23)

22 True sovereigns of the land are those who have it "chiselled deep into their faces"—those who embody the land—and those with an ancestral and sensory connection to it.

23 More broadly, Norm's sense of custodianship over the land, and his ongoing practice of Aboriginal Law, is retained and enacted even though he does not officially own the land, in legal terms, around Desperance. In fact, Norm doesn't even hold state-conferred native title rights to the land. Instead, native title rights near Desperance have been granted to Joseph Midnight's mob—they have falsely claimed they are the "real traditional owners"—because they were willing to do a deal with the government for the building of a mine (pp. 44-45). Here, Wright critiques the native title process as a farce, as a land rights process which can be exploited by governments and big mining companies to achieve certain ends by means of pitting one Aboriginal group of claimants against another. Norm's Pricklebush mob, who are the rightful custodians, lost out to the "unscrupulous" Eastside mob, in this case (p. 46). However, this land title arrangement is shown to have no effect whatsoever on who still has responsibility under *Aboriginal* Law for the upkeep of the land. Midnight knows full well his native title claim is fraudulent. His country is said to be "a long way off to the West" (p. 361). Norm continues to *act* as the land's chief custodian even though he has no state-recognised legal right to it, and every other Aboriginal group is represented as knowing that this is the way things are. In other words, both Indigenous understandings and Indigenous enactments of sovereignty are shown in *Carpentaria* to take precedence over the "shrill rhetoric of Native Title" arrangements conferred on Aboriginal people by the state [31]. Aboriginal people take responsibility for land as sovereign owners of it; Indigenous Law rules, not state conferred native title.

24 Tony Birch makes the point that although Indigenous sovereignty might be sought through European law,

> sovereignty within Indigenous communities themselves is not reliant on either European law or occasional state paternalism. It is maintained through pre-existing, pre-European models of governance. Such models continue to be culturally and politically sustainable, regardless of a lack of legal recognition by Australian governments [32].

25 This is what Alexis Wright seeks to portray and to assert in her fiction writing: the uninterrupted maintenance of laws, routines and

cultures of governance over lands and seas stretching from time immemorial to the present day.

26 *Carpentaria* closes with Norm enacting both the motion and the mission of the creative serpent from the beginning of the novel. Having survived a giant storm out at sea and on an island in the Gulf, where he met up with his grandson, Bala, Norm travels back to the mainland. He arrives and looks out across the floodplains, where all human infrastructure has been washed away by the storm, and he starts thinking about the home he will rebuild where his old house stood. Bala, as the son of Will and Joseph Midnight's granddaughter Hope, unifies the two rival factions of Aboriginal people in his person. He will receive the stories of the land; his generation will ensure a connection to Country and the survival of culture. As Norm and Bala walk they do not speak, for it was "much better to listen to the mass choir of frogs" assembled around them as they move along. In the final sentence, the narrator reports "there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh." (p. 438) As Jeanine Leane points out, "*Carpentaria* closes with a different song to the one at the beginning[33]." The chant of the nation that opened the novel has been replaced by the sound of Country being sung afresh. The land is in control of this song: it is singing, not the nation-state. The town of Desperance "is transformed, not destroyed," says Leane. "The settler disaster is reconfigured as Aboriginal cosmos[34]." The return of the land's traditional custodian with his future in hand is welcomed in song, and Aboriginal sovereignty, even if it is not a state-approved reality, is represented as a reality in the mind, the actions, and in the bodily presence on the land of Norm Phantom and Bala. Stephen Muecke argues that "Legitimate occupancy of the country, currently much contested in Australia, is about what people's bodies can conceivably do there[35]". This points to the political work that Wright's novel does: in conceiving of landscapes and seascapes as marked, mapped, signposted, storied spaces, they become cultured human place, occupied, embodied and owned, sovereign place.

27 Researcher and Indigenous rights advocate, Yamatji woman Crystal McKinnon, maintains that Indigenous sovereignty is not solely about territory or land, and is not contained by Western legal frameworks:

> The Western legal definition of sovereignty is far too simplistic and one-dimensional. Indigenous sovereignty is so much more than this; it is about relationships to family to ancestors and to kin. It is about the land, territory and country. It is about our rights and our obligations to each other. It is about our knowledges and our understandings of ourselves and of others. It is about our spiritual and religious beliefs and our creators. It is also about our place within our country, our stars and our worlds. It encompasses everything about who we are as Indigenous people. It is the past, the present and Indigenous futures [36].

28 Indigenous Australian stories of sovereign mindset and place, like Wright's *Carpentaria*, ought not to be read as practical, political blueprints or road maps for the achievement of sovereignty. But they have doubtless contributed to the unsilencing of sovereignty in recent years, to its being spoken about now in public debate, to the assertion in the Uluru Statement from the Heart that Indigenous sovereignty "co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown" and that it needs to be recognised in future agreement-making between governments and First Nations peoples [37]. Creative works like *Carpentaria* do the work that Dipesh Chakrabarty assigns to minority histories: they are always "struggling, or even groping, for non-statist forms of democracy that we cannot yet either completely understand or envisage [38]". In Australia, Wright's *Carpentaria* does become potentially transformative, because for something like sovereignty to become a political reality it first has to be imagined.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

In a 2013 interview, Alexis Wright explained the importance for Indigenous Australians of maintaining what she called a “sovereignty of the mind, even if we haven’t got sovereignty of the country or the land.” She went on to recount the story of an Indigenous leader who advised a meeting of Aboriginal people “if you think you are a sovereign people, act like it.” In her 2006 novel *Carpentaria*, Wright demonstrates how these two strands of Indigenous sovereignty are evident and practiced in contemporary Australia. Key Indigenous characters in the novel are revealed to both “think” sovereign and to “act like it.” Indigenous sovereignty, which has never been ceded but is still denied by Australian law, is performed on the land, in custom, in story and in song, in a multitude of ways. Wright thereby contributes to an assertion of sovereign, Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies in Australia. Significantly, cultural elders in *Carpentaria* are shown to take for granted their sovereign custodianship of Country regardless of who technically owns land within the colonised nation-space of the novel, thus revealing the rule of Aboriginal Law in Indigenous Australia over and against the assumed sovereign rule of the nation-state.

Français

Dans un entretien de 2013, Alexis Wright a expliqué l’importance qu’il y avait pour les Australiens aborigènes à maintenir ce qu’elle appelle une « souveraineté de l'esprit, même si nous n'avons pas la souveraineté du pays ou de la terre. » Elle a ensuite rappelé le conseil d’un leader aborigène aux participants autochtones d’une réunion : « si vous pensez être un peuple souverain, agissez comme tel. » Dans son roman *Carpentaria*, paru en 2006, Wright montre comment ces deux volets de la souveraineté indigène sont

évidents, et mis en pratique dans l'Australie contemporaine. Les principaux personnages aborigènes du roman tout à la fois se pensent souverains, et agissent comme tels. Le roman montre comment la souveraineté autochtone, qui n'a jamais été cédée mais qui est toujours niée par la loi australienne, s'exerce de multiples façons, sur le territoire, dans les coutumes, dans les histoires et dans les chants. Wright contribue ainsi à relayer et à affirmer l'existence d'épistémologies et d'ontologies aborigènes souveraines en Australie. Il est significatif de constater que les figures d'autorité culturelle, dans *Carpentaria*, considèrent comme acquis leur rôle de gardiens souverains du pays, indépendamment de la question de savoir qui est techniquement propriétaire de la terre dans l'espace-nation colonisé du roman, révélant ainsi la primauté de la loi autochtone dans l'Australie aborigène sur la primauté supposée de l'État-nation.

INDEX

Mots-clés
souveraineté, mondes aborigènes, paysages marins, pistes de rêves, incarnation, droit aborigène, terra nullius, Déclaration d'Uluru

Keywords
sovereignty, Aboriginal Country, seascape, songlines, embodiment, Aboriginal Law, terra nullius, Uluru Statement

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II - Embracing great and small: of dust, cyclones and songs in *Carpentaria*

The Dust of *Carpentaria*

Samuel J. Cox

PLAN

Mozzie Fishman and the Convoy
Wright's Epic Matter(s)
Dust and The Ancient Library

TEXTE

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 C*arpentaria* 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 deter-

ritorialised 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 mysterious, 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 environ-

mentally 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 associated 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 invocation 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 chambers, 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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RÉSUMÉS

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.

INDEX

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

AUTEUR

Samuel J. Cox

“Plenty of business going on”

The Apocalyptic Cyclones of Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* as Trope of Real, Imagined, and Spiritual Australian Place

Chrystopher J. Spicer

TEXTE

1 “Place extends,” declares Alexis Wright in her essay, “A Journey in Writing Place”, “a particular place is not separate and just of itself”. Rather, it is part of the extended, national environmental place[1]. While *Carpentaria* is a unique and singular work of particular literary place, that place too is not “just of itself”, for Wright’s novel is situated within the context of tropical Australian literary place, and in this paper I will explore Wright’s use of the apocalyptic cyclone trope in *Carpentaria* and then the trope’s context in Australian literature by way of understanding the cyclone trope’s relationship to Australian literary place.

2 While Wright is the first Australian Aboriginal writer to offer a vision for society through the genre of dystopian literature, a genre that includes such texts as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), she subverts the Western form of the genre in that it is nature, the environment, and ancestral spirits that destroy and re-create place rather than technology or nuclear warfare, and the instruments of apocalypse in *Carpentaria* are natural events: cyclones. Here, the spiritual and the natural are the vehicles by which the hopelessness of present place is transformed into the hope of future place. The Australian Aboriginal peoples’ cultural knowledge is grounded in faithfulness and faith in a particular place, its ancestry, its people, its seas and skies, and the deep interpretation of these with the sacred. For Aboriginal peoples, argues anthropologist Wade Davis, life is “a cosmological whole”, and so they understand their obligation is to “sustain the world”, as an essential part of which the “literal preservation of the land was the fundamental priority of every Aboriginal man and woman[2]”. In Wright’s literary world, then, there is an intrinsic relationship between the natural climate and the social

climate, that is between spiritual and physical place and the people within it. Australian Aboriginal people perceive cyclones as products of the place itself that may be actually "sung up" by a clever man or spirits for a purpose, such as chasing down and punishing lawbreakers [3]. Such an intimate relationship between people and environment forms what Wright terms an "extraordinary literacy of place", and an essential element of tropical Northern Australia place is the cyclones that are so integral to it [4]. They are the forces of nature that are "more powerful than anything that humans can offer [5]."

3 *Carpentaria* is a work within a sub-genre of Australian climate change literature in which cyclones are a significant trope and, as such, are an example of Wright's argument that place extends: that environmental place, personal place, and literary place are interrelated. In the first part of this paper, I want to explore the literacy of the particular cyclone place in *Carpentaria*, and then I will briefly consider some examples of other Australian works that also speak of cyclone place. To my knowledge, the particular context of extreme cyclonic weather events has not been considered in any critical commentary about *Carpentaria*, although critics such as Lucy Rowland have certainly considered the novel's relation to climate change, but I believe that it is important to consider *Carpentaria*'s contextual relevance to our relationship with both literal and literary Australian place [6].

4 Occurring with seasonal regularity, tropical cyclones are historically endemic to the Northern Australia region and so, as significant meteorological phenomena impacting the area, they have been integrated into its life, culture, and literature. Their combination of high-speed winds, heavy rain, and storm surges can mean loss of life and destruction of property on a large scale, and so to live successfully in the tropics, one must not only accept the storm as an integral part of life but be prepared to heed the meaning of the storm, to embrace its new revelations, and so better understand and better enable our relationship with our environment. Because cyclones are an integral, historic, and frequently catastrophic element of the physical and meteorological Northern Australia region, they have featured in Australian literary works that form an essential part of the national

literary context within which Wright tells her own epic and individual story.

5 While working on *Carpentaria*, Wright often read the Irish poet and playwright Seamus Heaney, whom she admired for having "dignified Irish humanity and their troubles in his poetry" with a calmness and clarity that inspired her to "speak to this country [Australia] in its language" and to strive to create a sense of authenticity about our world[7]. To achieve this authenticity, Wright perceived that Heaney had "dug into his country with his heart, his mind, and his soul," just as she aimed to do[8]. Heaney explains that there are two ways in which place is known and cherished: one is lived and unconscious, the other is learned and conscious and that "in the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension[9]". Wright visualized this co-existence in *Carpentaria* as a "spinning, multi-stranded helix of stories", a helix of strands "forever moving, entwining all stories together", that form the novel's literary DNA in which conscious and unconscious multi-cultural stories co-exist. While major characters in *Carpentaria* are Australian Aboriginal, Wright observes that she could have created characters indigenous to any part of the world "who share a relationship with their spiritual ancestors and heritage, or for that matter, any Australian – old or new[10]". Place extends.

6 Cyclones are significant to Wright's story, as they have been to the stories of other Australian authors, old or new, in their role as climatic instruments of apocalypse and epiphany, judgement and redemption, destruction and renewal, but in *Carpentaria* there is a spiritual relationship between cyclone, spirit, land, and people that is unique to this story. At the conclusion of the novel, when Norm Phantom and Bala sing the country afresh in the cyclone's aftermath, they sing a new song and a new story of renewed place, in contrast to the song of Armageddon heard at the beginning of the novel. While Desperance is destroyed by a cyclone, it is also transformed by it: a disaster for white settlers is transfigured as a revelation of Australian Aboriginal cosmos. In the true meaning of apocalypse, the cyclonic destruction of the old social structure and climate reveals that change is possible and that there can be a new and different social climate. In singing a new song of Country, Norm and Bala are re-establishing and continuing the story of the spiritual as well as the

physical place of the cyclone that has always been here and always will be here.

7 Wright's cyclones are more than random weather events. There are reasons for their existence. They have purpose. Cyclones play significant roles in the conscious and unconscious stories of what Wright terms the "deep weather" of Country, which is why she includes them in this novel[11]. Structurally bracketed by cyclones, *Carpentaria* is permeated by the ancestral spirits of the wind and the Serpent that are "all around in the atmosphere". As the serpent's breath "fights its way through in a tunnel of wind from underground", the rhythm of its breathing is the ebb and flow of the tide[12]. This is Country where the inside knowledge gathered from stories informs when the trade winds will merge in summer and when cyclones might linger and regroup, and Wright believes in the transforming power of these stories, that "once these stories are heard there is an opportunity to see this other way of knowing[13]". *Carpentaria* is a story of epiphany and apocalypse and the transforming power of hope that initially appears as a prophet who emerges from a cyclone to warn a town about its hypocrisy toward a land and its people and to offer an opportunity for cultures to come together. However, when that prophet is rejected and exiled by the white townspeople of Desperance, and eventually murdered by men from the local mine, a second cyclone created by clever man Norm Phantom punishes the mine and town, destroying them in order to cleanse and recreate the land. This cyclone is a storm of great spiritual power and portent, but in the true sense of apocalypse this cyclonic catastrophe is not just about destruction: it also reveals opportunity for change, for a new beginning and for hope.

8 In this story, *Carpentaria* country is a place of both end and beginning, of apocalypse and re-creation, where people experience epiphanies of hope in their relationships with place, story, person, and environment, including the meteorology. Because the English word "apocalypse" is derived from the Greek *apokalupsis*, meaning literally to uncover or reveal, the word was originally associated more with revelation than with the destruction of a world-ending violent event, while current usage tends to downplay the meaningful reveal in favor of the more dramatic Big Bang, that universe-wide explosive event wrought from catastrophe. In that sense, while an apocalypse

may certainly appear to be a catastrophe, according to the primary meaning of the word it happens for a *reason*. As James Berger maintains in *After the End*, to be truly apocalyptic an event must "in its destructive moment, clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end." An apocalypse is not actually the end in itself; rather, it anticipates, reveals, and explains the end[14]. For example, while a catastrophic weather event like a severe tropical cyclone may be described as apocalyptic in terms of its scope, severity of destruction, and its impact on people's lives, as an apocalypse the cyclone has purpose and meaning. It can destroy but, in the process, it can also reveal and after that epiphany, the cyclone can be a catalyst for re-creation. The cyclone in *Carpentaria* that seeks out a Law breaker, for example, has purpose as the punishment instrument of the creation spirit, finding and revealing the person to punish and destroy them. (p. 461) The "whirly wind" that "spung up from the hills themselves" (p. 394) has purpose to revive the fire that destroys the Gurfurritt mine and punish those that violate the Law[15]. A multifaceted threat to the environment of Wright's cyclone place, the mine endangers the physical health of the Aboriginal people working there as well as imperilling their cultural survival as "excavation of the land during mining activity can revise or disrupt the traditional narratives associated with that land[16]". The Gurfurritt mine has provoked the ancestral spirits of the place that should have remained undisturbed: Norm's son Kevin heard the roar of the ancestor's voice in the explosion that nearly killed him. Damage to the environmental place has spread beyond the land, and when the second cyclone arrives, "Country people, old people, said it was the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty polluted sea." Will can see that the country "looked dirty from mining, shipping, barges spilling ore and waste. Something had to run a rake across the lot" (p. 385). The cyclone arrives to cleanse and renew, to not only punish but to reveal a new earth to the survivors as re-creator.

9 The cyclone may also reveal on a more personal level. The destruction, the trauma, and the violence of such weather events can reveal and explain to survivors during and after the event unseen or unknown aspects of themselves. Consequently, in the aftermath they now perceive their very selves and their personal space differently, a revelation that may occur as an enlightening, illuminating, even spir-

itual experience: an epiphany. Wright also read James Joyce while working on *Carpentaria*, and in Joyce's *Stephen Hero* his protagonist defines an epiphany as a "sudden spiritual manifestation [...] the most delicate and evanescent of moments" that might appear without warning[17]. In such a moment, "the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus" finally does so, and everything becomes clear or "epiphanised," to use Joyce's term[18]. An example in Australian literature is the epiphany experienced by Patrick White's character Elizabeth Hunter in his novel *The Eye of the Storm*. Emerging from an island shelter into the quiet eye of a cyclone, she experiences an epiphany about her true spiritual condition, or rather lack of it. Only in that still moment within the Yeatsian gyre does she realize the true nature of her soul and is epiphanised[19]. Consequently, she seeks a right path during the latter part of her life so that she might achieve spiritual union with the universe when she dies[20]. The Biblical character Saul, the persecutor of Christians, also seeks the right path after experiencing another example of epiphany. While travelling to Damascus, he is suddenly surrounded by a light and interrogated by a divine voice, as recounted in Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles. Consequently, forced by his experience to question his life values and direction, he ceases his persecution, converts to Christianity, and changes his name to Paul.

10 For Alexis Wright, fiction penetrates surface layers to probe "deep into the inner workings of reality", and in *Carpentaria*, her cyclones are the instruments of that exploration, rendering catastrophe as revelatory apocalypse that enables the incomprehensible to be comprehended and the seeming, random meaninglessness of violent weather to be perceived to have meaning[21]. In this way, Wright challenges the reader to penetrate the layers of *Carpentaria*, right from the opening words of the storyteller: "A NATION CHANTS, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY" (p. 1), for they do not know this different story told by those on the outside of the white nation looking in. Desperance may seem to be Armageddon, but *Carpentaria* place is also where, "A CHILD WHO WAS NO STRANGER TO HER PEOPLE ASKED IF ANYONE COULD FIND HOPE. THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK WERE LISTENING AND SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG ONES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN" (p. 12). Stories are significant here because it is through story that *Carpentaria* place exists and will continue to exist. *Carpentaria*

expresses a profound way of re-thinking being and knowing about the world but, even more than that, this is literature that *makes* a world where legends and spirits and weather live side by side in a place of cyclical patterns embodied in the cyclonic weather systems of Wright's tropical coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

11 Wright's spinning cyclones are tropes of the "recurring cycle of existence" of her protagonists and their *Carpentaria* place [22]. The novel's events "are depicted by cyclical (climatic) and generational (remembered) experiences of time rather than by the time [...] measured by clock, calendar, and chronology [23]". Wright herself revealed that when writing *Carpentaria*, she was consciously striving "to create an authentic form of Indigenous story-telling" that would be a cyclic, multi-dimensional narrative differing in form and style from traditional European linear narrative, and the result is her entwined, "spinning, multi-stranded helix of stories [24]". The spinning, spiral form of the cyclones in *Carpentaria* is a trope of that spinning helix of stories that "relate to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams [25]". Norm Phantom and his son Will, for example, embark on journeys of self-discovery that will bring them back to their place, and Elias Smith, who is given to Desperance by a cyclone, returns to the sea from where he came. Will's wife Hope sets out to find him, taking the stories and knowledge she has learned back to the sea and to him, having given her father-in-law Norm hope that these forgotten stories of this place can be relearned. When the apocalyptic cyclone arrives, it cleanses *Carpentaria* place, cycling it back to its original pre-creation nakedness from which it can be re-created by and through these stories in a continuation of a journey of place.

12 *Carpentaria* is an epic story set in an epic story place. Wright tells us that her intention "was to build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side," where it would be as if the land "was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories about the land [26]". This is a saga that will grow the land, that reaches forward into an envisioned future as much as back through layers of time and history where the natural and the mythical elements twine together to form a helix of story that the land is telling about itself and its people [27].

13 Into *Carpentaria* country, where storms are "like second nature to these people", (p. 84) and into its story appears a man from out of a cyclone, a "wizard of many oceans" who has had his memory taken from him by the spirits of this once-in-a-century cyclone named Leda because he cursed the sea and angered them (p. 42). Like the mythological Leda birthing Helen of Troy, Cyclone Leda births a man with no name and no identity but who is clearly a man of spiritual significance, for when he appears a miracle occurs: lightning rises *up* from under the sea to strike the tree in the middle of Desperance at the same time as all the clocks in the town stop (p. 43). Chronological time ceases and spiritual time begins when this man is reborn out of the cyclone to be a messenger of the spirits.

14 This cyclone-birthed man, who materializes while apparently walking on water, is perceived differently by various groups. To the white townspeople, as a stranger appearing out of nowhere on some foreign shore, he exemplifies their origin story (p. 55). Hoping he will be able to provide answers to their local mysteries and answer their prayers, they place "the richness of prophecy squarely on his shoulders" and christen him with a prophet's name: Elias (pp. 67, 74). Like the Biblical prophet Elias, or Elijah, who encountered the "still small voice of God" within a whirlwind and was a prophet of rain, Elias Smith has encountered sacred spirits in a cyclone from which he has emerged with a purpose. "It was", Wright's story-teller declares, "the beginning of the day the spirits of the seas and storms mixed their business and sent Elias from out of oblivion into Desperance for a good reason"(p. 53). To the local Aboriginal people, Elias is a man of power, a "clever man", because in their story these spirits, appeased by the theft of his memory, cause the cyclone to skirt the town, and so the story of Elias, "which was later put alongside the Dreamtime by the keepers of the law to explain what happened once upon a time", becomes part of their story of place (p. 53). Norm Phantom is also aware that Elias knows the sacred place of the giant groper fish out in the Gulf and can communicate with them, because he has seen Elias call the sacred gropers up from the deep. Both the Aboriginal and the white people of Desperance agree that Elias is a spiritually unique person: the latter make him the town guardian, while the former adopt him as a man of "ancient ways" with whom they sit at night to count constellations (p. 75). However, Elias

perceives himself as neither. With no memory of his own identity, he cannot accept those that are imposed upon him. Consequently, the town perceives him as ungrateful and punishes him as a scapegoat with exile into the wilderness of the sea from whence he came. Finally, he is murdered by men from the mine.

15 When Norm's son Will Phantom, another exile, discovers the body and returns it to his father, Norm is traditionally obligated to start the body on its return journey to its spiritual place: the home of the groper in the Gulf of Carpentaria, where they gather on their nightly and seasonal journeys to and from the sea and the sky. Norm believes they are waiting here to receive Elias and take him into the sea of stars, and so he embarks on what will be a journey of great spiritual epiphany and revelation to return the man from the cyclone to his spiritual home [28]. As he sails on his sacred mission over the vast network of underwater song lines and under the map of the stars, spiritual secrets are revealed to him. After years of pain, anger, and loneliness, he now sees the hope of a path home where he will reunite with his family, his people, and his country. In fact, Hope is literally his family, in the form of his daughter-in-law, but Norm has had a problem with her being related to a destructive cyclone. Hope's grandfather was "old and clever" Cyclone, a believer in and user of magic who was reputed to be the "first person in contemporary times to turn imagination into reality". Cyclone's imagination was a dark place, however, for it was rumoured he had the ability to bring lies to life (p. 147), and this long-standing family background is why Norm was consumed with anger over Will's relationship with Hope and exiled him [29]. In *Carpentaria*, then, from one cyclone emerges Elias the prophet figure who is the herald of another cyclone and who turns Norm's heart to Hope, his son Will, and his grandson Bala, for it is on this physical and spiritual journey inspired by Elias' death that Norm re-establishes his relationship with them. This, he concludes, "was the solace of Elias: how he used his death to help an ignorant old man find his grandson, to rekindle hope in his own joyless soul" (p. 294).

16 As a result of this journey, perhaps because of this journey, the prophet's mantle of judgement once worn by Elias falls across Norm's shoulders. In that last verse of Malachi, Elijah is also identified as the prophet who will herald "the great and terrible day of the Lord", and

now it must be Norm who calls down the great and terrible day of judgement on Desperance in payback on the town for its hypocrisy, its ignorance, its racism, and its willingness to destroy this Carpentaria country. To do so, he draws on his spiritual power in a sacred place to "sing up the spirits in the water" (p. 467), creating the apocalyptic cyclone that will destroy it [30].

17 In *Carpentaria* place, cyclones have spiritual function and bear portent far beyond their literal form. As Will shelters from this storm, he sees storm clouds

> carrying the enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds [...] the sounds of the great spirit ancestors roaring [...] the spirit waves being rolled in by the ancestral seawater creatures of the currents [...] This was the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another. (p. 385)

18 He understands that this cyclone is more than weather: it is an apocalyptic event of profound significance that will change everything as part of the eternal creation cycle, because

> history could be obliterated when Gods moved the country. He saw history being rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making. (p. 473)

19 For Australian Aboriginal people, a cyclone reveals the way home to not only the living but also the spirits of the dead, and this cyclone has plucked the lost drowned souls from the depths (p. 458) as it crossed the waters of the Gulf, carrying them to shore. When Will climbs into the confined space under the roof of the Desperance pub to seek shelter, then, he is not surprised to discover that he is sharing it with spirits of ancestors and of drowned fisherman, including the very old Queen of the Pricklebush, who reminds Will that as a child he saw a Creation Spirit in the form of a cyclone follow a Law breaker along a river-bed until it found him hiding in a town and killed him. Cyclones have purpose as instruments of judgement, she declares, and this spiritually powerful cyclone raging around them has been brought into existence for that very purpose, 'sung' into existence

using a creation ceremony in a sacred place and then directed along the secret paths of underwater currents specifically to Desperance. “Cyclones don’t come from nowhere”, she states emphatically, “because there is plenty of business going on when cyclones come onto the country out of the rooftop of the world” (p. 461).

20 That cyclone business, in the true sense of apocalypse, is more than destruction: it is also to reveal and renew. Will knows that in revealing new knowledge to him, this cyclone experience is preparing him for “the knowledge of intuition, of understanding the vibrations of subtle movement in the environment” (p. 444). It is preparing him for change. In his mind, Will sees huge masses of the waters of the sea circulating, and “a mysterious change of great magnitude [...] taking place in the wetted atmosphere”, and so this change is not restricted to just the land. (p. 443) Will understands that this cyclonic event is part of the on-going story of this entire great creation place that is his homeland, his country, where “predetermined knowledge” dwelling within a world full of memories is “told, retold, thousand upon a thousand times from the voices of all times” (p. 443). This cyclonic event is not just about the despair of the past and destruction: this is an apocalyptic spiritual storm that reveals a new future of hope.

21 When Norm and Bala reach the site of Desperance after the cyclone, the land has been wiped clean of all trace of humanity. There will now be need for hope, and for Norm’s daughter-in-law Hope, as a new cycle begins. Norm, the man who lost hope, finally finds Hope in the cyclone. Wright’s constant puns and allusions to “hope” throughout the novel leave little doubt that her choice of this name was quite deliberate, and it is significant that these references become more positive as the novel progresses. While Will is trapped under the roof with the spirits during the storm, he has a vision of Hope in which she is apparently walking on water, and when Norm and Bala discover Hope wandering along a beach, she has emerged from the sea with no memory of how she came to be in it. Both these events are reminders of the first sightings of Elias and suggest that Hope has emerged as his spiritual successor and a messenger of hope from out of the second cyclone. Will’s epiphany is that he will survive and see her again. Norm has believed that miracles do not happen to anyone unless God has given them a miracle key such as the one he

considered was given to Elias, and he has refused to believe that Hope had it. However, as Hope prepares to embark on her own journey to find Will after the storm and restore a people to country made new by the cyclone, Norm has an epiphany that she now has that key and that he believes in her. (p. 498) Like his son, this man who lost hope has found Hope. As Norm's journey-cycle through sadness and revenge culminates in his spiritual awakening and renewal sung by the voices of frogs awakened by the rain, another cycle of hope begins for him, as it does for this cyclone place.

22 Wright envisages a cyclone country made spiritually animate through the interrelationship of human and non-human forces, and thus her novel challenges attitudes to what it means to be in and of that place. Wright's cyclones, that both begin and complete the cycle of her story, are more than weather: as apocalyptic instruments, they are spiritual voices and messengers with purpose to not only punish and destroy but also to reveal and transform. Cyclone Leda transforms Elias from person to prophet, a journey that continues after his death until he is eternally visible in the constellations as a spirit guide of great power. Will's meeting with the spirits within the second cyclone enables his spirit to be renewed and redefined. Norm Phantom, a man with more than normal power that can create cyclones, is guided to find Hope by the very cyclone he creates - a cyclone so powerful it changes landscape and lives. Ultimately, this cyclone country is cleansed in order that new life can be re-created in a renewed land under which the Creation Serpent will still sleep. The cyclone in *Carpentaria* is a spiritual as well as a physical experience that, told in this time, is a story of all time about the need for and understanding of our relationships through story with place and our environment.

23 It is a place that Ronald and Catherine Berndt describe as a "speaking land" that, "resonant with sound and presence", constitutes a "primary force" that "speaks unequivocally" through Australian Aboriginal stories that hold up a mirror in which can be seen the actions of the environment and of the people within it [31]. It is a voice of place in sharp contrast to the historical "great Australian silence" of white Australians to the presence of Aboriginal people [32]. Wright expressed a desire to entwine these stories to form "a literature growing out of the country itself" that was capable "of changing the way we think about literature in Australia", and so find "ways to sing this country

more powerfully[33]". *Carpentaria* voices an Australian Aboriginal view not only of Carpentaria place but of national place that challenges Western assumptions of our relationships to the natural environment. However, to understand that relationship to national place, we need to understand *Carpentaria* as it sits within the national literary context, within that small unique group of Australian literature that also features the cyclone as a literary trope of revelation and renewal. Wright was conscious when writing *Carpentaria* of the "power of stories" that grew out of place, and as her story grew out of a cyclone place, so have other Australian stories. To understand the Australian literary context of her use of the cyclone trope, we need to briefly overview some of the other Australian works in which that trope also appears, while understanding that *Carpentaria* is different and detached from the literary tradition of those previous works and speaks of another culture while yet speaking with a national voice. Recognizing the novel as Australian Aboriginal story-telling that is also part of a national story-telling of place enhances the power and the inclusiveness of *Carpentaria* as a new song within a vast story.

24 *Carpentaria* is positioned within a sub-genre of Australian climate literature that includes short stories, poems, and novels in which cyclones are major tropes and catalysts of events. Having referred to Patrick White's *The Eye of the Storm* earlier in the paper, the other four works that we will explore are Helen Weston's *The Prelude*, Vance Palmer's *Cyclone*, Thea Astley's *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, and Susan Hawthorne's poetry cycle *Earth's Breath*[34]. I consider these works the most significant in this group because in each, as in *Carpentaria*, the cyclone trope appears not just as catastrophe but as apocalypse, as both destroyer and creator, as the will of nature and as an instrument of divine will, as both fate and destiny. Thus these literary works also speak in their own way to our relationship to place and our journey through it, about our resilience and our search for hope and meaning in times of chaos and change.

25 In Kate Helen Weston's 1914 novel *The Prelude*, the earliest known Australian novel to use the cyclone trope, she also uses the tropical cyclone as an instrument of punishment, but this is a novel of a different era and culture in which the trope exists purely as a plot device. In this tragically romantic, Edwardian era narrative of sexual longing and unconsummated love set predominantly in sugar cane

country near Townsville, Weston flagrantly uses the cyclone to return her heroine, Nora Glayde, to the feminist path in order for her to become a fully independent woman. Weston's writing is clearly concerned with the position of women in society and the right of women to emotional and physical independence, and although she demonstrates a close affinity with Queensland place, it is really only secondary to her theme. While married to misogynistic and possessive Dr Malcolm McCarron, Nora Glayde meets the younger, politically active David Blencowe, who encourages her to become more independent. After she meets Blencowe again on a voyage to Townsville, they are left behind on Magnetic Island when their ship leaves without them. Attempting to sail to shore in a small boat, they are blown out to sea in a storm and eventually cast onto the shore of another island where they spend ten happy but chaste days together. When they are rescued, McCarron refuses to believe his wife remained faithful, at which point she leaves him, buys a local town newspaper, and becomes an independent, successful businesswoman. When McCarron dies suddenly, she is at last free to marry Blencowe but the couple are caught out in the open when a cyclone ravages his sugar cane plantation, and he is struck by flying debris and killed. Nevertheless, Glayde as the ultimate survivor rises above yet another tragedy to successfully manage both the plantation and the newspaper. Here, the cyclone punishes both characters for infringing moral codes: Blencowe for tempting the married Nora and Nora for being willing to be tempted from the feminist path by sexual desire and another marriage.

26 Vance Palmer's 1947 novel *Cyclone*, based on the 1934 Cape Tribulation cyclone event, is a far less contrived exploration of the ebb and flow of interchange between place and people, exploring relationships between society, weather, the environment, myth and spirituality. Palmer maintained that good stories "come from something in the author's experience" that was not external but that they had thought about until it became "an integral part" of their inner life. What the author was striving to do, in Palmer's opinion, was to give that experience a "shape and significance" that would enable the reader to understand it [35]. Palmer and his wife Nettie had been living on Green Island, offshore from Cairns, prior to that cyclone and had not long returned to Melbourne before that cyclone devastated

Cairns, killing some sixty people including good friends. Basing his novel on real people and events, Palmer seeks to explore the deeper elements and relationships between people, nature, and place. His characters are motivated by a search for meaning that is deeply connected to their tropical place and to their lives there.

27 Palmer, too, was aware of the epic, legendary nature of humanity's encounters with weather. "Literature", proposes literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, "is conscious mythology": as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, and in the literature of *Cyclone*, Palmer is developing his own conscious mythology of the tropical storm as he uses the great serpent monster Leviathan as a trope for the cyclone and the dangers and fears of the unknown associated with it [36]. Here, the shape of the natural event becomes that of the misshapen unnatural. As the cyclone rages around her home and around her husband out at sea, the character Fay Donolly envisions it as the enormous, wounded, sea-monster Leviathan, thrashing and destroying in anger, seeking to destroy and lay waste. In the end, the monster is defeated when Fay refuses to surrender to doubt and terror: her husband returns alive, her home remains intact, and the town's faith in itself is restored as it rebuilds. Before the cyclone arrived, the people of Palmer's port town were in conflict with each other and with themselves but, in the aftermath, having experienced the terror and the mystery of the apocalyptic cyclone event, Palmer's characters realize that they have transcended their fears and inadequacies, and this epiphany enables them to re-create new lives and new worlds. In writing *Cyclone*, Palmer sought in his imagination to understand and cope with the challenges of Far North Queensland place that includes catastrophe and chaos as well as paradise and peace. He wrote of a search to restore balance in time of disruption, of a search for meaning. He wrote of revelation.

28 Author Thea Astley also perceived an intimate relationship between the personal and the elemental: the cyclone as within us as well as without. She believed that many of her characters were "always touching on the edges of cyclones", and that just being alive was like living on that cyclonic edge [37], and her characters in A *Boat Load of Home Folk* duly discover that while they are trapped on a tropical island by a cyclone, storms rage within them as well as without. For Astley, the elemental force that is the cyclone symbolized the danger

that can emerge out of the emptiness of loneliness. To survive it, she proposes we need the strength gained from social connectivity and community. As her characters attempt to cope with their internal as well as external violent weather, their perceptions of themselves, of each other, and of their environment change. Some are touched by the cyclone while others are consumed, but no-one escapes the encounter. *A Boat Load of Home Folk* is a profound novel of the human experience, a moral fable in Astley uses the elemental apocalypse of the cyclone as a trope of an apocalypse that is both destructive and revelatory. Weighed in moral balances by the gods of whirling air, some of Astley's home folk are found wanting, yet in the aftermath others experience revelations of understanding and enlightenment.

29 Unlike the previous authors, Susan Hawthorne wrote her poetry cycle *Earth's Breath* having survived an actual cyclone: Tropical Cyclone Larry in North Queensland in March 2006. In the aftermath of that event, Hawthorne felt that the cyclone had infiltrated and revealed her innermost self. However, she also realized that her personal experience was part of the trans-national storm experience, that we are all caught up together in storms of one type or another and so, while we need to develop personal resilience, we also need to empathize with the broader global community and recognize that we are all living with the chaos of Nature. In this work, Hawthorne also searches for reason and meaning in the relationship between person and place when both have been subject to the seemingly random chaos of the violent cyclonic storm. In the course of her poem cycle, Hawthorne's interaction with the cyclone becomes intimate and ultimately complete. By the final stanza, the cyclone is *inside* her. It has become an integral part of her; it is constantly with her and even invasively *through* her. She feels caught up in the cyclone's intimate embrace: "I am in with through the cyclone/ which is inside with through me [38]". In the last section of her poem cycle, the arms of Hawthorne's spiralling storm broaden and extend as her point of view moves from the personal and local to the world cyclone. Because "the wind has entered/ some inner part of me/ and I cannot wrench it out", she feels part of the universal meteorology [39]. An event that she once saw only as isolating her from the world is now revealing to her that she is part of that world. She realizes she will never be the same

person she was before her epiphany in the cyclone, and that is important for her to understand the changes wrought within her by her cyclone experience, that she and the wind are now part of the same living system.

30 As the cyclone is experienced across literary and literal Country, a regional consciousness is engendered by this common circulation of elements. Alexis Wright suggests the power and purpose of Australian literature is that as it draws from the stories "of our two-and-something centuries", it is "growing with a lot more truth and telling, reimagining and rewriting history [40]". She considers "it is exciting to think about how we might draw strength from our combined heritages to grow stronger and more creatively", and that "we need more literature that shows we are at home with all the realities of our region [41]". At home, that is, with our place. According to James Houston, "Place implies belonging. It establishes identity [42]". Place, in other words, is part of self, of who we are. One is "essential to the being of the other," argues Edward Casey. "In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place [43]". Place is thus more than a matter of geography: whether actual or imagined as literary place, it is constitutive of one's sense of self. Seamus Heaney proposed that it is in the imagination, in what he termed "the country of the mind", where the tension between the literate and conscious and the lived and unconscious ways in which place is known and cherished becomes resolved in a "feeling, assenting, equable marriage" that constitutes our sensing of place "in its richest possible manifestations [44]". In reading stories of our cyclone place, we experience that place in our country of the mind, resolving the tension between what we unconsciously understand of place and that which we consciously learn and appreciate through literary sensibility. In this way, people and place become mapped into the texture and structure of the narrative of place. "Every narrative [...] plays a critical role in making place", argue Potteiger and Purinton. "It is through narrative that we interpret the processes and events of place. We come to know a place because we know its stories [45]".

31 Stories are not only about what we say about ourselves, then, but about how we see the world, how we perceive and interpret the environment around us and our relation to it. As Alexis Wright suggests, we write and read stories in order to find an explanation of

our world, to reach an understanding of it with which we can live [46]. So, in the stories we have explored in this paper about tropical cyclone place, we can see Wright and other Australian authors, Kate Weston, Vance Palmer, Thea Astley, Patrick White, and Susan Hawthorne, striving through their stories of the cyclone to reach, as a group of authors from different Australian eras and differing cultural heritage, that understanding of their experience. Invariably, it is not a comfortable experience: the tropical cyclone as trope may at times be an epiphany and a revelation, but it is at the same time a destructive, violent, hazardous, soul-searching, and even potentially fatal experience for literary characters, as it is in reality.

32 The metaphorics and aesthetics of tropical cyclones permeate the literature of Northern Australian place. The cyclonic storm reverberates through that literature with contexts of theme and setting, of plot and place, of tropes and tropics that encompass the complicated and symbiotic relations between society, nature, landscape, place, and space. The cyclonic storm is a literary trope of both personal and collective awareness, of revelation within the stillness and spirituality of the cyclone's eye that enables the individual to emerge from the experience transformed. To transcend the tropical cyclone experience, one needs to be open to the epiphany of revelation as these violent storms strip away the historic cultural over-growth, clearing space to re-build and for new imaginative ideas to grow. Such stories can challenge previous human experience, providing opportunity to move forward, opportunity for the emergence of the new.

NOTES

1 Alexis Wright, "A Journey in Writing Place," *Meanjin*, vol. 78, n° 2, 2019, pp. 44-53, p. 52.

2 Wade Davis, The *Wayfinders*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2009, p. 148, p. 159.

3 Alexis Wright, "Deep Weather," *Meanjin*, vol. 70, n° 2, 2011, pp. 70-82, p. 75.

4 Alexis Wright, "A Journey in Writing Place", *op. cit.*, p. 44.

5 Alexis Wright, "Deep Weather", *op. cit.*, p. 76.

6 Lucy Rowland, “Indigenous Temporality and Climate Change in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006)”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 55, n° 4, 2019, pp. 541-554.

7 Alexis Wright, “A Journey in Writing Place”, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

8 Alexis Wright, “The Power and Purpose of Literature”, *Meanjin*, vol. 77 n° 4, 2018, pp. 209-218, p. 213.

9 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, London, Faber & Faber, 1964, p. 131.

10 Alexis Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*”, *HEAT*, n° 13, 2007, pp. 79-95, p. 84.

11 Alexis Wright, “Deep Weather”, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

12 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Artarmon, NSW, Giramondo, 2007, and *Carpentaria*, London, Constable, 2009, p. 2. Hereafter references to the Constable edition of the novel will appear between brackets in the body of the text.

13 Alexis Wright, “Deep Weather”, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

14 James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post Apocalypse*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 5.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 411.

16 Lucy Rowland, “Indigenous Temporality and Climate Change in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006)”, *op. cit.*, p. 550.

17 Alexis Wright, “A Journey in Writing Place,” p. 47. James Joyce, *Stephen Hero: Part of the first draft of ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’*, (Theodore Spencer, Ed.), London, Jonathan Cape, 1960, p. 216.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 217. Epiphanies are also pivotal moments throughout Joyce’s *Dubliner* stories, as well.

19 See: W B Yeats, “The Second Coming”, in W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry* [ed. A. Norman Jeffares], London, Macmillan, 1971, p. 99. Also, see: T. S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton”, in *Four Quartets*, London, Faber & Faber, 1966, pp. 15-16.

20 Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*, Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin, 1977, pp. 408-411.

21 Alexis Wright, “Politics of Writing”, *Southerly*, vol. 62, n° 2, 2002, pp. 10-20, p. 13.

22 Veronica Strang, *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values*, Oxford, Berg, 1997, pp. 247-248.

23 Linda Daley, "Alexis Wright's Fiction as World-making", *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 10, n° 1, 2016, pp. 8-23, p. 9.

24 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *op. cit.*, p. 84.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 87.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 236-7.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 153. Cyclone's son and Hope's father was Joseph Midnight. Cyclone was said to have brought to life from story the murderous, giant sow Abilene who then carried a grudge against his family and subsequently killed one of them. Nevertheless, Cyclone, with Midnight, had Norm arrested for the murder, understandably adding to Norm's hostility.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 481-2, 485, 487.

31 Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood, Penguin Books Australia, 1989, p. 426.

32 W. E. H. Stanner. *After The Dreaming*, Crows Nest, Sydney, ABC Enterprises, 1991, p. 27.

33 Alexis Wright, "A Journey in Writing Place", *op. cit.*, p. 49.

34 See: Kate Helen Weston, *The Prelude*, London, Holden & Hardingham, 1914; Vance Palmer, *Cyclone*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1947; Patrick White, *Eye of the Storm*, Sydney, Penguin, 1977; Thea Astley, *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1968; Susan Hawthorne, *Earth's Breath*, North Melbourne, Spinifex Press, 2009.

35 Vance Palmer, *The Rainbow Bird, and other stories*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1957, p. 123.

36 Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1970, p. 295.

37 Thea Astley, *The Acolyte*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1985, p. 119; Ray Willbanks, "Thea Astley Interview", in Susan Sheridan and Paul Genomi (eds.), *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 21-35, p. 84.

38 Susan Hawthorne, "From Wind Mind", *Earth's Breath*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

40 Alexis Wright, "The Power and Purpose of Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 211.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

42 James Houston, "The Concepts of 'Place' and 'Land' in the Judeo-Christian Tradition", in David Ley and Marvyn Samples (eds.), *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*, London, Croom Helm, 1978, p. 226.

43 Edward Casey, *Getting back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 684

44 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

45 Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton, *Landscape Narratives: Design practices for telling stories*, New York, Wiley, 1998, p. 6.

46 Alexis Wright, "The Power and Purpose of Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 216.

RÉSUMÉS

English

Australian Aboriginal author Alexis Wright contends that place is not separate and isolated unto itself but is instead part of a whole environment. While *Carpentaria* Country is a place of both end and beginning, then, where character and reader can find hope in the underlying bond between story, person, and place, it can also be explored as part of the national, extended literary place. Structurally bracketed by cyclones, *Carpentaria* is a story about hope in a land of the imagination in which a prophet emerges from a cyclone to warn of a town's hypocrisy and to offer a chance for cultures to come together. When he is rejected, scapegoated, exiled, and murdered, a second cyclone catastrophically destroys the town, presenting in the true sense of apocalypse an opportunity for change and renewal of people and place. With this use of the apocalyptic cyclone trope, Wright's novel situates within a national literary context: the sub-genre of Australian climate literature in which the apocalyptic cyclone as a trope of destruction, epiphany, and renewal plays a major role in relationships between Australian society, place, and community. As one of a group of Australian literary works within the context of that sub-genre, *Carpentaria* can be seen not only as a powerfully individual work of literature but also as one in which the spiritual as well as the physical experience of the Australian literary cyclone can bring together the conscious with the unconscious in the landscape of the mind as we seek to understand through story our extended relationships with place.

Français
L'autrice aborigène australienne Alexis Wright soutient que le lieu n'est pas séparé et isolé en soi, mais qu'il fait au contraire partie d'un environnement global. Si le pays de *Carpentaria* est à la fois un lieu de fin et de début, où le personnage et le lecteur peuvent trouver de l'espoir dans le lien sous-jacent entre l'histoire, la personne et le lieu, il peut également être exploré comme faisant partie d'un lieu littéraire national et étendu. Structurée par des cyclones, *Carpentaria* est une histoire d'espoir dans un pays imaginaire dans lequel un prophète émerge d'un cyclone pour mettre en garde contre l'hypocrisie d'une ville, et offrir une chance aux différents groupes socio-culturels de s'unir. Lorsqu'il est rejeté, désigné comme bouc émissaire, exilé et assassiné, un second cyclone détruit la ville, offrant, au sens propre de l'apocalypse, une occasion de changement et de renouvellement des personnes et des lieux. Avec cette utilisation du trope du cyclone apocalyptique, le roman de Wright se situe dans un contexte littéraire national, celui du sous-genre de la littérature climatique australienne. En tant que trope de destruction, d'épiphanie et de renouveau, le cyclone apocalyptique y joue un rôle majeur dans les relations entre la société, le lieu et la communauté australienne. Au sein d'un groupe d'œuvres littéraires australiennes appartenant à ce sous-genre, *Carpentaria* peut être considéré non seulement comme une œuvre littéraire individuelle puissante, mais aussi comme une œuvre dans laquelle l'expérience spirituelle et physique du cyclone littéraire australien peut réunir le conscient et l'inconscient dans le paysage de l'esprit, alors que nous cherchons à comprendre par le biais de l'histoire nos relations étendues avec le lieu.

INDEX

Mots-clés
Wright (Alexis), apocalypse, aborigènes australiens, littérature australienne, Carpentaria, cyclone, épiphanie, écolittérature

Keywords
Wright (Alexis), apocalypse, Australian Aborigines, Australian literature, Carpentaria, cyclone, epiphany, ecofiction

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“Heartbeat”, or singing the novel afresh

The role of popular song and songsters in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*

« Heartbeat » : le rôle de la chanson et des chanteurs et chanteuses populaires dans Carpentaria *d’Alexis Wright*

Adrian Grafe

PLAN

“Country” music and musicians
“Rock and roll” (p. 389): Presley, Orbison, Holly, and Sonny and Cher
“Mesmerising” (p. 431): Bob Marley, reggae and cultural struggle
Conclusion: “as though he were no more than a song” (p. 440)

DÉDICACE

Dedicated to all the agrégation students I taught in 2021-2022, with gratitude for your enthusiasm, kindness—and indulgence!

TEXTE

1 Popular culture, especially music and musicians, but also cinema and popular literature, constitutes a rarely-mentioned facet of *Carpentaria*’s capacious aesthetic, whereby polyvocality, intertextuality, intermediality, and finally intermusicality combine. Although *Carpentaria* is both indebted to, and deconstructs, the European genre of the novel on the one hand and, on the other, the Judeo-Christian literary genre of the apocalypse, the multiple allusions to music and musicians, song and melody offer a clue as to how Alexis Wright has conceived the novel, as well as to how it might be received. The text alludes to a number of modes and styles of music from different periods but often from modern times. Apart from classical sung forms such as opera, arias and cantatas (not the more literary form of the symphony), the novel refers by name to jazz, reggae, country and western, and rock and roll: “One of my intentions was to write the novel as though it was a very long melody of

different forms of music[1].” Singers’ names frequently appear, as do their lyrics, so that these references go beyond merely mentioning song and singing, but actualise these things. In this way Wright songifies the novel, or her text songifies itself. Except for Bob Marley, all these artists are white Americans, neither Indigenous, then, nor Australian. Like the rainbow serpent, the aesthetic of the novel is “porous[2]”. The novel is intertextually and culturally inclusive while reaching for Americana far more than for “Australiana” (p. 445).

2 What is the function of such musical allusions, and how can the novel itself be considered as a musical composition? Wright stated in “On Writing *Carpentaria*” that the novel “started to be written like a long song, following ancient tradition, reaching back as much as it reached forward, to tell a contemporary story to our ground[3]”. The narrative is thus intended to represent both the fluidity of time, and harness the potential of different tempi, that are afforded by music and song as art forms in their own right. In Wright’s statement, the idea of song carries as much weight as that of story, so that the oral nature of the storytelling in the novel and of the novel as storytelling, logically received by the ear as much as by the eye is, as it were, covocal: storytelling as speech, storytelling as song. Many cultural traditions foreground song as the medium of performance of epic poetry, including that of the Homeric bard[4]. Wright’s novel can rightfully be considered in the light of such traditions. She herself feels “comfortable” using such terms as “epic” and “saga” to describe the Indigenous peoples’ “story world[5]”. Ancient performance of such works may well have been sung as well as spoken. To use Bakhtin’s word, one might consider *Carpentaria* as a “novelization” of Indigenous epic and saga[6]. However, the resulting novel is literally a song, an enchantment, in all senses of the word, of the novelistic genre.

3 As in other fields in which the novel is invested, from ecology to meteorology to garbology (that is, the specific attention paid to the waste of a community), the lexicon of music in the novel is extremely broad. Popular music in the novel is part of the whole, intricate song pattern that *Carpentaria* represents, from the “chant” in the epigraph to the first chapter (and even before that to Heaney’s translation of Sorescu’s “The First Words”, which is a lyric poem), right through to the choir of frogs singing the country afresh in the novel’s closing

lines. The frequent references to popular music and musicians belong, as it were, to the real, non-fictional world in the same way as the Gulf of Carpentaria, Brisbane and many other place-names within and without Australia, Tim Winton, contemporary brand names like R. M. Williams boots, Eveready, and Coke, and much else in the novel, do. The aim of the following three sections is to examine how Wright riffs on the three main popular musical forms referenced in the novel.

"Country" music and musicians

4 Australian scholar Joseph Cummins argues that "the concept of the songline, an Indigenous practice combining storytelling, singing, dance and art [lies] at the centre of Wright's *Carpentaria*[7]". It cannot be coincidental that two of the characters in the novel especially associated with the songlines, Mozzie Fishman and Norm Phantom, are also those who are particularly fond of country and western music. Although Wright avoids the word "songlines" in *Carpentaria*, she does have Fishman's pilgrimage follow "the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestor" (p. 114), a "road" shortly afterwards described as the "spiritual Dreaming track" (p. 118). These are explicit references to the Aboriginal songlines, an integral part of the Aboriginal "Dreaming"—Wright uses the upper-case D—which encompasses Indigenous spirituality and profound connection with "Country", land, sea and sky. Within the Dreaming, the songlines are "physical and spiritual journeys" which "map out country[8]". In this respect, one can see why country and western music, a pastoral form of artistic expression as its name indicates (the term "country and western" is repeated several times in the course of the novel), would appeal to the author, given that she stated that "country" was "even the central character" in her writing[9]. As they drive along, Mozzie Fishman and his fellow pilgrims form a "riotous choir of *yippee yi-ays*" (p. 116), a rare moment of sheer joy in the novel which casts the narrative ahead to the "mass choir of frogs" (p. 499) with their "sweet" song (p. 496): these singing frogs are as much the main characters in the last lines of the novel as Norm and Bala. "Yippe yi-ay" is the chorus line of "The Old Chisolm Trail", a nineteenth-century cowboy song about cowboys driving their cattle across desert terrain from Texas to Kansas[10]. The song's lyrics are delivered in speech for the verses, which give the narrative of the journey, and song for the chor-

uses: this arrangement bears some formal similarity to *Carpentaria*'s balance and blend of speech and song.

5 Fishman is himself a country and western singer, channelling Hank Williams in his own way through a rewriting or creative misremembering of Williams's best-known song, the Cajun-influenced "Jambalaya" (1952). The result is a kind of cotextuality. Fishman sings the "first words" to the song as Williams wrote them, singing the second line as "me got to go for the codfish ladies down the Bayou" (p. 138), originally written by Williams as: "Me gotta go pole the pirogue down the bayou[11]." Mozzie "invented new words to suit himself. But why not! 'Son of a gun, hey, Will?'" (p. 138) Fishman quotes the first words of the last line of each chorus, "Son of a gun", a slightly vague expression, possibly American, to refer to oneself positively, or to someone else affectionately or damningly. He seems to be singing—or talking—about himself. The last line of the choruses, as written by Williams, is: "Son of a gun we'll have big fun on the bayou." Fishman transforms this into the line addressed to Will just quoted, and then sings: "A buzzin, having fun down the Bayou." (p. 138) Here Fishman takes the word "buzzin" from the first line of the third stanza, "Thibodaux Fontaineaux the place is buzzin'", and transposes it to the last line of the chorus. The "codfish ladies" Fishman sings about are nowhere to be found in Williams's original lyrics, nor are any ladies except the persona's sweetheart "Yvonne". The phrase may be gender-inflected and slyly self-referential, whereby "cod*fish ladies*" hints at "fish man"; or there may be a touch of bawdy in the phrase, since "cod" is Middle English for "scrotum" (as in the noun "codpiece", meaning a covering for a man's private parts). The word "codfish" may also be part of the humour attached to his last name to the extent that cod is a seawater fish although he himself has never been to sea (cf. p. 467, "the Fishman never went to sea").

6 Such rewriting of popular song on Fishman's part forms a pattern with the "memory revisions" (p. 50) councils which are convened daily by the Pricklebush elders, as well as with the stories of human history Will Phantom sees on the walls of a rock cave which are "made and remade" (p. 174). Alexis Wright herself considers the stories depicted on rock or cave walls by her people's ancestors as "sung[12]". Thus an Indigenous voice—Fishman's—channels a non-

Indigenous one, in a way which would doubtless not have shocked or displeased Williams. And songsters like Williams and their songs are in fact not satirised, unlike A. A. Milne for example ("*they were changing guards at Buckingham Palace*" [p. 71], an allusion to the eponymous 1924 poem by Milne), later set to music as a children's song, or Coots and Gillespie, authors of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" (1934), touched on in the text when the Uptown children react excitedly to Elias Smith's arrival: "the children yelling out about Santa Claus coming to town" (p. 66). Williams's songs are not satirised because he is both not linked to a colonial power and, above all, because he is a country artist.

7 Hank Williams was one of the most influential composers and singers in twentieth-century North American music, and his influence continues to be felt among succeeding generations of popular musicians. Mozzie Fishman is "the country and western big man" (p. 118), an undoubted term of approval on the narrator's part which might equally be applied to Hank Williams. The fact that country music became a significant cultural force in North America and beyond is largely due to his efforts alone. This kind of popular music is, like *Carpentaria* itself, inclusive, blending various styles including African-American and French influences. Many Australian Indigenous people are fond of country and western music, and some use it to promote their rights struggles[13]. Incidentally, as Fishman sits in his car channelling Hank Williams, he not only sings but dances: he is said to "[break] into a jitterbug" and "shak[e] about" (p. 138). Fishman expresses his undoubted exuberance, contrasting so heavily as it does with his overwhelming later dejection in the narrative when he feels he is shrinking and becoming a beetle (p. 400), through the medium of dance and song. The fact that the novel closes with Norm Phantom and Bala walking "home" to the music of the frog choir in the final lines, rather than with their being stationary, hints at the possibility of dance: the two brief final paragraphs contain the phrase "they walked" (p. 499) three times altogether. They walk to music as the country is sung back into being after the storm. This motif of walking and movement to music is arguably analogous to dance. And, if this argument is plausible, it confirms Cummins's concise definition of the Dreaming given above which explicitly includes dancing.

8 Both Mozzie Fishman and Norm Phantom love country and western music, but what is also relevant is the fact that the terms with which the narrator depicts this love show how such music forms part of the two friends' Dreaming memory. Country songs spring to Fishman's mind "from a buried heyday" (p. 118) which could include other memories and suggests that such songs are capable of being brought back to life (just as Norm Phantom is able to bring fish miraculously back to life through his decorative art; and see below in relation to Bob Marley). The adjective "buried" returns in a similar context, again in connection with Fishman, whose "deeply buried emotions" arise within him as he tries to fall asleep (p. 143): Fishman is a living repository of remembrance in which his Dreaming knowledge of the songlines lives alongside his country music expertise and his personal memories. All these different strands of memory are fused together in him.

9 After Norm Phantom has buried Elias Smith at sea, the narrator says that Norm "quietly sang country and western songs as though borrowing well-used treasures from his house" (p. 258). His treasures are these songs, and his treasure-house is his memory. The wording is similar to that used to describe Norm's Dreaming memory earlier in the same chapter (Chapter 8): "Men such as Norm Phantom kept a library chock-a-block full of stories of the old country stored in their heads" (p. 235): terms like "library", which could be a room or rooms, or a whole building, and "store", find their equivalents in the ideas of "house" and "treasure".

10 As with Norm Phantom and Mozzie Fishman, country and western songs are associated with Angel Day, and this provides a link between the three of them that underpins their romantic involvement. The first of two country songs associated with Angel Day is "Send Me the Pillow You Dream On" (Hank Locklin, 1959), which the narrative says Angel Day sings while Mozzie Fishman is away (p. 324). Wright quotes the two chorus lines as originally written, and the song is an unproblematic objective correlative for Angel's purported loneliness during Fishman's absence. Shortly after the depiction of Angel in her new house singing this song, the focus shifts back to Bruiser and Truthful who drive up to her house in order to accuse her of the "neglect" of her two sons who died in jail (p. 325). As they get out of the car, Dolly Parton is "singing loudly on the radio, *God doesn't make honky*

tonk women" (p. 325). In the style of Mozzie Fishman's take on Hank Williams' songs, the line here is a misquotation or misremembering of the title or lyric on Wright's part or that of her narrator. The title, and chorus line, of the song is: "It wasn't God who made honky tonk angels". Originally dating from 1952, and written by a man (J. D. Miller), the song's argument is that if faithless women exist it is not God's fault but that of married men who, by pretending they are single, seduce women[14]. Given Wright's extreme care with word-choice, she may well be alluding to the original title and therefore directly to Angel, while implying, through the substitution of "women" for "angels", that Angel is indeed a woman and no angel.

"Rock and roll" (p. 389): Presley, Orbison, Holly, and Sonny and Cher

11 Three seminal figures of rock'n'roll music are cited in the novel, two by name (Elvis Presley, Roy Orbison) and one, Buddy Holly, through the synecdoche of his lyrics. The first two are each named twice, these names being used not in relation to the artists' music but for their names' connotative value and the "image" (p. 44) they call to mind. This is one example of the way in which the novel plays with contemporary celebrity culture. Stan Bruiser has "Elvis combed-back hair and sideburns" (p. 33), which the reader is expected to recognise as being associated with Bruiser's attempted creation of a virile self-image attractive, like the singer, to women: in fact, it ultimately works against him since his toxic hypermasculinity does not in fact correspond to Presley (who was virile enough but not toxically so) or the latter's innate artistry. But some men in Desperance, be they Indigenous or white, are said to have "mutton-chop sideburns" after Presley (p. 44), this sort of emulation perhaps denoting cross-cultural mimetic desire for the kind of affluence and sexual attractiveness associated with Presley's image. A similar but more positive phenomenon can be noted in the case of Roy Orbison. Both Mozzie and the young male pilgrims in his convoy wear "Roy Orbison sunglasses" (pp. 118, 138). This seems to be an example of what in marketing is called meaning transfer, whereby the qualities and cred-

ibility of a celebrity—in this case, Roy Orbison's cool image and perhaps also his talent—are believed by the consumer (or wearer) to transfer to the latter[15]. The implication is that Fishman and his cohort acquire cool and credibility through wearing sun-glasses associated with a pop music star. Because Roy Orbison (1936-1988) was white, the pilgrims may also be trying to project the message that if they want they can play the game of the white man's celebrity culture. It is true that these artists were in some ways out of date by the time in which the novel is set (the 1990s), but their artistry, fame and recognisability were still alive and present through records and archive material (photos, posters, TV shows and books). These references to American music superstars may also represent a turning towards a culture that is neither mainstream Australian nor European.

12 The role of Buddy Holly (1936-1959) in the novel is slightly different since the first words of a song of his, "Heartbeat", is cited without his name. Like Presley and Orbison, Holly was one of the founders of rock and roll music and, like them and Hank Williams, is venerated to this day by fans and succeeding generations of musicians alike. Returning to Desperance on the last leg of his pilgrimage, among the sounds he hears are the "music of *Heartbeat why do you miss* on a car radio, voices and laughter." (p. 143) Once again, Wright is aligning herself through the art of song with innovative artists who (also) manage to reach a global audience. Wright had used this technique earlier in the chapter when quoting the title of the Sonny and Cher song "I Got You Babe" (p. 121) which the pilgrims tap their car roofs to as they wait to fill up with petrol. The fact that all the pilgrims tap out the song's beat together shows how music can be a unifying social and spiritual force. Apart from the association with American popular culture and song, especially to the extent that rock and roll and artists like Sonny and Cher were perceived as countercultural when they first emerged, such songs may form part of the subtext of the novel. In this chapter, ostensibly about Mozzie Fishman (whose name gives the chapter its title), Angel Day leaves her husband Norm and the Phantom household. Fishman does not here admit that it is him that Angel Day has run off for. This becomes clear later in the novel when Norm recounts the stiry of Angel's leaving him with Fishman to Elias Smith's corpse (p. 228). "I Got You Babe" and especially "Heart-

beat", which is directly linked to Fishman, may stand as teasing allusions to his affair with Angel Day.

"Mesmerising" (p. 431): Bob Marley, reggae and cultural struggle

13 Bob Marley provides a rebellious cry for the rights of the oppressed, a counterpoint in the novel to country music and tamer popular music. Marley is honoured globally for his music and message by Indigenous communities including Australian First Nations people, who burn a sacred flame to his memory in Victoria Park in Sydney. Like those of country music and musicians, it is not surprising to find his name in a novel devoted to contemporary Indigenous experience. As an activist Alexis Wright is well-known for having worked among Indigenous people living in difficult circumstances. She may see in Marley something of a kindred spirit. Mikal Gilmore has written of Marley: "His songs were his memories; he had lived with the wretched, he had seen the downpressors and those whom they pressed down[16]." The phrase "His songs were his memories" chimes with the presentation of song and the songlines in *Carpentaria*, and more broadly with Indigenous philosophy.

14 Bob Marley is a literally iconic figure in the novel because his name occurs several times in the text in relation to his image printed on T-shirts. Even though Marley is seen as a positive figure in global culture and by Indigenous communities, this does not mean his image is systematically associated with positive characters in the novel. The boys who attack Kevin Phantom are "jeaned and Bob Marley T-shirted, gammon Rasta men from the prickly bush ghettoes of East Side" (110). A keyword in this phrase is the adjective "gammon", meaning fake, which is in common use among Indigenous Australians[17]. The boys' T-shirts and Rasta look seem to be a cover for their violent intentions since they are aligning themselves, or pretending to align themselves, with an artist who said: "Rasta don't believe in violence[18]." The three young boys who are wrongly taken into custody for Gordie's murder are said to be "all Bob Marley look-alikes" (p. 299). This elliptical way of depicting the boys' appear-

ance is a literary technique in that it enables the author to avoid giving a long physical description of the boys while informing the reader of the latter, assuming the reader recognises the allusion. The boys' looks might mark them out as potential rebels which would be an additional reason for white law and order to suspect them of the murder[19]. Such T-shirts return when Will Phantom is rescued from his imprisonment at the hands of the thugs from the Gurfurritt mine by two young men sent by Mozzie Fishman "with Bob Marley staring from their Rasta-coloured T-shirts" (p. 387), shortly to be identified with their T-shirts as Will Phantom and the "two Bob Marley faces" (p. 388) are forced to flee the heat of the flames destroying the mine. By the time the trio manage to meet up with Fishman, the two boys are called "Rasta boys [...]" and "Rastafarian god men." (p. 406) Rastafarianism is a Jamaican sect who pay allegiance to Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia as their god, and consider blacks as a chosen people. The term "god men" might suggest that they are seen, or see themselves, as somehow divine because they have punningly managed to pluck Will from death by sheer "will power". (p. 406) But it may also allude to the fact that the boys' Rasta identity aligns them with Haile Selassie, that they share in his perceived divine status. The image by which Marley is said to be "staring" from the T-shirts already suggests that the boys are somehow avatars of Marley, as well as the idea that Marley is himself alive (as does the reference in the text to his actual music, discussed below). At the same time, such allusions may stand as an indirect comment on the dearth of available indigenous role models and the global commodification of resistance figures like Marley.

15 In Chapter 12, the colour of the "Rasta-coloured T-shirts" is made explicit when one of the three boys driving Angel Day is said to be wearing a "rainbow coloured reggae T-shirt" (p. 432). Bob Marley and reggae iconography are associated with the colours of the rainbow. In the present context, the explicit "rainbow" might be an allusion to the rainbow serpent on the cover of the first Australian edition of the novel, which is a picture of Indigenous activist Murrandoo Yanner's rainbow tattoo, Yanner being one of the inspirations behind the novel according to Wright's dedication page. The rainbow serpent is the "creative serpent" present in the novel from the first page on, and the boy's T-shirt is a reminder of that continuous presence within

the land[20]. The three young men are said to be "escaping into the world of reggae" (p. 413), reminiscent of Polly Walker's statement: "Songs stir the spirits of listeners, creating a liminal space in which people can 'lose themselves[21]' [...]" The song the boys "hum to" is Bob Marley's "'Buffalo Soldiers'", a slight misquotation of Marley's title, "Buffalo Soldier". Buffalo soldiers were nineteenth-century African slave-soldiers so-called by Native Americans because their hair reminded them of buffalo fur. In this concatenation of Marley, abused Afro-Americans and Native Americans could certainly be a subtext for struggle and rebellion on the part of the Indigenous youths here. Marley's "mesmerising voice rose from the dead out of a dust-ingrained cassette player." (p. 431) The song, one of Marley's slower ones, does indeed have a hypnotic rhythm, over which Marley's voice sings deep. The recording enables Marley to appear to live again: it is as though he and his voice were alive in the Dreaming, like the ancestors; and perhaps the youths who align themselves with Marley in the novel do consider him as their ancestor in their struggle for cultural recognition, just as he himself struggled for the rights of black people and the oppressed in what was often, though not always, a non-aggressive, melodic mode like the song "Buffalo Soldier".

Conclusion: "as though he were no more than a song" (p. 440)

16 To conclude with a question: why did Alexis Wright choose to foreground so many non-Australian, non-Indigenous artists and songs, instead of choosing Indigenous ones? One can only speculate here as to a possible answer. The contemporary Indigenous reggae artist Willie Brim (full name Ngunbay Willie Brim, born 1959 in Northern Queensland) has said that he is happy to compose his songs in reggae mode if that will help get his people's message across, but that he does not want to adhere to Rastafarianism because for him it would be a betrayal of his own ancestral spirituality[22]. *Carpentaria* is not an ethnographic study of Indigenous people, and indeed appeals only occasionally to Indigenous language. The Indigenous fondness for such music need not cynically be seen as the result of an enculturative strategy on the part of the white community or media, and the

popular music references examined above concern music known to be enjoyed by the Australian Indigenous communities, and very possibly by Wright herself, corresponding to the playful side of her approach to novel writing rather than to any deep ideological aim. In the scene in which Mozzie Fishman rewrites the lyrics to "Jambalaya", he is said to be "singing on about some place as if he knew where it was" (p. 138). This corresponds to the songlines description he later gives Will of "several hundred sites in a geography he had never travelled" (p. 467), and the fact that this is in fact a songlines description is later substantiated through the narrative internally focalised through Will who stays awake "to sing the Fishman's ceremonial song cycles all night" (p. 477). Fishman himself is said to deliver his version of "Jambalaya" "to the spirits" (p. 138): his performance of this (relatively) contemporary song is not primarily for the people around him, even though he turns to Will in his car, enthusiastic about his own renderings, but rather a Dreaming ceremony, and he and his convoy are following the Dreaming track. Fishman's, and Phantom's, love of singing country and western songs is thus compatible with the Dreaming tradition. The attachment of the Indigenous people in the novel to "country", consonant with their Dreaming spirituality, epitomises, beyond this sense of belonging local and national, their commitment to the interconnectedness of all life and a profound respect and fondness for the earth as a whole.

17 Some of the most insightful contemporary philosophical inquiry into the art and practice of singing may well be the writing of the much-missed phenomenologist and poet Jean-Louis Chrétien (1952-2019) in *L'arche de la parole* (1998), as well as *Saint Augustin et les actes de parole* (2002 [23]). In the latter, Chrétien gives his appreciation of the act of singing in the following terms: "*Chanter, c'est faire que ce que nous sommes au plus intime, et ce que nous éprouvons de plus secret, s'élève depuis la poitrine et la gorge et résonne dans l'espace et le monde* [24]". This appreciation chimes with Mozzie Fishman's approach to singing whereby "country and western melodies" are said to be "jumping from his soul out to the world through his steel-grey beard" (p. 118), with Chrétien's "*au plus intime*" and "*de plus secret*" corresponding to Mozzie's "soul", the philosopher's "*poitrine*" and "*gorge*" equivalent to Fishman's "beard", and the vast spatial reference ("*monde*", "world") being identical in both.

Chrétien writes that the "*manifestation*" of the singing voice is "*tout à la fois intensément spirituelle, et intensément sensible*[25]".This duality echoes Fishman's way of singing, with its spiritual dimension (he sings "to the spirits") and physical one (he sings from within his body out through his beard, and dances to the songs he sings). In fact, in the relationship between the Fishman and the songs he sings, the songs are the active partner: he is not at first described as singing the country and western melodies, they enter his mind and "jump" out into the world via his body and vocal apparatus. The reason for this is that Fishman feels "so happy". Like the sadness of a song, Chrétien writes, "*la joie [d'un chant] s'impose avec une évidence qui est propre au musical. La voix semble s'oublier en son propre chant, et comme se perdre* [...[26]]" The phrase "*comme se perdre*" recalls the idea of losing oneself in song as outlined by Polly Walker. In relation to a novel which attends so closely to voice, Chrétien's words would seem to be a fitting description for Fishman's singing, and may be applicable to the musical way in which the novel conveys sorrow and, *afresh*, in its closing lines, the possibility of joy. The description implies that Fishman becomes his song, and on Will Phantom's hard journey north he, too, becomes "no more than a song" (p. 440): the metam/Orphic force of Alexis Wright's novel manifests in its self-songification, that is, turning itself, its characters, and everything in it, finally into song.

NOTES

1 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", in Lynda Ng (ed.), *Indigenous Transnationalism: Alexis Wright's* Carpentaria, Artarmon, Giramondo, 2018, pp. 217-236, p. 225.

2 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London, Constable, 2008, p. 2. Hereafter, references to the novel, in this edition, are given as page numbers in brackets within the body of the text of the essay. This article is not intended to be exhaustive, and relatively straightforward references to Neil Diamond and his songs, and Jimmie Dale Gilmore, for example, are not discussed here. The whole question of the nature of the relationship between literature and music, in general and in *Carpentaria*, naturally goes far beyond what is said here.

3 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *op. cit.*, p. 223.

4 See for example Georg Danek, Stefan Hegel, 'Homeric Singing – An Approach to the Original Performance', 2002, https://www.oeaw.ac.at/kal/sh.

5 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *op. cit.*, p. 218.

6 Cf. M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981, p. 7.

7 Joseph Cummins, *The Space and Time of Imagined Sound: Australian Literature and Music, 1945 to Present*, D. Phil. Thesis, UNSW, 2015, p. 9, DOI: 10.26190/unsworks/18835 (https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/18835).

8 Martin Renes, "Dreamtime Narrative and Postcolonisation: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* as an Antidote to the Discourse of Intervention", *The Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, vol. 2. n° 1, 2011, p. 116. Wright writes the word "dreaming" in the novel both with and without the upper-case initial letter. With the latter, it refers to Indigenous spirituality.

9 Jean-Pierre Vernay, "An Interview with Alexis Wright", *Antipodes*, vol. 18, n° 2, December 2004, pp. 119-122, p. 121.

10 Wright's father was a "cattleman" (cf. for example Eric Forbes's interview with Alexis Wright, "On the Couch: Alexis Wright", November 4th 2008 http://goodbooksguide.blogspot.com/2008/08/on-couch-alexis-wright.html, an American word according to OED. Perhaps Wright's interest in cowboy (cattleman) songs is an affectionate reminiscence of her father.

11 All quotations from Hank Williams's original lyrics to "Jamabalaya" as found here: https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/hankwilliams/jambalayaonthebayou.html.

12 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *op. cit.*, p. 228.

13 Cf. for instance Sophie Verass's fine and sensitive article, especially regarding the long history of Indigenous people's acquaintance with country and western, "Six stars of Aboriginal country music", https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/06/17/six-stars-aboriginal-country-music.

14 The song was a direct answer to "The Wild Side of Life" by Hank Thompson (also 1952), which blamed women rather than men for women's infidelity. On a separate point, one wonders whether Wright has not

conflated the original song-title, which ends “honky tonk angels” with the Rolling Stones’ song “Honky-Tonk Women” (1969).

15 See “meaning tranfer”, *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011, from which this explanation is derived.

16 Mikal Gilmore, “The Life and Times of Bob Marley: How He Changed the World” in *Rolling Stone*, March 10th 2005, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/the-life-and-times-of-bob-marley-78392/.

17 For a detailed discussion of the use of this adjective in Australia, especially in the Northern Territory cf. https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/resources/aus/word/map/search/word/gammon/The%20Centre/.

18 Marley is quoted as saying said this in a 1973 interview which appeared on a 1980 record entitled “Bob Marley Interviews”, produced by Tuff Gong International, Ltd., Kingston, Jamaica. The quotation is from the conference paper “Religion and Revolution in the Lyrics of Bob Marley” by Jan DeCosmo cf. https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/CA/00/40/01/62/00001/PDF.pdf.

19 Elias Smith is said to have dreadlocks, considered in the West to be a specifically Rastafarian, Jamaican hairstyle (cf the OED definition of dreadlocks), and it is surprising that “It was the first time anyone in town had seen anyone with dreadlocks” (67). It may stand for the alienation between Uptown and the Pricklebush mob. Some Australian Indigenous people consider that their ancestors wore dreadlocks long before this hairstyle became associated in the West with Jamaica and reggae: on this point, see Victoria Grieve-Williams, “‘Reggae Became the Transporter of Our Struggle… and Our Love’: Willie Brim, Cultural Custodian, Bush Doctor, Songman of the Buluwai People of North Queensland”, in Olivia Guntarik and Victoria Grieve-Williams (eds.), *From Sit-ins to #revolutions: Media and the Changing Nature of Protests*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2020, pp. 95-112, p. 100.

20 The first edition of the novel, including the front and back covers, the latter crediting Yanner for the rainbow serpent tattoo, can be viewed here https://archive.org/details/carpentarianovel00wrig/page/458/mode/2up.

21 Cf. Polly O. Walker, “Singing a New Song: The Role of Music in Indigenous Strategies of Non-Violent Social Change”, in *EOLSS* (Encyclopedia of Life Support Systems), 2009, pp. 130-155, p. 131.

22 Cf. Victoria Grieve-Williams, "'Reggae Became the Transporter of Our Struggle... and Our Love': Willie Brim, Cultural Custodian, Bush Doctor, Songman of the Buluwai People of North Queensland", *op. cit.*: "the Buluwai do not subscribe to Rasta as they have their own cultural tradition, their own language and spirituality."

23 I draw on Chrétien's *L'arche de la parole* in my article "Degrees and Limits of Expressibility in Popular Song", in the online journal *DCLP* (*Dire et chanter les passions*), September 1st 2021, https://www.dclp.eu/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/DCLP_N1_GRAFE.pdf, to which, if I may, I refer the reader. The article discusses the idea of the metamorphosis of singer into song with which the present essay concludes.

24 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *Saint Augustin ou les actes de la parole*, Paris, PUF, 2002, p. 151.

25 *Ibid.*

26 *Ibid.*

RÉSUMÉS

English

Popular music constitutes a rarely-mentioned facet of *Carpentaria*'s intermedial aesthetic. "Song", part of Diana Brydon's "Reading across the Pacific: Reorienting the North", briefly evokes song in *Carpentaria*, though only "national" song(s). In "Dreaming of Others: *Carpentaria* and its critics", Alison Ravenscroft is "puzzled not only by song but by the entire scene" when Fishman sings country songs. Yet Wright wrote *Carpentaria* "while listening to music", including "blues" and "country"; it "started to be written like a long song". Some popular singers are either named or suggested by their lyrics. We consider these artists and their work in context, within Carpentaria's appeal to Americana, not Australiana, and to polyvocally singing the novel afresh. Wright later co-wrote the song "Giidang"—"heartbeat" in the Gumbayngirr language.

Français

La musique populaire constitue une facette rarement mentionnée de l'esthétique intermédiale de *Carpentaria*. « Song », qui fait partie de « Reading through the Pacific: Reorienting the North » de Diana Brydon, évoque brièvement la chanson dans *Carpentaria*, mais uniquement une ou des chansons « nationales ». Dans « Dreaming of Others : *Carpentaria* and its critics », Alison Ravenscroft est « déconcertée non seulement par la chanson mais par toute la scène » lorsque Fishman chante des chansons country. Pourtant, Wright a déclaré que *Carpentaria* « a commencé à être écrite comme

une longue chanson » ; elle l'a écrit « en écoutant de la musique », notamment le blues et le country. Certains chanteurs ou chanteuses y sont soit nommé.es soit évoqué.es au travers de leurs paroles. Nous considérerons ces artistes et leur travail en contexte, en réfléchissant à la façon dont *Carpentaria* s'intéresse à l'Americana plutôt qu'à l'Australiana, et à la polyvocalité du roman. Par la suite, Wright a co-écrit la chanson « Giidang », qui veut dire heartbeat en langue Gumbayngirr.

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III - Narrative power and responsibility

The Spell of Place in *Carpentaria*

Christine Vandamme

PLAN

Denouncing the shallow truth of national master narratives
A master narrative based on possession and naming
Salvaging stories and sharing them: difficult transmission and failed reconciliation
The Gulf of Carpentaria as a metaphor of our present and future ways of inhabiting the world

TEXTE

1 In her spellbinding *Carpentaria* Alexis Wright offers what Glissant would call an "all-work," namely a work which enters into resonance with, and reflects, the "all-world". In that sense *Carpentaria* is more than a novel: it questions, challenges, and finally enriches and possibly revitalises our non-fiction world which suffocates in its slow progress towards extinction. Such programmed decline and extinction are denounced as being derived from a blind belief in one story, one master narrative, a gospel of progress through competition and conquest, appropriation and violence. Such a monological "truth" ultimately corrupts the people, the environment, and the overall equilibrium of all natural forces and beings.

2 Wright offers instead a wide array of simultaneous and sometimes contradictory "truths" and visions as part of the Dreaming. She first deconstructs national master narratives based on exclusion, dispossession and the fabrication of shallow, ready-made myths and beliefs as opposed to the deep knowledge of the river country. But she also offers a thorough and complex reflection on the difficulty of passing down the "immemorial" knowledge and history contained in the ancestral stories of the Dreamtime in a world now monitored from above by big international companies whose immense powers tend to confiscate and control stories, manipulate truths only to replace them with their own self-legitimizing and self-authored narratives.

3 *Carpentaria* never falls into the postcolonial trap of binary thinking between Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives and interests, or even Nature and Culture, Body and Mind. The book encourages its readers to imagine and picture how best to reconnect with country through the case study of an extraordinary terrain, the Gulf of Carpentaria. While the non-Indigenous inhabitants of the local settler town Desperance are busy building imaginary walls and boundaries around its precincts, the Indigenous Pricklebush mob know that the claypans they live on is a place where no such inscription and imposition of arbitrary signs and demarcating lines is possible. For them, on the contrary, the river country they live on is a place where survival, experience and community life require outstanding powers of both adaptation and imagination but also of cooperation, of strong Will and energizing Hope, the mythical couple/coupling at the core of the story and the Dreamtime according to Alexis Wright.

4 Alexis Wright knows that Australian literature should strive to offer a *third space* where it would be possible to get more intimately acquainted with the way "Aboriginal people think" but also where the "cultural matrices of the foundation myths that Australians of immigrant backgrounds cling to[1]" could be put into perspective and reassessed. *Carpentaria*, both the novel and the Gulf of Carpentaria itself, offer this unique opportunity of challenging national foundation myths and revitalizing them through a deeper knowledge of place.

Denouncing the shallow truth of national master narratives

5 Wright is very gifted in having the reader read between the lines and distrust easy manipulation with nationalist representations and made-up stories. It is no coincidence that the novel starts with the words "The nation". *Carpentaria* offers a reflection on both Australia as a nation and its founding myths. The anonymous narrator presents side by side two main visions and worldviews–and even two epistemologies to be more precise, in the first pages of the novel. The very first paragraph starts with the vision of the non-Indigenous Australian community inherited from colonial times and their obsession with biblical mythmaking opposing the elect (the "faithful") to

the sinners ("the wicked"), the righteous white Christian community to the little black girls who are condemned from the start.

6 More importantly still, the novel starts with an ambivalent sentence, foregrounding the idea of two irreconcilable worldviews and conceptions of stories. Either we understand the first sentence as suggesting that the non-Indigenous Australian community have based their national narratives on a denial of the Indigenous "story" or stories, affirming in a very abrupt and contemptuous way that they know everything they need to know about the country and its stories: "A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*"; (p. 1) or the sentence could be understood as referring to the Indigenous community themselves warning the non-Indigenous community that they know all about the monological and teleological master narratives[2] based on religious mythmaking and symbolic violence that the non-Indigenous community has tried to impose on them. In that case the italicized passage "*BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*", could signal a shift in perspective and voice with the narrator speaking in the name of the Indigenous community, as is the case at the end of the paragraph when the other passage in italics is a piece of direct speech from Indigenous little black girls: "*ARMAGGEDON BEGINS HERE*". The shift to italics might suggest that Wright deliberately kept the sentence ambivalent to have the reader ponder who exactly is to be the ultimate judge of what the nation should consist in, and whose voice should be listened to. This being said, syntactically, both sentences imply that the first part of each refers to the utterer of the reported speech in italics. The second italicized passage is uttered by an Indigenous little girl but for all we know, she is only iterating what she has been told repeatedly and is most probably convinced of, namely that in the ultimate struggle between the forces of good and evil, Indigenous people are the ones who have to change sides and join the so-called forces of good: "LITTLE GIRLS WHO [...] ANNOUNCE MATTER-OF-FACTLY, *ARMAGGEDON BEGINS HERE*." What is ironical is that for the readers, the sentence takes on sarcastic undertones and can be understood as implying exactly the contrary, namely that the non-Indigenous worldview will only lead to apocalypse and that they themselves should be considered as being on the side of evil, and should be considered as the "wicked".

7 The juxtaposition of two visions thus accentuates the contentious issue of national mythmaking and narratives. The novel starts with "A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*. THE BELLS PEAL EVERYWHERE." and the first paragraph ends on Armageddon, the biblical fight between good and evil: "ARMAGGEDON BEGINS HERE". This suggests that no salvation is to be expected for the little black girls, only "HUMAN FALLOUT" and "ARMAGGEDON". And the total inability to bridge the gap between Aboriginal stories in the Gulf of Carpentaria and the imported stories of the white community living in Desperance is rendered visually striking with the use of a whole line of suspension dots between the first paragraph corresponding to the national master narrative of the inhabitants living in this remote ghost town, Desperance, on the one hand, and the creation stories of the river people who have been living in the region for generations, on the other.

8 And yet this is precisely the mission that Alexis Wright gives herself as a writer: to bridge the gap between the two communities, to call upon her readers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to accept the knowledge that immersion in the river country can bring. They are all invited to either experience it directly or imagine it for themselves– to "picture the creative serpent". Such knowledge can be acquired in "imagin[ing] the serpent's breathing rhythms" as the tide flows inland and then ebbs back towards the sea. The anonymous narrator keeps using the term "knowledge" and warns the readers that "it takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with the river, whatever its mood" (p. 3). Such knowledge is transmitted through initiation, the continuous learning and passing down, through generations, of the Aboriginal Law: "The inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is the Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began" (p. 3). Such a metaphor is very potent politically and socially: the narrator does not exclude the non-Indigenous readers but invites all readers, non-Indigenous ones included, to "go with the river" and learn from it. Alexis Wright herself spins a similar metaphor in "A Question of Fear", a very perceptive essay on the question of tolerance in Australia. She thus insists on the possibility and even the need for different worldviews and "belief systems" to "flow together" (Wright, 2008, pp. 146-147) [3]. She gives the example of the

Garma festival in which the Yolngu peoples of north-eastern Arnhem Land celebrate and promote the "idea of Yolngu and non-Indigenous knowledge flowing side-by-side":

> There is no valuing of one over the other – the central tenet is one of equality, each with potential for new ideas flowing between, but self-contained. Garma is a Yolngu idea that considers the confluence of two streams of knowledge represented by salt water and fresh water [4].

9 But the Gurfurrit mine does not have time to gain such "inside knowledge" or "deep knowledge" and no willingness either for their worldview to flow along that of the local Aboriginal people, the Pricklebush mob. They would not have any use for such a "stream of knowledge" as their goal is to convince the Uptown inhabitants of Desperance and the local Aboriginal communities that their new identity should coincide with the development of the mine itself. The anonymous narrator denounces such an approach and deconstructs the whole enterprise of manipulation and propaganda that the mine's communication and legal teams are setting up. The first step for the narrator is thus to strongly challenge deeply ingrained national myths celebrating "land theft [5]" and relying on a form of "egotistic projectile imagination [6]" which imposes its own worldview and convinces itself of its legitimacy in doing so. Such national master narratives tend to deploy themselves in a one-way direction and in constant ruptures with the past, thus remaining quite shallow and manipulative in nature. Conversely, the deep knowledge celebrated in the novel implies humility, openness and the desire for worldviews and types of knowledge to coalesce and "flow together" instead of suppressing each other. Alexis Wright considers that Australia as a nation has to give up on programmatic religious teleologies such as the one presented by the anonymous narrator in the first paragraph, announcing Armaggeddon for the little black girls and the Aboriginal community as a whole. The narrator also warns the readers against the gospel of ruthless capitalism endorsed by the mine which equates naming and the setting up of a master narrative of control and surveillance with possession and exploitation.

A master narrative based on possession and naming

10 There is a recurrent play on the manipulation of truth through naming and renaming. And this becomes all the more essential and pronounced when immense financial gains are to be expected with the arrival of the Gurfurrit mining company. The name of the company is transparently sarcastic: its only goal is profit-making and its only slogan "Go for it." So as to buy land from its rightful owners, the Aboriginal communities that have been living in the region for generations, the Gurfurrit company decides to buy its way into ownership of the land in deciding who will be considered as owning the land, namely those weak enough to accept to be bribed and to tell made-up stories about their pretended native rights to the land, like the Midnight mob who ultimately move east of Desperance [7].

11 The Gurfurrit mine also decides to rename the local river that used to flow through the town of Desperance. The *Wangala* river thus becomes *Normal's River*, thereby losing its local Aboriginal name. The mining executives seize a symbolic occasion which is the centenary of the town of Desperance to celebrate the new name. The reason why they pick the name of Normal Phantom, a living "old tribal man" (p. 4), is that he has lived in the "Pricklebush" region all his life as have his father's fathers before him (p. 6) and he knows the region like the back of his hand:

> [...] Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began. Normal was like ebbing water; he came and went on the flowing waters of the river right out to the sea. He stayed away on the water as long as he pleased. (p. 6)

12 Renaming the *Wangala* river suggests that you deliberately ignore the collective Aboriginal land rights attached to the river in attributing the name to a single person you might hope to then bribe and manipulate so as to gain ownership of the place [8]. What is both amusing and significant though is that only the first name remains. The last name "Phantom" disappears although this is precisely what should be kept.

13 From an Indigenous perspective, each individual is both himself or herself and much more than that. The ghostliness suggested by the onomastics in the last name "Phantom" does not suggest absence so much as an excess of presence or co-presence of the individual and his ancestors, both human and other-than-human, and this is what the non-Indigenous white Australian community of Desperance tends to wilfully obliterate. This is also what Alexis Wright mentions when she refers to deep knowledge and the work of geographer Patrick Nunn who stated in his book *The Edge of Memory* that:

> [t]he rich and varied world of the mind within which Aboriginal people's culture has long been grounded, and which is believed to exist in parallel with the tangible one renders the past far beyond the memory of any person, but conserved in the collective memory of the whole community [9].

14 Gregory Younging develops a similar idea in his study of Indigenous Peoples [10], when he refers to native American writer LeAnne Howe's notion of "time-space continuum", namely the necessity to refer back to ancestral figures and core cultural values and laws inscribed diachronically in time and also in the three dimensions of space. No fixed or unchanging worldview of the cultural and social life of one community as opposed to another is being proposed and promoted either but the need to adapt and evolve through cultural contact without forgetting about one's "history and heritage":

> […] Indigenous peoples have responsibilities connected to internal cultural imperatives, which include mindfulness of continuity with history and heritage. The ultimate responsibility for Indigenous peoples lies in being the link between the ancestors and future generations–a cultural precept that has been referred to by Indigenous writers, such as LeAnne Howe, as "the time-space continuum [11]".

15 Such a vision of the long time of history and the time-space continuum stands in stark contrast to the Desperanians' attachment to the ridiculously short-lived "glory" of their town–Desperance. The town's assumed importance is related to a minor event in the short history of non-Indigenous colonisation of Australia – the so-called

"discovery" of the place by British captain Matthew Flinders, referred to here as "Matthew *Desperance* Flinders" (my emphasis).

> [...] their town remained Desperance, named after the founder, Captain Matthew Desperance Flinders. Needless to say, no one in Uptown accepted the fact that Flinders was a prize fool to go about saying he discovered a deep water port that turned into a dustbowl when the river changed course, and a century would pass before the giant serpent ancestral spirit made that track again. (p. 59)

16 Such a name appears all the more anecdotal and insignificant when replaced in a pre-human perspective, "billions of years ago", which is the perspective announced from the second paragraph onwards, the time of Creation by the ancestral serpent of the Gulf of Carpentaria region. Thus, when the narrator later mentions that the Desperanians pompously congratulate each other about having been able to prevent their town from being renamed *Masterton* instead of Desperance, the comment produces a comical effect: the foreign colonisers who single-handedly changed the names of local places such as rivers in complete indifference to the original names given by the Aboriginal keepers of the land, now have to face the same form of disregard and arbitrary abuse of power when it is another authority, that of the Queensland state, that decides what name their town should have, without even consulting them beforehand. The anonymous narrator adds still another touch of irony for the readers in claiming the middle name of Matthew Flinders was Desperance, which, as Peter Brown sharply observed in his article on *Carpentaria*, is pure invention and quite "playful" at that (Brown, p. 265[12]). This is another way for the narrator to insist the newcomers have no memory of their own official history and are thus cut off both from the time-space continuum of the Gulf of Carpentaria itself but also from their own "history and heritage" (Younging, p. 18).

17 The reason why *Masterton* was chosen as a new name for the town of Desperance is to give it an identity of sorts with a fabricated master narrative suggesting possession, mastery and the illusion of self-importance in the region's ever shifting geographical features and uncertain economic opportunities. Similarly, the mining communication team's decision to drop Normal's last name, "Phantom", is an

attempt to impose their own control and mastery of the place in complete disregard for its keepers and guardians such as Normal Phantom. What characterises Normal Phantom is precisely that he cannot be placed, that he does not seem to master and possess the stories he has been given responsibility for but rather to be *possessed* by them, insofar as his knowledge cannot be severed from place and the constant reactivation of the stories: he needs to be reminded of them and to revitalize them through constant contact with the river and the dead river people's spirits that still haunt the place, speaking to those able to hear them. Gothic motifs such as ghostliness, spectrality, possession and haunting thus take on positive connotations: they remind the readers of the importance of listening to the spirits of the place and the voice of the ancestors. And this is the conclusion of the first chapter, namely that the readers, and Australians in general, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, should first give up on the idea of trying to possess through the imposition of self-legitimizing narratives or place names and listen carefully to the memories buried deep in the ground and yet ready to resurface to tell "the real story of what happened" in the region:

> "If you are someone who visits old cemeteries, wait a while if you visit the water people. The old Gulf countrymen and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here." (p. 11)

18 This being said, the novel also exposes the very real difficulties involved in transmitting stories and avoiding conflict and division, whether between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people or even within the Indigenous communities themselves.

Salvaging stories and sharing them: difficult transmission and failed reconciliation

19 The difficult transmission of Dreamtime stories is illustrated by a pattern repeated in the novel, namely that of dysfunctional father-son relationships. The Pricklebush mob, the Aboriginal people living in the area, consider Normal Phantom as one of their best represent-

atives as he knows the stories of the Dreamtime and the sea, the river and the stars, better than anyone else in the community:

> "Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began." (p. 6)

20 He should therefore be the ideal source of transmission of the ancestral stories to the new generations and his children in particular and yet he keeps abandoning them for the river or the sea. He even spends five years at sea away from home and his family at one point. The narrator comments sarcastically that Normal Phantom prefers to pass on his stories to his cockatoo, Pirate, rather than to any of his children. The one son who was most likely to not only learn the stories but pass them on, Will, finally stops seeing his father and speaking to him. Normal Phantom's youngest son, Kevin, the one who was so bright he could expect to get on in the white world and maybe transmit his father's knowledge in written form, is never given the opportunity to accompany his father when he goes to sea. On top of such indifference on the part of his father, Kevin experiences early on a sense of estrangement from his own country and the stories of his people. School expects from him to focus instead on non-Indigenous writers' sea stories, Tim Winton's novels in particular. As a result Kevin ends up getting top marks for his essays dealing with enthralling epic voyages on the sea, while he himself is never given the opportunity to have first-hand experience of seafaring with his father:

> 'I don't even feel like I belong here anymore,' Kevin complained about why he had to sit around uselessly trying to do essays about books talking about *them* white peoples lives. […] He became the silent non-participant, listening to epic tales of sea journeys he kept missing out on. He was the warrior most unlikely. Only in your dreams Kevin. […] Finally, Kevin was left only to hear stories. His essay on Tim Winton scored A plus, but you tell me, who on earth cared? (p. 102)

21 Wright's sour irony can be felt here with the anonymous narrator suggesting the epic mode for the white community is nothing more

than a glamorous form of self-aggrandizement of hyper-privileged people who are rich and idle enough to go fishing while Kevin, who is bright, most certainly will not even be able to get a job ("nobody, in any case, including Norm, expected Kevin would actually get a job", p. 103), even less be given the opportunity to go fishing as his own father, grandfather and ancestors have been doing for thousands of years, on the *Wangala* River, now known as "Normal's River." (p. 9). So Kevin is given second-hand knowledge of stories written by non-Indigenous people about some unfamiliar sea places while his own father refuses to pass on to him his own deep knowledge of river and sea country.

22 And yet the transmission seems to take place in a roundabout and unexpected way. It is through a non-Indigenous character that transmission becomes effective. A mysterious stranger to the place, a certain white man called Elias Smith, suddenly appears one day out of nowhere with no memory of where he comes from and what happened to him. The only thing he knows is that he feels at peace when on the sea, as Normal Phantom does. The narrator suggests his main gift is to give up on the idea of possession and accept instead the idea of being possessed and guided by the sea and the morning star. He is said to appear to the rest of the white community as "a man possessed" (p. 42). His ghostly appearance is a characteristic he shares with Will. Both men appear as ghosts to the white community: no one really knows whether they are dead or alive: they sometimes disappear without warning and are nowhere to be found. But even if they both go missing at one point for different reasons, they do not correspond to the lost child trope or the lost-in-the-Bush figure constitutive of so many settler narratives according to the eminent scholars Peter Pierce and Elspeth Tilley [13]. This is not to be wondered at since the novel is told from an Indigenous narrative point of view just as much, if not more, as from a non-Indigenous one. If in Australian literature written from a non-Indigenous perspective the Bush and unsettled areas in general are often seen as potentially dangerous places where you risk vanishing and disappearing forever, here it is very different—the vanishing is a possibility of rebirth. Elias Smith or Will, as lost-in-the-Bush figures, ghostly figures, seem more real and substantial than the fabricated myths, realities, truths or stories conveyed by the mine.

23 Peter Pierce was the first to analyze in such detail and with such insight the recurring lost-child motif in Australian literature written by non-Indigenous writers, speaking of a "country of lost children" and associating such a national anxiety with colonial and postcolonial guilt. Elspeth Tilley then pointed out in her own volume on "white vanishing" that the lost-child motif was only a subcategory of a wider trope, the "lost-in-the-Bush figure." She further demonstrated how in settler culture, this corresponded to a paradigm meant to claim the land for the white community. According to Elspeth Tilley a reinforced sense of "mateship" almost systematically accompanies the return of the missing figure and their reintegration into the white settler community:

> Often the restoration of equilibrium involves making a claim or statement for white Australian mateship; invariably, it involves making a claim or statement about white relationships with land and establishing at least some portion of that land as an unequivocal white "homescape [14]".

24 In *Carpentaria*, Elias is not welcomed by the white community for his return to his "homescape" as he does not know anymore what his homeplace or "homescape" is, except for the sea in the Gulf of Carpentaria. He is actually, for this very reason, almost worshipped as a sort of demi-god when he first appears on the shores of Desperance. It puts all Desparanians at ease in imagining any claim to the land should paradoxically rest on the idea of "building one's own place by oneself" without bothering about prior inhabitants of the place:

> The telling of Elias's story as white-haired man, or nighttime angel, or crustacean-covered aqua spirit, just grew old until one day all anyone remembered was that he had appeared one time, out of the pale blue yonder, and built his own place by himself just like they all had to, and there was nothing unusual about that. (p. 78)

25 Elias becomes a living legend and an emblematic mythical figure in the town's quest for a glorious and self-legitimizing foundation story or master narrative as he is just as lost and rootless as any of them or their fathers, or fathers' fathers: "A sea people such as themselves, come from so far away to be lost, would forever have all seas in their

sights. That was their story." (p. 49) The lost-at-sea figure has come to conveniently replace the lost-in-the-bush motif as an idealized foundation story:

> Call it a phobia about not allowing legends to die. Call it flights of fancy that had driven every man, woman, and child down onto the high tide mark to wait patiently, ankle deep in the mud, totally abandoning all of their daily jobs and duties, just to relive the familiar old story about their origins. (p. 50)

26 Elias becomes all the more easily associated to a mythical figure as he is both implicitly associated to Jesus walking on the sea (Matthew 14:22-34) and to the Ancient Mariner. Both references are strongly undermined by the narrator in creating a gap between what the readers cannot help associating Elias to–namely Jesus or the Ancient Mariner, and the man who emerges naked from the sea as an object of lust for the women of Desperance:

> But the steam-making women standing on the beach, downright proper, respectable Uptown women, could not escape the spell the mariner had cast on them, simply from looking at his bare thighs walking through water. (p. 62)

27 The reference to Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is inescapable for the reader as Coleridge's mariner casts a spell on the wedding-guest, just as the mysterious "mariner" does here with the Uptown women. But there is a significant difference. The mariner forces the wedding guest to listen to his tale, while the women only gawp at Elias's muscular body. The literary reference is thus strongly deflated, suggesting the Desperanians are so ignorant of their culture and their past they become crude, even vulgar, in their approach to their environment. The Pricklebush people, after having asked their children to find out about the ancestral stories or myths of the white community, are actually shocked when they come to the conclusion the "town had nothing–no culture, no song, no sacred places" (p. 56). In conclusion, despite all the explicit or veiled references to Jesus, the ancient mariner, or even Jonah (p. 48), it seems no one in Desperance is consciously aware that Elias could be reintegrated into such a Biblical as well as poetic tradition. The Desperanians' "familiar old

story about their origins" (p. 50) is thus one of lost origins, lost memories, even of their own culture or that of their ancestors.

28 Elias Smith only becomes iconic because he belongs to no place and comes from nowhere, as is the case for Desperanians. Such an ironical passage making fun of made-up founding myths or legends does not only target the non-Indigenous community living in Desperance. It also castigates divisions within the Indigenous community itself and the temptation for some Indigenous subgroups to also make up stories and invent imaginary origins once historic dislocations or "dispersals" have chased them away from their ancestral lands. The Aboriginal community now living east of the town, Joseph Midnight's family and relatives, thus wrongly claim they are the rightful traditional owners of the place and can therefore legitimately sell their land rights to the mine:

> The Eastside camp was old Joseph Midnight's mob exiled from Westside because they wanted to say that nobody else but they were the real traditional landowners where Desperance had been built. That idea originated from Old Cyclone who was Joseph Midnight's father. They even made up a name for themselves – Wangabiya – and said that their tribe were the real traditional owners, before Norm Phantom's group which they called the tribe of the Johnny-come-latelies came to the Gulf. Well! Even though no tribe on earth existed with that name Wangabiya, you had everyone going around claiming to be a Wangabiya. Lost Wangabiya started turning up in the Gulf from all over the place: Brisbane, Sydney and even one came over from Los Angeles saying he was a Wangabiya, and could speak the lost Wangabiya language. It was the hint of big bickies to be had from big mining that did that. (pp. 50-51)

29 The conclusion is that made-up stories and fabricated "truths" do not enable communities, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to fully relate to country and care for it. And yet the financial and ideological gains to be had from a good story lead to a ludicrous proliferation of stories all the same.

30 The narrator offers a quite disillusioned vision of the fights within the Aboriginal community itself when truth and ancestral stories give way to fanciful and made-up stories which are completely disconnected from any deep knowledge of country and the people they are

supposed to relate to. The narrator is also very much aware that financial interests related to the mine often end up fabricating alternative truths and misleading stories. The Gurfurritt mine and its boss Graham Spilling monitor everything from the top of a New York skyscraper:

> It could cast a security net over the whole social reality of Desperance, keeping tabs on how much food was in the fridge, who had just replaced a light bulb in town, or monitor the pulse rate of Kevin Phantom lying in a hospital, while he was trying to figure out whether to live or die. It could rock the town this way or that to make stories. It could burn the Council office down, burn the Queen's picture, to gauge the reaction. (p. 428)

31 Post-truth replaces authentic stories. The rumours accusing Elias of having burnt the Council office will be used to cover up and justify his murder by the mining men. The vast surveillance and hegemonic system implemented by the mine with the support of local and state authorities, simply blots out and squashes any rebellious figure from its two-dimensional screen like an insect as Mozzie Fishman is fully aware: "I am not talking about that useless, invisible Desperance kinda net, I am talking about the real ones, just as invisible, thrown out by the police who are wanting to squash people like you, like you is merely a nuisance of a mosquito." (p. 403)

32 Alexis Wright conversely suggests all Australian citizens should strive to get to know more about deep knowledge and deep time in order to more fully relate to their environment and to each other. And this might require for non-Indigenous Australians to partly forget about all the national master narratives they have tended to build their national identity on so as to start anew and learn from "the deep history of this land and caring for it":

> In this country there are sacred places holding enormous powers throughout this continent and reaching far out in the seas. But most non-Aboriginal people do not understand the powerful nature of this country and the forces of nature, or how the ancient law stories associated with each of these sacred places contain vital knowledge about the deep history of this land and caring for it [15].

33 It is no coincidence if Mozzie, like a modern Aboriginal Moses[16], takes his followers, young rootless Aborigines, back to country for them to retrieve such "ancient law stories". To that extent the anonymous narrator celebrates both Mozzie's courage and the social and political relevance of his enterprise. For Mozzie, for the anonymous narrator, for Wright herself, "ancient law stories" are the "narratives of great and old wisdom [which] are the true constitution of this country":

> The Aboriginal caretakers of their traditional country have always understood its power, and why it is so important to care for the land through developing an important system of laws that created great responsibility for caring for the stories and powers of the ancestors. These narratives of great and old wisdom are the true constitution for this country, and urgently need to be upfront in the national narrative in understanding how to care for it[17].

34 The anonymous narrator in *Carpentaria* similarly insists the one main conveyor of stories is country and in that instance the Gulf of Carpentaria itself. All Australians are thus invited to accept to place country and its attendant laws at the core of Australian "national narrative[s]". Wright sees such a move as the only way forward to preserve the possibility of a sustainable future for Australia and humankind at large.

The Gulf of Carpentaria as a metaphor of our present and future ways of inhabiting the world

35 The most convincing protagonist who is able to pass down ancestral stories to men and women is the river country itself. A river country is a country in constant metamorphoses. If "History is only geography deploying itself across time[18]" according to French geographer Élisée Reclus, then the geography of *Carpentaria* also has a lot to tell us about both our present history and our future history, about the major disruptions brought about by the Anthropocene: the rapid

succession of cataclysmic events such as cyclones in the Gulf of Carpentaria reflects the effects of ongoing climate change which is due to the overexploitation of natural resources. The destruction of Desperance by the elements at the end of the novel similarly points to the possible destruction of Western development as we know it and the urgent need to rethink it.

36 Replacing the current Australian national master narratives based on domination and a stoical resignation to suffering, with the Law and the stories of the elders, "narratives of great and old wisdom," is still very much a work in progress. This is an issue which Jane Gleeson-White analyses beautifully. She sees in the writing of *Carpentaria* an attempt "to embody in novel form a complex multivalent mesh of Indigenous realities related to place and the active interconnection with the human world[19]." She also remarks that instead of a "Christian, capitalist settler vision" the novel offers a more complex "vision of human-non-human relations rooted in place" which clashes with, and breaks away from, a former "settler-Australian literature which apprehends the land as other[20]". And this is where the recurrent figure of the ghostly, dangerous "other", whether human or non-human, commonly found in non-Indigenous settler narratives, disappears in favour of an acceptance of being possessed rather than possessing, thus welcoming the spell of country and willingly immersing oneself in it before realizing one also has to care for it. In Aboriginal culture caring for the land implies responsibility but also being able to get attuned to its vital rhythms through direct experience and listening to the ancestral stories passed on from generation to generation. In *Carpentaria*, such transmission is not reserved to Indigenous people but is rendered accessible, at least up to a point, to non-Indigenous people as well. Elias is a good illustration of such a process.

37 Elias's knowledge comes from the loss of his former memories and the acceptance of being haunted by sea spirits:

> In the minds of local people there had always been an infallible certainty without evidence or proof of Elias's knowledge which was said to have come from travelling the many seas of the world. It was just so, for the spirits who had stolen his memory had left him the sea. (p. 158)

38 The narrator even remarks that Elias is ultimately integrated into the Law or Dreamtime:

> It was the beginning of the story of the day the spirits of the seas and storms mixed their business, and sent Elias from out of oblivion into Desperance with good reason. This was the story about Elias Smith which was later put alongside the Dreamtime by the keepers of the Law […]. (p. 53)

39 Will's own knowledge also comes from the ocean as in a father-son transmission:

> The breeze had come down from the sea, passing inconspicuously over the noisy motor cars on the Gulf road, touching Will in a gentle caress, as though the ocean seemed pleased to know its son had returned. (p. 157)

40 In both cases, knowledge is acquired through close connection and communion with country and what Daniel Heath Justice calls the other-than-human in his illuminating volume *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*[21]. Will is actually both human and other-than-human: he is a man but he is also mud, he is invisible: "[…] the headlights pass over him standing in the bush, but he remains invisible. Will Phantom is mud. At home on the sea, at home on the land…" (p. 174) And in the end, the other-than-human sea creatures, the gropers, are the ones to bring Norm, Hope and Bala back home. They also surround Hope's boat when she decides to leave again in search of Will. The sea eagle for Elias, the gropers for Norm, the seagulls for Mozzie's and Lloydie's sons, all of them belong to the other-than-human world which accompanies men and women on their journey on this earth, and forever after, in the Dreamtime and the songlines.

41 Such a worldview is less easy to apprehend for non-Aboriginal readers who might be quite unfamiliar with the Dreamtime, but the narrator of *Carpentaria* invites them to relate to it imaginatively and even epistemologically from the very first page onwards: "Picture the creative serpent" (p. 1). The "inside knowledge" Alexis Wright enjoins her readers to strive for implies humility and a "particular kind of knowledge […] about there being no difference between you and the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its

own mood" (p. 3). Such knowledge bears some resemblance to David Abrams' own definition of what he calls the "spell of the sensuous", the "wild alterity of our multiform Earth" which brings to voice our "interdependence with that which we cannot fathom, cannot determine, and cannot control":

> I believe nonetheless that this is a work we must all, to some extent, be engaged in (whether we are philosophers or farmers, professors or piano-tuners): the struggle to disclose a new way of speaking—one that affirms the wild alterity of this multiform Earth even as it enacts and brings to voice our thorough interdependence with that which we cannot fathom, cannot determine, and cannot control [22].

42 *Carpentaria* similarly exemplifies a *spell* of the place, a *spell* of country which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities should accept. In her novel Alexis Wright does not replace the grand narrative of colonisation, Christianity and capitalist development with another monological story but offers instead an array of stories and points of view which sketch a mental map of connections which are forever developing and crisscrossing in what the narrator calls a "watery spider-web":

> [H]is mind was alive, it was electrifying inside his head, where the sea kept dividing itself into greater and smaller horizontal and vertical columns, forming tributaries as thick as the matted hair of the universe, from where all manner of ocean currents were flowing, full to the brim with floodwaters. As he walked in this place, searching for an escape route, streams of water were running in every direction as though it was the history of his knowledge crisscrossing itself until it formed a watery spider-web, a polygon structure tangled with all of the local currents he ever knew in his mind, all tracks leading home. (p. 244)

43 Such a highly poetic passage exemplifies what the Dreamtime means for Aboriginal people–an intricate entanglement of routes, tracks and forms of knowledge which ultimately will lead *home*. The only linear metaphor used by Wright herself is the idea of the rope of time which intertwines different paths and strands into one long rope, or "creative snake" (p. 1) or "tidal river snake" (p. 2). This is the country-rope of the Dreamtime snake combining all "stories, all realities":

> The world I try to inhabit in my writing is like looking at the ancestral tracks spanning our traditional country which, if I look at the land, combines all stories, all realities from the ancient to the new, and makes it one—like all the strands on a long rope. [23]

44 And she enjoins all her readers, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, to write their own stories about country and contribute to the writing of another ending to our common history than simple extinction in reconnecting with the land and with each other. Alexis Wright thus considers literature as one of the most successful illustrations of a distinctively Indigenous characteristic, namely the ability to be and remain in "constant negotiations with the agency of the cosmic world—rain, wind, fire, tsunami, climate excess, etc." and to recreate a "force of life, like a Phoenix rising from the ashes [24]" to borrow Barbara Glowcewski's own terms about Indigenous Australians, Polynesians, or Native Americans.

NOTES

1 Alexis Wright, "A Question of Fear," in Christos Tsiolkas, Gideon Haigh & Alexis Wright (eds), *Tolerance, Prejudice and Fear: Sydney Pen Voices, the 3 Writers Project*, Crows Nest, Victoria, Allen Unwin, 2008, pp. 129-169, p. 138.

2 The term master narrative is used all along the article with the acceptance Lyotard gives to the related terms "grand narrative" or "meta narrative" in his groundbreaking 1979 critical piece *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, namely a totalizing narrative developing itself in a teleological way based on "Reason", "Truth", "Progress" or even "History" and often instrumentalized in national representations and discourses.

3 Alexis Wright, "A Question of Fear", op. cit., pp. 146-147.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 147.

5 "After all, this nation was shaped through its ability to lie and get away with the land theft of the entire country from Aboriginal people since day one of colonisation; it is the most fundamental issue of what is still wrong in the country, ongoing and long outstanding." *Ibid.*, p. 130.

6 The "egotistic projectile imagination [...] has a linear sensibility towards invasion, suppression and always-changing laws", Wright says in the same

essay “A Question of Fear” (op. cit., p. 143). She is speaking about the imposition of religious beliefs at the time of colonisation but also, more generally, about a tendency among the non-Indigenous settlers to impose their worldview in a way that seems to be disdainful of place, and of the transmission of stories and knowledge over the long time of history. In a way, such an analysis confirms that for Wright, one of the essential obstacles to Australia’s sustainable development is not only its obsessive “fear tactics” (p. 134) but also its linear teleology which is itself full of gaps and ruptures and doesn’t flow or grow but invades, suppresses and constantly changes course when running aground without ever putting into question its own approach.

7 The issue of land rights is a contentious one and has led to many divisions within Aboriginal communities themselves. With the Mabo Decision in 1992 and the Native Title Act in 1993, Aboriginal communities now have the legal possibility to claim their ancestral lands back if they can prove continued connections to the land claimed and such ongoing connection to the land is mostly validated through stories and songlines. The anonymous narrator denounces the opportunism of the Midnight mob who did not hesitate to lie about their fictitious connection to the river country to get benefits in return. They granted rights to the company that they did not even have in the first place (p. 52). See the illuminating article by Susan Barrett on such an issue for further detail: Susan Barrett, “‘This land is me’: Indigenous Australian story-telling and ecological knowledge”, Elohi, n° 3, 2013, pp. 29-40. DOI : 10.4000/elohi.592 (https://doi.org/10.4000/elohi.592).

8 Giving new names to places rather than their original Indigenous ones is a process Paul Carter associates to what he calls “imperial history” (*The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History*, New York, Knopf, 1988 [1987], p. xvi). In this illuminating book on spatial history in Australia, Carter insists settlers tend to apply names to places so as to legitimate their appropriation of them: “The primary object is not to understand or to interpret: it is to legitimate.” (*Ibid.*)

9 Alexis Wright quotes this passage in her article “The Ancient Library and a Self-Governing Literature”, *Sydney Review of Books*, 28 June 2019, p. 2. Patrick Nunn’s original book was published in 2018 (*The Edge of Memory: Ancient Stories, Oral Tradition, and the Post-Glacial World*, New York, Bloomsbury, 2018).

10 Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples*, Edmonton, Brush Education, 2018.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

12 Peter Brown, “From Carpentaria to Carpentaria: Configurations of Space and Continents of Literature” in Estelle Castro-Koshy and Temiti Lehartel (eds.), *Alexis Wright*, Carpentaria, Ellipses, 2021, pp. 241-267.

13 Peter Pierce speaks of a recurring lost child motif in Australian settler literature (in *The Country of Lost Children: An Australian Anxiety*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999) while Elspeth Tilley follows in his tracks enlarging the perspective to the lost-in-the-bush figure (in *White Vanishing: Rethinking Australia's Lost-in-the-Bush Myth*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, Cross/Cultures n° 152, 2012).

14 Tilley, op. cit., pp. 9-10.

15 Alexis Wright, “We all smell the smoke, we all feel the heat. This environmental catastrophe is global”, *Guardian Australia*, 17 May 2019.

16 Louise Loomes convincingly supports the idea that Alexis Wright deliberately conveys her message through two main sets of stories, Indigenous ones and non-Indigenous ones. The non-Indigenous narratives and myths are often strongly reliant on biblical stories and figures such as Mozzie/Moses. Louise Loomes, “‘Armageddon Begins Here’: Apocalypse in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*”, *Li*NQ, n° 41, 2014, pp. 124-138, pp. 126-127.

17 Alexis Wright, “We all smell the smoke, we all feel the heat. This environmental catastrophe is global”, op. cit.

18 French geographer Élisée Reclus once said: “History is only geography deploying itself across time just as geography is only history deploying itself across space” (my translation of Elisée Reclus’s words opening Man and the Earth: “L’histoire n’est que la géographie dans le temps, comme la géographie n’est que l’histoire dans l’espace” in Béatrice Giblin (dir.) *L’homme et la terre*, Paris, La Découverte, 1998 [1905-1908].

19 Jane Gleeson-White, “Capitalism versus the agency of place: an ecocritical reading of *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*”, JASAL, vol. 13, n° 2, 2013, https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/JASAL/article/view/9867/9756, pp. 8-9.

20 *Ibid.*, p 11.

21 Daniel Heath Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, Waterloo, Ontario, Wilfried Laurier University Press, 2018.

22 David Abram, “Between the Body and the Breathing Earth. A Reply to Ted Toadvine”, *Environmental Ethics*, n° 27, 2005, pp. 171-190, p. 185.

23 Alexis Wright, “Politics of Writing”, *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature*, vol. 62, n° 2, 2002, pp. 10-20, p. 20.

24 Barbara Glowczewski, *Indigenising Anthropology with Guattari and Deleuze*, Edinburgh University Press, 2020, pp. 324-325.

RÉSUMÉS

English

The following paper allows us to study the links between place and Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime or Dreaming. Such an approach foregrounds the need to re-envision our world as in permanent co-presence of human and other-than-human, and thus the necessity to reassess and ultimately refuse monological nationalist foundation narratives and replace them with more inclusive ones to reflect more fully what sustainable relationships in nature and society at large really consist in.

Carpentaria offers a very original revisiting of the Gothic spectral motifs of disappearance and disorientation so prevalent in non-Indigenous Australian literature – replacing them instead with an acceptance of being haunted and “possessed”. Possession in Carpentaria is about being revitalised by place, as the work of anthropologists, poets and thinkers like Glowcewski, Glissant or Abram (*The Spell of The Sensuous*), have amply demonstrated. In Wright’s novel, the notion of possession and being possessed by the river country takes on a unique urgency, thus foregrounding the importance of stories, “stories of deep knowledge”, not only for themselves, but precisely because such law stories can have a major and lasting impact on ideological, economic and social choices but also point to new or, to be more accurate, rediscovered epistemologies.

Français

Cet article se propose d’étudier les liens qui unissent terrain, territoire et ce que les aborigènes appellent le temps du rêve ou la Rêvance. Une telle approche met en lumière la nécessité de poser un nouveau regard sur le monde et la présence simultanée de l’humain et du non-humain, ce qui amène une réflexion critique sur la nature des récits fondateurs propres aux colonies de peuplement et la nécessité de les remettre en cause dans leur dimension monologique pour les faire évoluer vers des récits et des histoires pluriels et davantage inclusifs, à l’image de ce que les relations devraient être entre l’homme et la nature, et les hommes entre eux. *Carpentaria* revisite des motifs gothiques récurrents dans la littérature australienne non autochtone, à savoir la spectralité et la notion de possession dans tous les sens du terme. Être possédé plutôt que de vouloir

posséder la terre à n'importe quel prix, c'est là l'un des principaux messages du roman qui prône une renaissance et une revitalisation de la nation passant par une reconnexion à la terre, un processus que Barbara Glowcewski, Édouard Glissant ou encore David Abram ont analysé et célébré chacun à leur manière.

INDEX

Mots-clés
territoire, métarécits, récits fondateurs, gothique, Rêvance, épistémologie, écolittérature

Keywords
place, master narrative, gothic, the Dreaming, epistemology, ecofiction

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Epic, Trauma, and Affective Practice in *Carpentaria*

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PLAN

Racial trauma, cyclical haunting, and posthuman trauma
Anti-colonial epic trauma
Humour and Affective Practice
Conclusion

TEXTE

1 Trauma is trending, but Indigenous researchers like Professor Chelsea Watego have critiqued the way intergenerational trauma is cited by some white scholars and commentators in ways that pity and pathologise Indigenous experience and communities while failing to acknowledge the actively traumatising violence of the settler-colonial nation-state. Watego tweeted from her public account: "really over intergenerational trauma discourse. It's unrelenting colonial violence is what it is." Dr Tess Ryan replied to Watego from her public account: "It seems to have become something many have hung hat their hat on. It paints mob into a corner and denies excellence[1].

2 *Carpentaria*[2] does the vital work of testifying to transgenerational trauma as colonial violence *and* asserting excellence. Wright does this by rejecting the common individualistic, apolitical casting of trauma to create a profoundly layered, experimental narrative that commemorates survival and culture while tracking the consequences of a multinational mining company setting up operations on sacred land.

3 *Carpentaria* depicts Aboriginal people and communities as more than traumatised; its characters are complex, eccentric, passionate, and funny. The humour in the book, I argue, does crucial work testifying to trauma by showing how challenges are met with moxie and ingenuity in many Aboriginal communities. In this way, humour plays a critical role in pushing back against racial trauma. The novel is

frequently referred to as incorporating mysticism or magic realism, but as Dr Jeanine Leane proposes, "Aboriginal realism" is a more apt description that emphasises decentring the Western worldview inherent to "magic realism [3]". Aboriginal resistance has never ceased on land never ceded, and *Carpentaria* takes us into the heart of this struggle in a way that not only addresses "all times [4]", as Wright puts it, but that also shows all realities. In other words, it asserts the realities of lived Aboriginal experience past and present in the context of a nation-state in which settler-colonial experience operates as the dominant narrative.

4 As I aim to show, while C*arpentaria* seems to be an anti-epic in its refusal of the idealised heroism and mono-nationalism of the classical epic, it can be more accurately described as an anti-colonial epic. The word epic originally referred to the cycle of an oral tradition and came from the ancient Greek word meaning word, story, poem. The epic was originally associated with mythical narrative poems such as Homer's *the Iliad and the Odyssey* [5], estimated to have been composed around the 8th century BC. The results of a Google search for "the first oral epic narrative" indicates that the first recognised epic is the *Epic of Gilgamesh* [6], written c.2500-1300, before the Christian era, in an ancient region of Iraq. The ancient Indian *Mahabharata* [7] (c. 3rd century BC-3rd century AD) is also given an honourable mention as an early example and the longest epic ever written. There is no mention of the rich Aboriginal oral tradition that gave rise to the Dreaming creation myths, epic in proportion if not in the traditional Western conception of the epic, yet these stories were on Wright's mind during the writing of the book. In an interview with Kerry O'Brien, she said:

> We come from a long history and association in this country, ancient epical stories that tell about how the land has been created, and that is still very important to Aboriginal people whether they live in urban areas of the country or remote areas [8].

5 I aim to show that Wright, draws on that tradition, fashioning a unique mode of epic that refuses the terms of the classic epic, constituted as "fictionalised versions of important past events" foregrounding "people who have become semi-legendary [9]".

Racial trauma, cyclical haunting, and posthuman trauma

6 Critical race theory (CRT) views race as a social construct, as a dominant discourse that significantly influences social organisation and has dire consequences for people of colour. CRT holds that racism is the norm; it is everywhere; a daily occurrence for many people of colour. It serves a purpose, and white people benefit materially from it. A central tenet is that there is no unitary black identity and intersectionality (the argument that other aspects of identity such as gender and class can compound and complicate racism), first explicated by Kimberlé Crenshaw[10], should be considered when assessing the impact of racism. Wright's fictional world-building reflects all this.

7 *Carpentaria* is rife with Indigenous in-fighting among the "poor old Pricklebush people" (p. 22) who have been living dispossessed for decades near a rubbish dump. Wright says, "people who had been getting on well, living side by side for decades, started to recall tribal battles from the ancient past" (p. 25), but some of the conflict and dysfunction stems less from the ancient past and more from stresses of racism and poverty. Racial trauma describes a chronic form of traumatic stress resulting from "individual, institutional, and cultural encounters with racism and racial discrimination" that negatively affect people's mental and physical health[11]. Wright depicts this playing out in destructive dynamics in the Pricklebush community, against the tenacious binding of cultural knowledge and familial and friendship love. For example, the women of the community frequently turn on Norm's wife, Angel Day, accusing her of selfishness in her dump shopping (p. 17) while at the same time viewing her as "magical" and diseased as a result of foraging among white people's garbage (p. 16). Racial trauma is distinguished from classic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); it bears a closer resemblance to Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), a more pernicious traumatic injury related to chronic exposure to traumatic experience. Judith Herman, who coined the term[12], asserts that shame and significant impairment of interpersonal skills is pronounced in CPTSD. While research on racial trauma is still emergent, it is reasonable to

expect a similar finding in relation to Race-Based Traumatic Stress. In this sense, racist abuse and exploitation and traumatic shame are socially situated and structured and perpetuated by historical and continuing social inequities. Allegory and metaphors showing this in play abound in *Carpentaria*, such as in the above example of Angel's scavenging and communal attitudes toward it.

8 I previously introduced the term cyclical haunting in *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*[13] to describe the feed-back loop between individual, familial, and collective trauma transmissions. My conception is based on Jacques Derrida's thinking on hauntology, which he posits as some aspect of public life that is "neither living nor dead, present or absent",[14] marking the "site of vacillating certainty and possibility[15]". Wright's statement that she could "find no reason to write history, in the sense of drawing on historical incident, when all times are important and unresolved[16]" is pointedly resonant with Derrida's notion of hauntology.

9 I argued that a cyclically haunted poetics of transgenerational trauma serves as political account rather than a mere tale of trauma or fictional narrative[17]. Wright's embodied racial trauma informs *Carpentaria*. Wright shows how old cultural knowledge and ancient Aboriginal cultural practices come up against what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty[18]". This is most evident in the way the Pricklebush community are affected by the business of the mine.

10 Cyclical haunting is fuelled by traumatic affect, which I understand to be psychic trauma bound to embodied affect circulating "in and between assemblages[19]", in and between individuals and collectives. Michael Richardson and I have also defined traumatic affect as "the mode, substance, and dynamics of relation through which trauma is experienced, transmitted, conveyed, and represented[20]". It is palpable when Wright writes that "old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here" (p. 11), and of "those whose fractured spirit cried of rape, murder and the pillage of their traditional lands" (p. 26) and the "up-to-no-good Mission-bred kids" who "accidentally hanged Cry-baby Sally" (p. 2).

11 Talking to Kerry O'Brien, Wright disclosed a painful event in her family history. Her great-grandmother and another girl were stolen by an infamous pastoralist linked to the massacres of Indigenous people that might have included members of her own family. In gesturing towards such deep wounds and wrongs in the fictionalised Desperance, Wright demands an ethical reckoning, challenging what Professor Colin Tatz refers to as the "wilful amnesia" of non-Indigenous Australians[21]. *Carpentaria* speaks to the Aboriginal community and invites non-Indigenous people to step out of ignorance, be more curious, open, educated, and humbler. It confronts white readers with the limitations and damage of the white-centred national ideal forged and forced by settler-ancestors, revealing a timeless rootedness in country we could, were we collectively willing, learn and prosper from. Wright suggests as much when she opens Chapter 2 with the following lines:

> One evening in the driest grasses in the world, a child who was no stranger to her people, asked if anyone could find hope.
> The people of parable and prophecy pondered what was hopeless and finally declared that they no longer knew what hope was.
> The clocks, tick-a-ty tock, looked as though they might run out of time.
> Luckily, the ghosts in the memories of the old folk were listening and said anyone can find hope in the stories: the big stories and the little ones in between. (p. 12, capital letters in original)

12 Gabriele Schwab maintains that stories have heightened potential to "carry" transgenerational trauma[22] stating that "writing from within the core of trauma is a constant struggle between the colonizing power of words and the revolt of what is being rejected, silenced[23]". Wright's novel confirms this, but it also resists what Diane Molloy refers to as the framing of a "history of dispossession and marginalisation that so often defines Aboriginal people as silent and passive victims[24]". Challenging the humanism of most literary trauma testimony, Wright shows nonhuman individuals and communities devastated by human activity and the suffering of the land. At the end of the novel, when Norm and Bala return to Desperance after the cyclone, they find it destroyed and desolate. The only living beings they encounter are "bony, hollow-ribbed, abandoned dogs" dogs so traumatised they are "speechless, dumbfounded, unable to crack a

bark. Unable to emit a sound out of their wide-opened mouths" (p. 498). And in Chapter 8, Wright depicts ruthless capitalist brutality in a gut-wrenching scene in which white fishermen chop chunks of flesh off a live groper winched onto the sand (p. 238). Wright contests what intersectionality scholar Patricia Hill Collins[25] refers to as socially constructed hierarchies that discriminate based on gender, race, species, etc. She witnesses to these hierarchies and the process of their naturalisation by showing how colonialism disposed Aboriginal people and how the settler-colonial state continues to do so. In doing so, she depicts both racial trauma and Aboriginal resistance and self-determination. Such witnessing is a necessary step to transforming society into one of equity, justice, compassion, and sustainability.

Anti-colonial epic trauma

13 Sneharika Roy[26] lauds the epic's "rich potential to articulate post-imperial concerns with nation and migration across the Global North/South Divide" (n.p.). I shy away from terms like "subaltern", the "Global South", and even the term "postcolonial" when discussing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature for reasons I will explain later. As Wright says:

> While writers are storytellers who work in the world of mythmaking, so too are the academics who study our works [...] I am not sure if those people who are meant to be placed in one classification or another in a planetary divide have simply been classified for the benefit of the classifiers[27].

14 Roy acknowledges the seeming incredulity of the postcolonial epic proposition when she states:

> On the one hand the epic is perhaps *too compatible* with postcolonial literature: the genre's specific preoccupation with history, territory and identity are themes that are so ubiquitous in postcolonial studies as to make epic form almost redundant. Yet, paradoxically, the epic tends to be regarded "as the genre of imperial authority *par excellence*, [and] is viewed as *inherently incompatible* with the postcolonial agenda of

> critically reappraising colonialism and its aftermath" (emphasis in original)[28].

15 Thus, Roy confines her use of the term epic "to those manifestations with an explicitly political scope dealing with a historical, mythical or, most often, euhemeristic past (myth cast as history)[29]".

> [This] enables Roy to operate within a complex world of paradoxical relations; this subgenre offers a space for articulating histories and counter-histories, nations and counter-nations—all of which provide the basis for the postcolonial epic[30].

16 Roy cites Bakhtin's materialist, somewhat Marxist engagement with language as the basis for his claim that the contemporary novel is "a subversive, many-voiced 'dialogic' form of the ever-becoming present in negative opposition to the [classical] 'monological epic.'" The traditional epic is set in a fixed, inaccessible past and driven by a "conservative vocation" to "reinforce political authority[31]".

17 Roy makes a case for three modes of postcolonial epic novel: epic imagery, genealogy, and ekphrasis; in my view, the first two modes combine in *Carpentaria* to testify to epic trauma. It is my sense that reading Wright for epic imagery in terms of metaphor is, at least for a non-Indigenous scholar, a dangerous and problematic enterprise since our understanding of Aboriginal realism is limited by insufficient cultural knowledge. In other words, it is sometimes difficult for a scholar like me to identify what is and what is not metaphor in Wright's work. As Innes notes:

> the epic developed out of a communal impetus to cultural memory before it became a written form. The verbal and performative elements play off against the literary in different ways for different cultures, and therefore historical precision needs to be applied to individual epic texts in order to avoid generalisation[32].

18 It would be a misstep to automatically read nonhuman animals in Wright's work as metaphor, which a Western scholar coming from a traditional literary criticism foundation would tend to do by, for example, assuming the black swans in *The Swan Book*[33] are a metaphor for Aboriginal people. But to the degree that Wright does

employ simile, metaphor, allegory etc., *Carpentaria* destabilises "hegemonic systems of signification and problematise the differential, fragmented 'realities' of historical experience across divides of power, culture, space and time[34]" through the use of Aboriginal English and Aboriginal realism, such as in the surreal scene in Chapter 8, "Norm's Responsibility", in which Norm goes out to sea in inclement weather (pp. 219-263).

19 Roy's insistence that "postcolonial epic shifts our attention from physical violence to a double-edged rhetorical violence that serves to both elevate its subaltern characters to the proportions of epic and expose the fault lines of the postcolonial project of nationalist identity-construction[35]" rings bells of recognition. Roy speaks of writing that collapses the boundary between the magical and the real via a depiction of the supernatural as "matter-of-fact". She states that Amitav Ghosh neglects "the form of magical realism" while retaining its core function "to juxtapose the incommensurable 'realities' of the colonisers and the colonised so that the (Eurocentric) terms on which reality is defined is called into question[36]". Wright does similar work, not by retaining the core function of magic realism, but by writing Aboriginal realism. As Roy puts it, "postcolonial tropes periodically supplant the diegetic reality of the text, calling into question the Eurocentric or nationalist criteria according to which a normative version of 'reality' was established in the first place[37]". This is, I want to suggest, not merely a postcolonial move in the case of Wright, but an anti-colonial one in terms of proclaiming intellectual sovereignty. Observe the opening lines:

> A nation chants, But we know your story already.
> The bells peal everywhere.
> Church bells calling the faithful to the tabernacle where the gates of heaven will open, but not for the wicked. Calling innocent little black girls from a distant community where the white dove bearing an olive branch never lands. Little girls who come back home after church on Sunday, who look around themselves at the human fallout and announce matter-of-factly, Armageddon begins here. (p. 1)

20 This is the magic Wright weaves with her mashing of words and concepts and knowledges born in different, and seemingly irreconcilable realities: the postcolonial trope of Christian worship, the little

black girls ghosted by the failing white dove metaphor, the italics that trouble and undermine the colonial project.

21 I prefaced my monograph analysis of *Carpentaria* with an acknowledgment that

> [The term] "'postcolonialism' is most often understood as a field of study in which the legacies of imperialism and colonialism are analyzed in literature or other cultural productions" while the "postcolonial era" describes a period following "formal colonialism in which its effects are still being felt and/or enacted [38].

22 I define *Carpentaria* as an anti-colonial epic rather than postcolonial epic for several reasons. The term postcolonialism has always been fraught and contested. As Paul Brains says, "some critics argue that the term misleadingly implies that colonialism is over when in fact most of the nations involved are still culturally and economically subordinated to the rich industrial states through various forms of neo-colonialism [39]". Brains also notes that "this way of defining a whole era is Eurocentric, that it singles out the colonial experience as the most important fact about the countries involved [40]". Chelsea Watego side-eyes the term postcolonialism in the Australian context when she says that "we have yet to reach our postcolonial moment in this country [41]".

23 The term "anticolonialism" broadly refers to a commitment to the revolutionary "struggle against imperial rule in colonized countries [42]". It has been historically linked to nationalist independent movements, which is not applicable to Wright's work on the face of it, but I suggest that the term "anti-colonial" might be more fitting than "postcolonial" for literary works like *Carpentaria* emerging from within a vibrant field of contemporary Aboriginal activism and a long history of resistance. While Wright does not suggest she imagines an overthrow of the neocolonial nation-state government as a realistic objective, she does proclaim Aboriginal sovereignty and stage an argument for land rights. The figure of Will Phantom, the activist son of patriarch and lovable, maladjusted Norm, tries to protect sacred land from the imperial domination of multi-national corporate expansion. He embodies the "genuine anti-racist praxis" Chelsea Watego champions as foregrounding "Black power via Indi-

genous sovereignty in embodying the ideologies of the 'burn it down' and 'I am not the problem' kind articulated by Tarneen Onus-Williams and Aunty Rosalie Kunoth-Monks [43]". At the same time Wright makes clear the limits and nuances of such a position in the context of settler-colonialism by casting Will off on an island of refuse, unable to claim his sovereign land, in the end. *Carpentaria* is also anti-colonial in that it "Black writing has interrupted the unquestioned privilege of whites to represent non-whites in Australia [44]". And it is anti-colonial in the sense that, as Cornelis Marten Renes argues, it stages a cross-cultural intervention "across Indigenous and European genres and epistemologies" that calls for "the deconstruction of colonial discourse, for an invigorating Indigenous inscription into country, and for intellectual sovereignty as the condition *sine-qua-non* for the Indigenous community to move forward [45]".

24 Wright's anti-colonialism is less aligned with the traditional independence movement and more aligned with the forsaking of hope in favour of what Watego refers to as "a trading in truth-telling that is foundational to our survival." She goes on to assert that "accepting the truth of the limitations of this place offers us far more promise than hope ever has [46]". Accepting the truth of "Australia" means acknowledging its traumatic roots. As I have previously argued, Australia is a crime scene in which the "colonised national ideal" routinely elevates Anglo settlers and their descendants over First Nations peoples and other people of colour "via social and institutional structuring and circulations of attitudes, affects, and discourses that promote Australia's national identity as a white Western nation [47]". This is foundational racism that repeatedly reinscribes the erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Watego, speaking of another anti-colonial literary and scholarly giant, says that "Fanon describes the effects of colonial violence upon the colonised as a kind of breathlessness, a breathing that is overserved, occupied, in what he calls 'combat breathing [48]'". Angel's scavenging has this breathless quality. Caught in a storm out at sea, Norm wakes "startled by a breathless sensation of drowning in his dreams" (p. 257) and Will's struggle to survive the cyclone has this quality. This life-threatening breathlessness is racial trauma, and Wright's anti-colonial epic testimony to it can, therefore, be understood as the writing of epic trauma.

25 The epic trauma in the book is not limited to a focus on the invasion and its ongoing legacy. Wright also testifies to the trauma of ecological crises. As Nonie Sharp identified in a review, Wright weaves "an epic on several planes that knits together meanings" to create "a powerful allegory for our times: the Earth's retaliation in Gaia-like fashion, responding to the deep tramping marks of our footprints on the climate, on the places of both land and water[49]". Wright confirmed this in an interview when she referred to the novel as "an old saga" that mines "the everyday Indigenous story world", which she describes as "epic" in that it draws on "the laws, customs and values of our culture" as well as "epic stories of historical events[50]". As Renes insightfully notes, in sum, this "works toward closing the hierarchical Eurocentric gap between the oral and written, tradition and modernity, nature and human, fact and fiction, past and present, story and history", and it does this through "inscription in a holistic cycle of destruction/renewal and life/death" and "strategic employment of Dreamtime tropes as well as Western ones[51]".

26 Roy contends that genealogy, as a convention of the postcolonial epic, involves digressions that structure narrative temporality[52]' and that this non-linear treatment of time refuses "forms of imperial or social determinisms" and advances "post-imperial programmes of political and cultural change[53]". Postcolonial epic, Roy insists, features a "transnational political vision through hybrid intertextual genealogies that draw on indigenous and European cultural traditions[54]". Wright speaks of her deep engagement with international literature—Irish, Mexican, Palestinian, and more—as well as her Chinese and Waanyi ancestry in connection with other language groups across the continent. She references Carlos Fuentes's assertion that in Mexico "all times are important, and no time has ever been resolved[55]". Wright is not only attending to the hauntology of an Indigenous "before" and an imperialist invasion "after" in the novel; she calls forth other erased times, people, and realities, such as when she writes about the "new Australians" and "dark-skinned foreigners" (p. 5) who lived around Pricklebush way in "the time before the motor car, when goods and chattels came up by camel train until Abdul and Abdullah, the old Afghan brothers" who mysteriously disappeared "along the track called the 'lifeline', connecting north to south" (p. 4). One of the great strengths of the

writing is the use of free indirect discourse, a strategy that brings collective attitude to life so vividly in a third-person narrative voice. For example, when the camels turn up in the dead of night with no sign of Abdul and Abdullah, the towns folk wake up with a start as the "ghosts with an Afghan smell, true God, just came straight in, levitating, taking over, helping themselves, walking around people's home with no *mind youse*, not one shred of good manners whatsoever" (p. 5). The reference to "youse" is Australian slang and "true God" is commonly used in Aboriginal English.

27 The serial lack of clear resolutions in the novel, e.g., mysterious disappearances and unexplainable events, suggests the presence of trauma, which by its very nature is unresolved; what distinguishes traumatic experience from non-traumatic stress or distress is that it marks an event or events that occur so quickly, violently or threateningly as to overwhelm the nervous system and elude psychic registration. Thus, though it involves profound impact it is unavailable for processing in the usual ways experience is processed. Despite its tendency to occlusion and delayed symptomology, trauma tends to wreak havoc subjectively and collectively. Eminent trauma theorists like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued that trauma nevertheless demands witnessing and testimony and that "this narrative that *could not be articulated*" (italics in original) must be heard [56]. Wright's experimental methodology is one way to bring traumatic inarticulation forth into the communicative realm. Her attention to evoking "all times" depicts hauntology, as a social legacy and, by extension, pre- as well as post-invasion cyclical haunting. Wright gestures throughout the novel to lingering traumas from times well before 1788:

> The war of the dump burst apart the little world of the Phantoms and their related families. Everyone in the Pricklebush from elder to child, Eastsider to Westsider, injured and uninjured, started bringing up their faded memories of the ancient wars. (p. 30)

28 The epic trauma testimony of the novel is, therefore, not confined to witnessing to colonisation and the injustices of the settler-nation it created, but stretches further back to the traumatic reverberations of distant ancestors, highlighting the probability that history across all times and culture is bound to trauma.

Humour and Affective Practice

29 Roy questions Bakhtin's assertion that "the epic and the comic are incompatible[57]", maintaining that: "It is precisely because laughter foregrounds 'inconsistency and tension'" in the representation of humanity "that it is crucial to postcolonial epic and serves its ambivalent purposes so well[58]". Humour is, then, key in Wright's anti-colonial epic trauma testimony and its expression of grief.

30 Wright identifies her overarching project as establishing a self-governing literature, noting the writing of *Carpentaria* was the result of "the deep sadness I felt about how we were left gutted from the huge fight undertaken by our people against the development of a massive mine on our country, and our concerns about the environmental destruction to some of its important living parts – non-human, the all-spiritual of our pristine country[59]". Her aim was to "try to achieve the highest standard in the art form of literary fiction, the practice of imagining" and that the "process of creating epic stories feels as though I am working in a form of alchemy[60]". Affect is crucial to Wright's project, as I aim to show in this section, and while deep sadness motivated the writing of the book, humour also plays a central role. Humour is not as unlikely a feature of trauma testimony as it may seem. Marjolein 't Hart states that "humorologists stress the role of jokes as a peculiar kind of communication strategy, peculiar due to the ambiguity of humour[61]. While Wright is not in the business of telling jokes as such, the humour in the book, whether overt or more subtle, can be viewed as a communication strategy that does specific work in the anti-colonial writing of epic and trauma.

31 Affect is the link between humour and trauma. Margaret Wetherell describes affective practice as focusing "on the emotional as it appears in social life" in a way that highlights "what participants do[62]". Or, in Fanny Gravel-Patry's terms, "affective practice is the way emotions appear in social life in their messy, eclectic and relational forms. Affect is not only grounded in material lives through bodily reactions, it is embodied meaning-making[63]." I aim to show how affect, manifesting as textual humour as well as traumatic grief, operates as embodied meaning-making in *Carpentaria*, and how this is crucial to Wright's epic trauma testimony (as well as her celebra-

tion of the long heritage sustaining life in present-day Aboriginal communities). Affective practice is, Wetherell claims, a dynamic process in which "thinking and feeling are, in fact, social acts taking place through the manifold public and communal sources of language [64]". Affect and feeling are bodily, but it is also representational and discursive. This has significant implications for a writer from the Waanji nation with Chinese heritage and a white cattleman father and for a book that foregrounds Aboriginal English as it examines "competing stories of nation", in Demelza Hall's words [65].

32 Affect is generally understood as both a hardwired, biological, embodied experience *and* an operation that exceeds bodies, often referred to as virtual. In its hardwired, biological form, it is universal in that all human beings fundamentally experience the same range of biological manifestations, though the ways in which they are expressed, interpreted, and circulated vary depending on cultural and historical contexts (nonhuman beings also have hardwired, biological systems, albeit different kinds). The "trans" in my reference to transgenerational trauma encompasses, in Greg Seigworth's words, "the virtual traversing of affective capacities and incapacities between bodies" and "the thoroughly ordinary way that feelings often come to adhere, getting handed down (and up and over), living on in matter and atmospheres, always more and other-than-human [66]".

33 O'Brien asked Wright what she meant by a previous comment that she had inherited all the words left unsaid in her family, to which Wright replied:

> It's very hurtful for our family sometimes to talk about that history. And I think it gets passed down to the next generation through the following generations of not wanting to bring up hurtful things, hurtful things that happen to us even now, and the family will just say, 'Let it go, don't say anything [67].'

34 Such intergenerational and embodied traumatic affect transmits between bodies, gets handed down, lives on in matter and atmosphere, gesturing toward what is unspeakable and outside language.

35 As Stephen Ahern says, though "the contours of affective phenomena are particularly difficult to discern" they "always encompass the virtual as well as the real", expressing "potentiality in the process of

becoming, even when actualized in a singular instance of body or art, flesh or fiction[68]". Both "real" and "virtual" affective contours are operative in the scene in which Norm buries Elias at sea. Attended by the "sea lady" (p. 253), an "industrious guardian angel of good sense" (p. 261) and "the devil woman Gardajala singing out from the bush" (p. 262), the line between sleep and wakefulness, surrealism, and meaning-making, past and present, human and nonhuman, body and environment, the deathliness of trauma and the presence of ancestry and tradition blurs. Affect has also been associated with the subaltern. For example, Stephen Morton cites Gayatri Spivak's suggestion that the "European enlightenment concepts of reason, and the civilising rhetoric of imperialism, which draws on these concepts" forecloses affect[69]. And Kelly Oliver crucially argues that "affects move between bodies; colonization and oppression operate through depositing the unwanted affects of the dominant group onto those othered by that group in order to sustain its privileged position[70]". All of this is tangibly at work in the novel.

36 Ankhi Mukherjee states that Western conceptions of trauma and the methods for addressing it "do not sufficiently declare self-interest or their entanglements in specific histories, geographies, or what David Scott terms 'the conscripts of modernity[71]'". This harks back to Watego's point about the suspect way intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal communities is frequently cited by white commentators. Mukherjee goes on to say that the "designation of victimhood to the trauma sufferer forecloses the empowering potential of trauma[72]". *Carpentaria* refuses this designation, painting a portrait of a people so much more than traumatised or resilient and a country in desperate need of reckoning and healing, while artistically enacting and realising the empowering potential of trauma. Though humour and laughter are not generally considered to be emotions, they are undoubtedly bound to affect, and not necessarily to the affect they are most associated with—joy. But Maggie Hennefeld has recently declared that laughter itself is a radical "affect that bridges the gap between feminist comedy studies and feminist affect theory[73]". This is notable since feminist theory has traditionally focused on the so-called negative emotions—fear, shame, anger, sadness etc. —that jam "the wheels of the grinding feedback loop between bodily matter and structural power[74]".

37 Humour is a complex operation, and it is, I argue, critical to Wright's epic trauma testimony in that it recognises the productive, positive, and empowering aspects of trauma and refuses the neocolonial casting of Aboriginal people as disempowered, one-dimensional victims. Jana Ščigulinská, citing Bakhtin's exaltation of laughter as that which liberates the laugher from a hopeless, burdensome situation, notes irony and humour as characteristic of postcolonial literature [75], but this is not particularly useful in that it positions Wright's multifaceted work within a homogenous category. Ščigulinská's claim that the novel's humour amounts to "tears behind the laughter [76]" is simplistic; Wright does not write with the tears of a clown so much as a trauma survivor writer-warrior of resistance.

38 In a PhD thesis titled "The Role of Aboriginal Humour in Cultural Survival and Resistance," Pearl Duncan compellingly argues that "Irony, satire and parody have been strategies of resistance in a colonised and a postcolonising Australia" and that the humour in *Carpentaria* is "cathartic" (p. 114). [77]Duncan is a self-identified "Aboriginal researcher" using an ethnographic methodology that draws on lived experience "of how humour works in practice as well as in theory [78]". She states that Wright "lampoons [79]" the police through the character of Truthful, the non-Indigenous cop. She goes on to discuss the violence many Aboriginal people, including Duncan's own family, experience at the hands of the police, showing how, in Anne Brewster's words, Wright "destabilizes whiteness [80]" through the humorous depiction of Truthful being blocked by a community who band together refusing to dob each other in, regardless of internal conflict. If the claim to destabilizing whiteness in this instance is fuzzy, perhaps an assertion that the scene enacts the destabilizing of white authority is more convincing. Duncan also confirms Carole Ferrier's positing of burlesque humour in relation to many character names, including Truthful [81]. Humour can manifest hidden transcripts [82]. Jacqueline Bussie defines "tragic laughter" as laughter born of trauma that "interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief" and a "mode of social critique [83]". This describes the humour in the novel more accurately than Ščigulinská's conception of "gentle [84]" humour that merely masks sadness and pain (which

risks falling into the victim-trap Watego rails against). Far from wishy-washy gentle, Wright's humour is clever, dark, biting, and bawdy by turns. Leaning into Bakhtin's vision of carnivalesque laughter with its "creative potential to upset the status quo" and "empower the disempowered [85]" as well as other theorists of humour, and discussing Toni Morrison's *Beloved* [86], Bussie speaks of traumatic humour as a way of forging and enacting consciousness outside of the ideology of colonial oppression [87].

39 Angel Day, as a character, is an interesting study on this front. Angel is a Medusa figure, diabolical and badly behaved in the eyes of many. She dares to think of herself as having worth in a world that would deny it. Her tenaciousness and determination to stay on the site she chose for a home "on top of the nest of a snake spirit" (p. 13), where she bore and raised children, sets the scene for her comedic marital mismatch with long-suffering Norm. Her fondness for the rubbish dump across the road, where she finds many a trash-treasure, is, of course, ironic, but it is also a literal testament to the resilience, fortitude, and resourcefulness of people criminally subjugated by a settler-colonial nation-state. Angel Day's palace has become so symbolic of this that the Brisbane Writers' Festival erected a homage to it in 2017, where a live performance based on the novel has been staged (the structure was re-erected, and the performance re-staged during the 2019 Brisbane Writers' Festival). Angel could be read as the "unruly woman" Hennefeld (after Kathleen Karlyn) identifies as representing the collective laughter of feminist comedy studies, her "merry antics" routinely upsetting people [88], but at the risk of minimising her sometimes dangerously reckless behaviour. Hennefeld notes Brian Massumi's observation that laughter is powerful because of its tendency to interrupt situations that are ill-fitting [89]. Angel is a black woman in a settler-colonial state, and the world that state has built up around her does not fit.

40 Humorous free indirect discourse is foregrounded throughout Chapter 2, simply titled "Angel Day," with Angel's mocking derision in the face of various judgements and disapprovals and accentuated by single word exasperated exclamations such as "Well!", "Oh!", and "Goodness!" But this humour is underpinned by trauma suggested by lines such as:

> This led them [the old Pricklebush people] to say privately that she had acquired a disease from making her life out of living in other people's rubbish. Who knew what kind of lurgies lurked in white trash? (p. 16)

41 and "the crease in between her eyebrows was deepening with the thought of her chaotic life" (p. 19). The chronic racial trauma all the Aboriginal characters in the novel experience is, for Angel and other women characters, complicated by gendered trauma. This plays out at several points but is perhaps most obvious toward the end of the novel when Angel, having been a passenger in a car travelling a highway littered with racist abuse such as "Kill all coons" (p. 432), is left to her fate and sits for a time alone in the abandoned car:

> She considered the prospect of walking into town by herself. Walk into a town she did not know? Impossible, she answered herself. What an absurd thought. How could she walk into town? White people would stare at her. Who would help her? (pp. 434-435).

42 She then sets out on foot, walking "in her high heels" until she is offered a ride by truckers who "arrived out of hell" (p. 435), whereafter Angel "lived unhappily in a devilish place" (p. 436).

43 At that point, Angel's old community come to appreciate her feisty attempt to refuse the traumatic shame she had inherited and that the white world affirmed daily, coming to see her as "a sensation who dreamt far above the heads of other people" (p. 436). Through Angel and other characterisations, Wright demonstrates affective practice in that she shows how, to cite Wetherell, "Thinking and feeling are, in fact, social acts taking place through the manifold public and communal sources of language [90]". The thinking and feeling expressed in the interactions between these characters and the scenes in which their lives play out are rooted both in trauma and in resilience, cultural rootedness, and resistance to the dark forces of colonisation and racism, and Wright's communication of humour does crucial work in communicating this tension.

Conclusion

44 In my monograph, I argued that traumatic affect is how cyclical haunting proceeds, both in society and in writing, defining it as "affect that bears the characteristics of trauma comprising both these forms of intensity, more or less distinctly or entwined on a circular, or feeding back and forth, continuum [91]". I presented cyclical haunting as essentially timeless because it marks the inability of experience to settle into the past, to be resolved.

45 In this article, I have discussed affect and humour as both an expression of this and of resistance and resilience. *Carpentaria* does not simply testify to colonial trauma; it testifies to pre-and post-invasion cyclical haunting, which involves a scope of epic proportions. It is also an anti-colonial epic in the postcolonial sense of the form that Roy attends to, one that enacts affective practice in its production and that reveals the affective practices of a fictional Aboriginal community that survives and often thrives in the face of systemic injustice and racial trauma.

46 I have previously spoken of literature that testifies to transgenerational trauma and cyclical haunting as the writing of "micro-macro traumatic memory," "multigenerational political-ethical account" and a "political act, as covert, yet formidable political activism [92]". It is clear from the text itself and from Wright's commentary that this was, in part, the impetus of the project, which, fully realised, has earned its place as a contemporary classic by manifesting an anti-colonial epic that, drawing on Aboriginal knowledge and experience and literary innovation, departs radically from the classical epic.

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RÉSUMÉS

English

This article draws on my concept of "cyclical haunting," which describes the autonomous force of structural trauma in which traumatic transmissions

feed into and out of individual and collective experience. I propose a new, related concept of “epic trauma” as the mode through which *Carpentaria* witnesses and testifies to historical trauma and its intergenerational transmissions. I argue that the spooked relationship between familial, community, and cultural-historical contexts in Wright’s masterpiece explicates pre-invasion relations circulating over time and across generations complicated by ingrained injustices, racist attitudes, and unethical Western practices and that Wright’s employment of the literary device of the (anti-colonial) epic is central to that project.
I also consider *Carpentaria* through a traumatic-affective practice lens, focussing on the role of humour in sustaining an essentially tragic epic narrative. Margaret Wetherell describes affective practice as “the emotional as it appears in social life” (*Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications, 2012, p. 4). Viewing the text in terms of affective practice and considering humour enables a more nuanced understanding of how Wright crafts her blend of trauma testimony, affective agency, spirited resistance, and sophisticated homage to Aboriginal cultural life, both traditional and contemporary.

Français

Cet article s'inspire de mon concept de « hantise cyclique », qui décrit la force autonome du traumatisme structurel dans lequel les transmissions traumatiques à la fois alimentent et sont produites par l’expérience individuelle et collective. Je propose un nouveau concept connexe, celui de « traumatisme épique », comme le mode par lequel *Carpentaria* témoigne du traumatisme historique et de ses transmissions intergénérationnelles. Les rapports effrayants entre les contextes familiaux, communautaires et historico-culturels dans le chef-d'œuvre de Wright s’expliquent par le fait que les relations pré-coloniales qui circulent dans le temps et entre les générations sont compliquées par les injustices systémiques, les attitudes racistes et des pratiques occidentales contraires à l'éthique. L'utilisation par Wright du dispositif littéraire de l'épopée (anticoloniale) est donc au cœur du projet narratif.
Je considère également *Carpentaria* dans une optique de pratique affective traumatique, en me concentrant sur le rôle de l'humour dans l’élaboration d'un récit épique essentiellement tragique. Margaret Wetherell décrit la pratique affective comme « l'émotionnel tel qu'il apparaît dans la vie sociale » (*Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications, 2012, p. 4). Envisager le texte en termes de pratique affective et considérer l'humour permet une compréhension plus nuancée de la façon dont Wright élabore son mélange de témoignage de traumatisme, d’agentivité des affects, de résistance fougueuse et d'hommage à la vie culturelle aborigène, à la fois traditionnelle et contemporaine.

INDEX

Mots-clés
trauma, affect, trauma cyclique, trauma épique

Keywords
trauma, affect, cyclical trauma, epic trauma

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Translating Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

An Interview with Italian Co-Translator Andrea Sirotti

Margherita Zanoletti et Andrea Sirotti

PLAN

Part 1. The context
Part 2. Practical choices and textual examples
Part 3. Reflections
Conclusion

NOTES DE L'AUTEUR

This article has been conceived and designed by Margherita Zanoletti, and written by Margherita Zanoletti and Andrea Sirotti. Its sections can be attributed to their authors as follows: Margherita Zanoletti authored the introduction, the questions contained in Part 1., Part 2., and Part 3., the section titled "Conclusion", and the Notes. Andrea Sirotti authored the answers contained in Part 1., Part 2., and Part 3. The English translation of Sirotti's answers is by Margherita Zanoletti.

TEXTE

1 Born and based in Florence, Andrea Sirotti is a literary translator specialized in English and postcolonial literatures. Since the mid-1990s, he has edited and translated into Italian anthologies and poetic collections for various publishers by authors such as Emily Dickinson, Margaret Atwood, Carol Ann Duffy, Eavan Boland, Alexis Wright, and Arundhathi Subramaniam. Moreover, he has translated narrative texts by Lloyd Jones, Ginu Kamani, Hisham Matar, Hari Kunzru, Aatish Taseer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Ian McGuire, introducing them to the Italian public for the first time [1]. With Shaul Bassi, he also co-edited the handbook *Gli studi postcoloniali. Un'introduzione* [2].

2 In 2008, in collaboration with Gaetano Luigi Staffilano, Sirotti translated Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* into Italian, less than two years after the publication of the English original [3]. Published by Rizzoli, *I cacciatori di stelle* ("The Stars Catchers") never achieved

the expected commercial success: in fact, it was a sales flop, and for years the Italian translation of the novel has been almost unavailable on the market.

3 This retrospective interview with Margherita Zanoletti was conducted in Italian via an email exchange between 2021 and 2022, and subsequently translated into English by Zanoletti. In the meanwhile, Staffilano passed away at the beginning of 2022, making the project to communicate with him too, impossible [4]. The conversation with Sirotti revolves around the genesis and the outcome of the project of translating *Carpentaria* into Italian, offering close micro-readings of the novel as an exemplary instance of polyphonic writing. The discussion, structured in three sections (Part 1. The context; Part 2. Practical choices and textual examples; Part 3. Reflections), touches on the difficulties and the ethical and practical choices related to the translation process, the relationship between the author and the translators, and the editorial intervention of the Italian publisher, driven by commercial reasons – from the transformation of the title and the book cover design to the attempts to normalise Wright's distinctly Indigenous Australian style. Through a series of memories and reflections looking back to an intense translation experience, and drawing on a number of relevant theorisations on translation theory and practice, including those by Antoine Berman, Lawrence Venuti, Peeter Torop, and Susan Petrilli, the interview also aims, on the one hand, to emphasise the twofold role of the author as a storyteller and spokesperson for the Indigenous minority and, on the other hand, to draw attention to the role of translators as readers, interpreters, mediators, and co-authors, offering some insights on the questionable dynamics of the publishing industry.

Part 1. The context

Margherita Zanoletti (MZ): Let us start from the very beginning. What was the genesis of the project of translating *Carpentaria* into Italian?

Andrea Sirotti (AS): It all started towards the end of 2007, when an editor of Rizzoli (a publishing house with which I had never worked before) contacted me, asking if I would be willing to participate as a co-translator in the Italian edition of what she described as "an

Australian Aboriginal novel, a nice family story set in Queensland". The reason why more than one translator was needed lay not so much ~~as~~ as one might imagine ~~in~~ the difficulty of the text, but rather in the need to get the novel out in time for the Turin International Book Fair in May 2008. In fact, I remember that for the delivery, we would have had to respect the deadline of March 31, that is to say three months of work. Given the complexity of the novel, this was a decidedly tight time, even though there were two of us working on it, Gaetano Luigi Staffilano and myself. For various reasons, then, the publication process took longer than that, although it was not our responsibility.

I don't know why they involved me. I had already had the experience of translating so-called 'postcolonial' fiction, and this might have played a role (although my other experiences in Downunder literature were limited, at the time, to the translation of Lloyd Jones's *Mr Pip* [5]).

MZ: Most translation theorists agree that before embarking upon any translation the translator should engage in a preliminary stage involving analysis and research. This translation-oriented analysis should not only ensure correct interpretation of the source, but also "provide a reliable foundation for each and every decision which the translator has to make [6]". In your case, where did you start from, before translating *Carpentaria*? How long did this propedaeutical phase take?

AS: As a rule, this preparatory phase should last a long time: the time necessary to become familiar with the cultural universe of the author and her story. I say *it should*, because this is not always possible. Before translating *Carpentaria*, in particular, I remember spending a few hectic days collecting as much material as possible about the author and the geographic and cultural context. The rest, alas, remained to be checked while the work progressed, especially when knowledge of specific characteristics became essential for the plausibility of the translation [7].

MZ: Notwithstanding her international reputation, in Italy Alexis Wright appears to be still a niche name in the literary market. In term of wider notoriety, she has a long way to go [8]. How has your Italian translation of *Carpentaria* been received?

AS: A fundamental misunderstanding weighed on the reception of *Carpentaria*, I think. I always had the suspicion that Rizzoli had acquired the book in an attempt to repeat the success of some so-called 'exotic' novels released in previous years. One example is Khaled Hosseini's popular novel *The Kite Runner*. In fact, among other things, *I cacciatori di stelle* apes the Italian title of Hosseini's book, *Il cacciatore di aquiloni* ("The Kite Hunter[9]") It is obvious that a reader who is buying a book titled *I cacciatori di stelle*, with a 'nice' cover and presented to bookstores as "a family story", expects a completely different product from *Carpentaria*. This may explain, at least in part, the reasons for the novel's limited sales. I have personally had feedback from friends who bought the book expecting to find certain "ingredients", only to discover that it was instead a complex, ambitious book, and anything but easy to read[10].

MZ: Australian literature still tends to be a small market in Italy, although in the new millennium, by and large, Australian literature has increasingly been recognised and positioned as a high-quality and innovative form of creative expression, just waiting to be fully discovered[11]. Do you think that your translation of *Carpentaria* contributed to Wright's fame, and to the recognition of Australian Indigenous literature?

AS: No, I don't. I think with regret that the Italian edition of the book has had very little impact in Italy, except perhaps in some academic circles who were ready and prepared to grasp and appreciate the scope and value of this literary work. In other words, it was a missed opportunity.

Part 2. Practical choices and textual examples

MZ: In *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright's storytelling is a stratified blend of myth and scripture, politics, and farce. In order to compose a sort of epic of an Indigenous people who is mostly illiterate, the author combines "English and Waanyi language, high and low diction, concrete and abstract elements, humorous and poetic expression, often in alliterative prose which sounds on the verge of scansion". This way, Wright manages "to compose a wide-ranging

epic novel, reminiscent of the songlines of her ancestors, but inscribed in an exogenous literary heritage in English, and written in a creative, hybrid style [12]". This language is in stark contrast with the impoverished, colloquial English spoken by the local white community and the standard Australian English employed by the other white characters coming from different areas of the continent. What were the major challenges in translating this linguistic polyphony?

AS: *Carpentaria* is a novel that merges epic and everyday life and gives voice to three distinct communities residing in Desperance: two groups of rival Aborigines (living in the Westside and Eastside barracks respectively) gathered around their respective archetypal and charismatic 'leaders' (Norm Phantom and Joseph Midnight), and the community of whites living in the neat houses of Uptown. Despite appearances, in the novel the vulgar and materialistic inhabitants of Uptown, the people without history, although living in the respectable area of town are the real fringe dwellers. Their sterile respectability, narrow materialism, and racism which are at times violent, at other times paternalistic seem to be the real 'capital sins' in that world.

Not that the Aborigines are flawless and vice-free, far from it. However, the native characters always appear to us round, in a certain sense heroic: and if they fall, they do so grandly, like the epic protagonists. When you consider the structure of the novel in its wholeness, compared to the half-figure types of the white community, Norm Phantom, Mozzie Fishman, Will Phantom, and Angel Day stand out like giants.

Clearly, trying to recreate all this in Italian is quite problematic, also because one cannot run the always present risk of making a caricature of the Aborigines by employing a language full of solecisms or anacolutha. In contrast, the language of the white community can be made to sound more colloquial in various ways, even if it is apparently closer to the standard.

MZ: The issue that you raise recalls Lawrence Venuti's widespread theorisation in *The Translator's Invisibility*, where distinctions such as foreignisation/domestication, indicating opposite ethical attitudes, or resistancy/fluency, indicating corresponding discursive

strategies, call the attention to the 'politics' of translation, which must balance commercial and literary imperatives[13]. In a foreignising translation, as proposed by Venuti, the translator intentionally disrupts the linguistic and genre expectations of the target language to mark the otherness of the translated texts. The scholar further argues that "discontinuities at the level of syntax, diction, or discourse allow the translation to be read as a translation [...] showing where it departs from target language cultural values, domesticating a foreignizing translation by showing where it depends on them[14]". However, as you observe, it is paramount to avoid the deforming tendency of exoticising and ridiculing the Foreign stressing the deviation from the morpho-syntactic standard[15] From this perspective, could you provide a textual example taken from *I cacciatori di stelle*?

AS: As an example, let us take the incipit of Joseph Midnight's long 'tirade', contained in the sixth chapter, which recalls the arrival of the chroniclers from the southern cities to Desperance:

> Every day, never miss, the white city people started to metamorphose themselves up there in Desperance, and they were asking too many questions, millions maybe, of the white neighbours. Will Phantom was that popular. A big troublemaker but nobody had a photo of him. Got nothing to give, for the white people – too insular. What they got to know? Got nothing. You could see they were city people who were too plain scared to go about, and come down there in the Pricklebush and ask the Aborigine people sitting at home in their rightful place. They looked, Oh! this side, or that side of town. No, not going, they must have said about the Pricklebush. Waiting and waiting instead. Those reporter types hung around town not knowing what to do, then they all looked outside of the fish and chip shop, and guess who? One old blackfella man, Joseph Midnight now, white hair jumping out everywhere from he head, he was sitting there. Him by himself: Uptown. He looked over his shoulder at those city newspaper people and saw they'd even got a Southern blackfella with them. A real smart one, educated, acting as a guide. He got on a tie, clean white shirt and a nice suit. He goes up to old man and called him, 'Uncle,' and he says: '*What kind of person you reckon, older man, you say Will Phantom?*' Old Midnight he looked back for awhile, and he says: 'Who's this?' He was thinking now for must be two minutes before he was squinty eyes, still saying nothing, and then he

> speaks back, 'Well! You, you, say, I never, and I never believe it. You say I am your Uncle, then listen to this one, boy[16]. (Emphasis added)

> Ogni giorno, immancabilmente, i bianchi di città cominciavano a *metamorfizzarsi* lassù a Desperance, e facevano troppe domande, forse milioni, ai paesani bianchi. Will Phantom era così popolare, ma nessuno aveva una foto di quel gran piantagrane. «Nulla da dare,» a bianchi come loro… che mentalità chiusa.
> Cosa scoprirono? Nulla. Si vedeva che era gente di città che aveva una paura fottuta di andare in giro, di scendere nel Pricklebush a domandare alla gente *ab origine* seduta all'interno del loro legittimo posto. Guardavano, oh se guardavano! Da una parte, o dall'altra del paese. «Ma non ci andiamo» devono aver detto, intendendo nel Pricklebush. Lunghe attese, invece. Facce da cronisti che ciondolavano per la città senza sapere cosa fare. Poi guardarono tutti fuori dal negozio del *fish and chips*, e indovina un po'? Un vecchio *blackfella*, Joseph Midnight in persona, capelli che gli spuntano fuori dappertutto dalla testa *sua di lui*, era seduto là. Lui da solo: a Uptown. Guardò di sottecchi quei pennivendoli di città e vide che si erano portati dietro perfino un *blackfella* del sud. Uno intelligente, istruito, che faceva da guida. Aveva su la cravatta, una camicia bianca pulita e un bell'abito. Va dal vecchio e lo chiama «zio», poi gli fa: «*Che tipo di persona mi dici che è Will Phantom?*» Il vecchio Midnight lo squadra per un po', poi dice: «E tu chi sei?» Ci pensa per un paio di minuti, poi strizza gli occhi, ancora senza dir nulla, alla fine gli fa: «Be', tu… dici? Io non ci credo, mai e poi mai. Dici che sono tuo zio, allora ascoltami bene, ragazzo.[17] (Emphasis added)

In the Italian translation, one can spot examples of high and solemn language mixed with specific idiolects. We have tried to recreate this expressive modality without elements that could involuntarily sound caricatured. Indeed, what we have attempted to restore is the Aborigines' proud mastery of their own language. They make fun of anyone (white or subservient to Whites) who tries to water down or sweeten their expressions. Note, in bold, the mangled English adopted by the journalist to make himself understood better by the native elderly ("'What kind of person you reckon, older man, you say Will Phantom?'").

MZ: It should be noted that the reverse translation of "Che tipo di persona mi dici che è Will Phantom?" is "What kind of person do

you tell me Will Phantom is?". While the epithet "older man" has disappeared in the translation, the Italian pronoun "mi" ("to me") is a strategic addition which immediately makes the sentence sound informal, almost childish. This, when combined with the anaphora of "che" mirroring the anaphora of "you", plays a key role in transmitting the colloquial tone of the source, allowing it to be heard, though from a distance, by the receiving Italian audience[18]. This translation strategy contributes to preserve the polyphony of voices that characterizes Wright's narrative, made up by a mixture of more formal language with idiomatic, colloquial expressions. Latinate vocabulary such as "metamorphose" and "insular" are emphasized by resorting to italicization ("metamorfizzarsi") and punctuation ("...che mentalità chiusa", in back translation "...what a closed mind"), while the derogative, archaic-sounding adjective "Aborigine", also derived from Latin ("ab", from; "origine", origin (https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/origin)) is turned into the Latin expression "ab origine" ("from the beginning").

Clearly, instead of normalizing and flattening the language, you and Staffilano have preserved and even accentuated reference to the oral speech: yet the Foreign is never ridiculed. For example, the italicized sentence "Got nothing to give" is translated literally, as "nulla da dare", between inverted commas; the choice of the poetic word "nulla" ("nothing", from the Latin word "nulla") instead of the more prosaic synonym "niente" contributes to evoke Wright's "distinctive poetic qualities[19]". The same change of punctuation, from italics to inverted commas, occurs with "No, not going", translated as "ma non ci andiamo" (literally, "but we are not going there"), a sentence which intertextually refers to Oodgeroo Noonuccal's famous poem "We Are Going[20]". In other cases, shifts occur on a lexical and syntactical level. For example, in translation the syntagm "too plain scared" turns from colloquial speech to direct expression of vulgarity, as "avevano una paura fottuta" means, in reverse translation, "were scared shitless"; emphasised by Wright through the use of italics, the alliteration "from he head" (a grammatical variance of "his", where the personal pronoun "he" is employed with an adjectival function) is translated into the redundant expression "dalla testa sua di lui", where "sua" and "di lui" express the same meaning (both mean "his"; in back transla-

tion: "from his head"); while the informal phrase "He got on a tie" is echoed in the Italian translation "Aveva su la cravatta" (literally, "He had his tie on"), as the phrasal verb employed "avere su" ("to wear", "to have on") sounds far more colloquial than the prepositionless verb "avere" ("to wear", "to have"). Similarly, spoken words that have been transcribed in the source are perpetuated in the translation. For example, "One old blackfella man" (without italics in Wright's text, as the word "blackfella", a variant spelling of "blackfellow", has been lexicalised in English) is only partially translated as "un vecchio blackfella" ("an old blackfellow"). The term "blackfella" is italicised thus made more visible to the eyes of readers. While the omission does not interfere with the function of the text, the cultural reference is left on the page, leaving the reader to recover its meaning from the context. [21]

Reciprocated in the Italian translation, Wright's intermingling of languages, registers and references provides an Indigenous world-view in writing. Wright sets her novel in the area around the Gulf of Carpentaria in northwest Queensland, which is the home of her people: the Waanyi. She draws not only on the dramatic topography of the region, but on an essentially non-European vision of humankind's place in the world. Could you comment upon this aspect?

AS: Wright's world is visionary and concrete at the same time. Local facts and rumours coexist with the legends of the Dreaming; ancestral myths and sacred stories are treated with a matter of fact and sometimes tragicomic tone in a very original and paradoxical language, which is sublime and quotidian, traditional, and innovative at once. This mixture certainly sounds like a rather unheard-of blend. This novel, therefore, also delights in daring linguistic research, in the continuous juxtaposition of points of view, in the occurrence of sections that can be definitely classified as 'interior monologues', in search of a language (especially the English used by the Indigenous protagonists) that sounds native and foreign, colloquial, and solemn, everyday and epic at the same time, with an idiosyncratic use of some 'highbrow' terms. It appears as if the author was particularly interested in the literary and intellectual definition of a communicative code useful for colonising the language of the colonizers by pushing it to the extreme (as in Rushdie's famous formula "the Empire writes back [22]").

MZ: Wright's novel teems with extraordinary characters: from the rulers of the family, the queen of the rubbish-dump Angel Day and the king of time Normal Phantom, to Elias Smith, Mozzie Fishman, Bruiser, Captain Nicoli Finn, and Will Phantom. What character did you end up empathizing most with?

AS: Among the characters, I remember being very impressed by Elias, the man arrived from the sea "who had his memory stolen". (C, p. 42) Despite being white, he is an outsider, one who collapses just when he compromises with the whites. His role, however, remains (somewhat) central even after he dies, with Will first and then Norm caring for and talking to his mummified corpse.

MZ: What page or episode would you pick and recall as the most moving?

AS: Among the most intense pages of the novel, I would mention the episode in which Angel Day, Norm's indomitable, sensual, and individualistic wife, the one who builds the necessary and the superfluous by recycling the waste of the whites, discovers a statue of the Virgin Mary in the landfill and then repaints it in her own image and likeness, just like an ordinary woman from Pricklebush. This episode is a postcolonial reinterpretation of the religion of the oppressors:

> The Virgin Mary was dressed in a white-painted gown and blue cloak. Her right hand was raised, offering a permanent blessing, while her left hand held gold-coloured rosary beads. Angel Day was breathless. 'This is mine,' she whispered, disbelieving the luck of her ordinary morning.
> "This is mine," she repeated her claim loudly to the assembled seagulls waiting around the oleanders. She knew she could not leave this behind either, otherwise someone else would get it, and now she had to carry the statue home, for she knew that with the Virgin Mary in pride of place, nobody would be able to interfere with the power of the blessings it would bestow on her home. "Luck was going to change for sure, from this moment onwards," she told the seagulls, because she, Mrs Angel Day, now owned the luck of the white people. [...] This was how white people had become rich by saving up enough money, so they could look down on others, by keeping statues of their holy ones in their homes. Their spiritual ancestors would perform miracles if they saw how hard some people were praying all the time, and for this kind of devotion, reward them with money.

> Blessed with the prophecy of richness, money befalls them, and that was the reason why they owned all the businesses in town.
> The seagulls, lifting off all over the dump, in the mind-bending sounds they made seemed to be singing a hymn, *Glory!*
> *Glory, Magnificat*. (pp. 22-23)

> La Vergine aveva una veste dipinta di bianco e un mantello azzurro. Teneva la mano destra alzata in perpetua benedizione, e con la sinistra reggeva un rosario dai grani dorati. Angel Day rimase senza fiato. «È mia», sussurrò, incredula di quanta fortuna le fosse capitata in quella mattina qualunque.
> «È mia», ripeté a voce alta al gruppo dei gabbiani in attesa attorno ai resti delle siepi di oleandro. Sapeva benissimo di non poter lasciare lì la statua, altrimenti l'avrebbe presa qualcun altro, e di doverla portare a casa, perché era certa che, con la Madonna a proteggere il luogo, la sua casa e la sua famiglia sarebbero state protette da benedizioni potentissime. «D'ora in avanti la sorte cambierà di sicuro,» disse ai gabbiani, perché lei, la signora Angel Day, adesso possedeva la stessa fortuna dei bianchi.
> [...] I bianchi si erano arricchiti mettendo da parte abbastanza soldi da poter guardare gli altri dall'alto in basso, proprio perché tenevano in casa le statue dei loro santi. I loro progenitori spirituali avrebbero fatto miracoli ascoltando tutte quelle preghiere, e avrebbero ricompensato una simile devozione in moneta sonante. Benedetti dalla profezia della ricchezza, il denaro pioveva loro addosso ed era per questo che gestivano tutte le imprese in città.
> Sembrò che i gabbiani che svolazzavano sulla discarica avessero unito le loro grida penetranti per intonare un inno: «Gloria!
> Gloria, Magnificat [23]!»

MZ: In this passage, as you observe, the lexicon of Christianity is translated into Indigenous knowledge. Spiritual, real, and imagined worlds coexist. Just like in the previous example, here too the Italian translators, though aiming at communicating with readers with limited awareness of Indigenous issues, avoid the temptation of domesticating the source. The excerpt features many references to the Christian spirituality, which in most cases the Italian translation renders literally. Words like "blessing" ("benedizione"), "rosary" ("rosario"), "miracles" ("miracoli"), "devotion" ("devozione"), and the Latin-injected hymn "Glory! Glory, Magnificat" ("Gloria! Gloria, Magnificat!") are cultural borrowings from the Western

world, which find direct correspondence in Italian. What does not have an equivalent is the Aboriginal world vision. The overlapping of past, present and future imbuing the prediction "Luck was going to change for sure, from this moment onwards" is translated into the Simple-Future sentence "D'ora in avanti la sorte cambierà di sicuro" (reverse translation is "from now on, luck will certainly change"). Clearly, Angel Day's perspective is in striking contrast with the linear conception of time of the average Italian reader. Her viewpoint is that of an Indigenous woman, for whom "all time is intertwined, important and unresolved as Aboriginal people see the time immemorial in our culture[24]", and the Italian translation cannot mimic Angel Day's mixture of tenses, as it would sound like a mockery. In contrast, the sentence "she told the seagulls, because she, Mrs Angel Day, now owned the luck of the white people" expresses hybrid temporality in the Italian translation too: "disse ai gabbiani, perché lei, la signora Angel Day, adesso possedeva la stessa fortuna dei Bianchi" (in back translation: "she told the seagulls, because she, Mrs Angel Day, now owned the same luck as the Whites"). Notably, the capitalisation of the word "Bianchi", introduced in the translation, appears loaded with irony, preserving Wright's humorous tone.

As the comparative reading of source and translation suggests, the challenge for the translators is not limited to the linguistic level but includes intercultural issues, as "the source-language word may express a concept which is totally unknown in the target culture. […] Such concepts are often referred to as 'culture-specific[25]'." The translator acts as a cultural mediator, who interprets and expresses stories and themes that are limitedly known by readers outside the Australian context.

From this perspective, literary translation is always a political act. The texts that are selected to be translated ultimately shape the literary market and intercultural relations and, as Mikhail Bakhtin suggested in his discussions of dialogism and heteroglossia, the ways in which a work is translated ineluctably reflect and express an interpretation of the source and a (semio)ethical stance[26]. Can you suggest the main political, hermeneutical, and ethical issues raised by the process of translating *Carpentaria*?

AS: Translating *Carpentaria* entails ethical problems, as Wright published it as a reference text for a denied nation and their language. In a recent retrospective article for the *Guardian*, she wrote:

> One of the most frequent questions authors are asked is, "Who are you writing for?" The audience I had in my mind while writing *Carpentaria* was the ancestors of our traditional country. I concentrated on the way our people speak to country and each other. In that way, it always felt as though I was writing a story to the old people about the complexities and bravery of our world today but also, by linking the past and the present in this way, I was bringing the ancestral realm into a story of all times [27].

At the time, we did not know all this. We learnt it later, in the course of work. However, from the first pages of the book, Staffilano and I understood that what we had been entrusted with was an important novel, which required radical and courageous choices. At the same time, we were aware that the leeway we had was not unlimited. That is to say that we had to accept some compromises.

MZ: How did this awareness reflect in your translation, in practical terms?

AS: In our translation, I think I can say that in general we managed not to flatten Alexis Wright's style, keeping the paradoxical and mock-epic tone, and respecting the linguistic registers and the lyrical qualities. In some cases, we accepted the editorial staff's proposal to streamline the adjectives and cut down on anaphors [28], but apart from this, I believe that our translation does a good service to the author and to the work.

MZ: How did you translate the realia [29] featuring in *Carpentaria*?

AS: Rizzoli's editorial staff invited us to have some Aboriginal terms translated or explained in the text. Called on by myself to settle the question, Alexis Wright was succinct about it. She pointed out that the Aboriginal language words and sentences in the original Australian and UK publication did not include any translation. Therefore, for consistency, in her opinion the Rizzoli publication should

have been the same. The Aboriginal language should remain in the text [30].

Staffilano and I agreed upon a univocal way to translate the hydro-geo-morphological and cultural characteristics of the territory, leaving many of the most recurrent terms untranslated, such as "claypan" / "saltpan", "bush", "Pricklebush", "Blackfella", "Outback", "Abo". In a number of cases, we chose to leave the original word in italics and to insert an explanation in the text.

MZ: Venuti criticises domestication as a site of racism and violence. For the scholar, domesticated translations "conform to dominant culture values", while foreignisation or resistancy "challenges the dominant aesthetic" as new ideas, genres and cultural values are welcomed [31]. Did the editorial staff attempt to domesticate, or normalise Wright's distinctly Indigenous style? Was it necessary to 'protect' your translation?

AS: Several times we had to hold back their attempts at standardisation and appeals to 'accessibility' and 'readability'. It was not so obvious to make it clear that reading difficulties were an integral part of the stylistic choices of the author, to whom we felt we must be faithful.

MZ: As a translator, do you employ footnotes, introductions, appendixes, glossaries to make it easier for readers? Why are these apparatuses absent in the Italian edition of *Carpentaria* [32]?

AS: I often make use of endnotes, glossaries, and appendices to clarify some aspects of the text without the apparatuses interfering too much in the fluidity of reading. Especially when it comes to translating postcolonial poetry, inserting these paratexts seems useful and necessary to me. In the case of Carpentaria, however, we were told that the notes would not be included.

MZ: Still on a paratextual level, were the transformation of the title from Carpentaria to *I cacciatori di stelle* and the book cover design your choices, or the publisher's preferences? Also the typographical variations at the beginning of chapters in the 2006 edition were erased in Italian. Were these changes driven by commercial, aesthetic, or communicative reasons?

Fig. 1. Alexis Wright, *I cacciatori di stelle* [trans. Andrea Sirotti and G. L. Staffilano], Milan, Rizzoli, 2008. Book cover.



Fig. 1. Alexis Wright, I cacciatori di stelle [trans. Andrea Sirotti and G. L. Staffilano], Milan, Rizzoli, 2008. Book cover.

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Fig. 2. Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Artamon NSW, Giramondo Publishing, 2006. Book cover.



Fig. 2. Alexis Wright, Carpentaria, Artamon NSW, Giramondo Publishing, 2006. Book cover.

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AS: None of the changes that you mention were made by the translators (in fact, this rarely happens), but by the publisher, and in particular its sales department or marketing consultants [33]. It would not have been particularly difficult, for instance, to reproduce the original title without changes, which by the way sounds like an Italian word! The contrast between the two covers is even more puzzling. In the Italian book an idyllic and harmonious tropical environment is depicted, while the original cover could be seen as disturbing: the 'ancestral snake' stands against the background of an inhospitable landscape. They seem to be two completely different, almost antithetical books [34]. I remember that the author, whom I was lucky enough to meet twice in the spring of 2009 during her Italian tour after the publication of the novel (first at the "Incroci di civiltà" festival, in Venice, then at Monash University in Prato), admitted that she was rather upset by the publisher's choices. As for the poetic parts all in capital letters at the beginning of the first two chapters [35], we translators had respected the original intention. Evidently the final choice was not to keep them. But the reason is unclear to me.

MZ: How did you collaborate with Staffilano, in practical terms? Did you translate together all chapters? Did one translator write the first draft and the other translator do the revision?

AS: After having discussed the translation approach and the fundamental choices, we divided the chapters up and began drafting. Then,

we scrupulously revised each other's work trying to harmonise the style, employing the word search function to standardise the translation of key concepts.

MZ: In a recent interview, you declared: "In my experience, being in touch with the authors (by e-mail, Skype or, in some lucky cases, even in person) has often been fertile and enriching. As is, generally, the dialogue and exchange with the reviser appointed by the publishing house, especially if she is also a translator and therefore someone able to fully grasp the difficulties of the job and the characteristics of the style to be reproduced [36]." How did this work out, in the case of *Carpentaria*?

AS: I must say that deadlines were too tight for Staffilano and I to be able to have a fertile conversation with the author while the project was 'in progress'. It was only towards the conclusion that we submitted her two lists of questions. We forwarded her the first list through the editorial staff (in some cases, publishers prefer not to provide translators with the private contacts of authors, and act as an intermediary for them), while ~~–~~once the urgency had been acknowledged ~~–~~we sent her the second list directly. Wright was very willing to collaborate. She was happy that her work was being translated into Italian and curious to 'hear' the results. She said she was amazed that *Carpentaria* was being translated into our language. She couldn't wait to see the finished book [37].

MZ: Did you involve other people during the translation process? And which technological tools did you employ?

AS: Apart from Staffilano and myself (and the editor), no other person was directly involved in the translation. It is true, however, that during the work I often consulted with my American friend and translator Johanna Bishop (I often ask the opinion of English-speaking colleagues for my translations). With her I discussed some controversial parts or some specific terms in context, to understand how they resonated with a native speaker. The first and eighth chapters, I remember, were subsequently analysed during a couple of my Master's degree classes in Postcolonial Translation at the University of Pisa. As for the technological tools, we used nothing else but some online dictionaries (including one of Australian English) and a speech synthesis software for reading. At the time, a handy open-

source program called *Read please* was quite popular. Today, as we know, everything is simpler, as the text-to-speech plugin *WordTalk* is incorporated in Microsoft Word.

Part 3. Reflections

MZ: Translators are readers, interpreters, mediators, co-authors. What definition in your opinion best describes the act of translating?

AS: On a case-by-case basis, translators can play each of these roles (and others as well). I like to think of translators above all as very attentive readers, who do research, ask themselves questions, do not give in to the superficiality or laziness of a first impression. Only in this way can the translation be based on the interpretation process that is essential to establish that relationship of understanding and empathy necessary to be faithful to the source text.

MZ: In a past interview you observed that "translating is a way of returning home, richer, after the long journey through the text [38]." How did the experience of translating *Carpentaria* enrich you? Do you think that the translator and the reader travel the same distance?

AS: Whenever I lecture on translation, *Carpentaria* figures among the examples I cite more often. It is the classic case of a work, as I like to say, "translated by difference [39]". Due to various circumstances two European white men, with more or less stable life habits, find themselves translating the work of an Indigenous woman from the other side of the world. Precisely because the differences are so marked, a lot of humility is needed. We need to listen and try to abandon as much as possible the reassuring mental framework of our everyday life and profession, which allow us to translate culturally-related works 'on autopilot'. The journey, therefore, is long and full of rewards: for both the reader and the translator. We return home enriched because we have learned to let experiences and points of view that we never even imagined existed resonate within us. This way we discover, perhaps, that these experiences and points of view are closer than we imagined to our way of feeling.

MZ: In the Afterword of your Italian translation of Emily Dickinson's poems, you write that yours is "a translation that aspires to be the bringer of fidelity[40]". In translating *Carpentaria*, what are the dominant[41] characteristics of Wright's poetics you have aimed to be faithful to?

AS: Certainly, the literary tension of the language, its solemnity and, at times, lyricism are dominant. Many were the moments when it seemed to me to translate poetry due to the author's particular attention to aspects such as rhythm, sonority, and prosody. The stories of the protagonists are always told in a hyperbolic and "larger than life" style. A bizarre, paradoxical, extravagant, excessive, and absolutely unpredictable style. The translator must try to recreate all this and, as is evident, this sits at the antipodes (not only the geographic, but also the translation antipodes) with respect to a domesticating or normalising translation.

MZ: In recent years, translation scholars have become increasingly interested in the role of emotion in the translation process and in how it impacts on translation performance[42]. In your experience, did the process of translating *Carpentaria* entail an emotional involvement? What role did your emotions play, in translating the novel?

AS: It is difficult for me to answer this question many years later. Even re-reading parts of the book today, I cannot honestly recall the emotions that I felt during the reading and translation. I can say that at the time I was very much in agreement with what the Australian anthropologist Nonie Sharp had said commenting on the novel:

> Why does this book move me deeply? Because it stirs up feeling on how one might live in tune with the ecology of place, the cycles of the cosmos? A parable about how, if we *don't* live in this way, nature and her beings – 'the elements' – make retribution? James Lovelock and other world scientists see this in their own way: as *The Revenge of Gaia*. But for them too an elemental sense of being stirs at this late moment of history. Upon this larger canvas *Carpentaria*, a work of magic realism in Westerners' language, becomes a powerful allegory for our times: the Earth's retaliation in Gaia-like fashion, responding to the deep tramping marks of our footprints on the climate, on the places of both land and water.[43]

This is such a relevant comment today, in the so-called "Anthropocene", just as the novel we are talking about is relevant in many respects.

MZ: You are not only a translator, but also an English teacher. How do these two activities connect? Have you ever employed *Carpentaria* for didactic purposes?

AS: Working as a high school teacher, I have often employed the texts that I was translating in my literature or translation classes. Students get generally very curious about stories from distant and unknown places. I have frequently taken them with me on an imaginary 'voyage' to the India of contemporary Anglophone poets, to Chimamanda Adichie's Nigeria, Hisham Matar's Libya, or the Bougainville Island of that splendid Dickensian rewriting that is Lloyd Jones's *Mr Pip*. With *Carpentaria* I hesitated, perhaps because the English language employed by Alexis Wright is a bit too literary and complex to read without too much hermeneutic efforts at the high school level. Masters and translation schools are a different matter. At university level, Wright's novel is an almost inexhaustible source of didactic examples.

MZ: As a final question, let us think in intersemiotic terms. What else, in your opinion, could (your translation of) *Carpentaria* be successfully translated into? A film? A musical work? A poem? A cycle of paintings? A website? A literary remake? A graphic novel? A videogame?

AS: Yours are all interesting suggestions. However, the hypothesis that comes most naturally to me is the film adaptation (or perhaps a TV series) that takes its cue from the novel's narrative and protagonists. The visual and cinematic potential of the book is evident, even if, overall, *Carpentaria* is more a novel of words than images, and any adaptation that did not take this aspect into account would inevitably lead to an oversimplification.

I am also curious about the hypothesis of a musical, or perhaps a *concept*, as they once used to say, based on *Carpentaria*'s story and characters. Who knows if anyone in Australia or elsewhere has thought or is thinking about it? In fact, there is a lot of music in this novel. Classical music, Handel above all, but also the incongruous and

paradoxical presence of a warbling Italian tenor (a miner) who sings "ma per fortuna è una notte di luna" ("but luckily it's a moonlit night", from Giacomo Puccini's *Bohème*) in that remote land. And country and western music: the constant soundtrack of the caravan of the religious zealot Mozzie Fishman. These genres are reinvented and made almost unrecognisable by Wright, as in this context other cultural elements are reinvented and redesigned.

Conclusion

4 Since the beginning of this project, the primary goal of interviewing Sirotti has been to offer a first-hand, tangible testimony of the translator's work, accounting for the interpretive path entailed by the process of translating *Carpentaria* into Italian. Through this interactive dialogue, conducted from a distance, the translator looks back to his experience and reflects retrospectively on its political, hermeneutical, and ethical implications, allowing his work to be finally "visible". In this respect, the interview proves to be a powerful methodological tool to disclose and historicise key contextual information related to the publication of Wright's novel in Italian, which otherwise would have remained hidden.

5 However, an attentive reading reveals that the conversation with Sirotti goes beyond a mere recollection of a past translation experience, highlighting at least two potential new directions and approaches for translation focused research.

6 The first significant aspect is that, as the case study at the heart of the interview shows with particular evidence, the politics of translation must balance commercial and literary imperatives, notably in the case of works from minority and postcolonial authors such as Alexis Wright. Reconstructing these background dynamics is essential to better understand not only how and why a translation was published, but also how and why a literary work, especially if belonging to a 'minor' literature, is accepted within and connects with a receiving cultural system [44].

7 This issue clearly emerges when considering the contrast between the translation approach of the publisher and that of the translators. On the one hand, Rizzoli's requests towards a translation as "domest-

icated" as possible, devoid of footnotes, translators' notes, and other critical apparatuses that would make the translators' work more evident, as well as the transformation of the original title *Carpentaria*, perhaps considered too cryptic, into the more "marketable" *I cacciatori di stelle*, can be seen as commercial strategies to present Wright's work to potential readers as a political-free, pleasant to read, and exotic novel. The tight deadline allowed for completing such a complex task as translating *Carpentaria* into Italian, imposed by the publisher, was also dictated by commercial needs. On the other hand, Sirotti and Staffilano's foreignising translation move in an entirely different direction. As the micro-readings offered in the interview display, although the translators admittedly had to "accept some compromises", they did not conform to the readers' expectations simplifying Wright's stratified language, but rather preserved the stylistic uniqueness of the original as much as possible. Their attempt was to mediate between their tendency towards 'resistive' translation and the need of the publisher for fluency and stylistic standardisation. This approach, which goes against the current mainstream of Italy's publishing market [45], reflects their ethical intent to let the Foreign shine through, allowing the reader access to a multidimensional story made of a polyphony of voices.

8 Observing these dynamics, we can gain a deeper understanding of why until now the Italian market has not been able to fully appreciate *I cacciatori di stelle*. As it is translated, the novel represents neither of the two "extremes" that so far have found the favor of the Italian public: the "exotic", namely, what is seen abroad as "Australian" in stereotypical terms (for instance, novels set in Australia, Australian blockbusters, etc.), and the "domesticated", namely, what is easy to sell (for example, genre fiction [46]).

9 A second relevant point that the interview raises is that any literary translation, including the translation of a "minor" literary work, always moves also on a multimodal and intersemiotic level. In other words, in order to achieve a thorough assessment of a translated work, analysing the linguistic aspects only is not enough. Rather, it is paramount to go beyond a verbocentric approach and consider the material and nonverbal elements too [47]. While, for instance, within translation studies, only a few writings in English deal mainly or

exclusively with covers of translations [48], the book cover, the page layout, the choice of paper, and the typographical elements should be all considered as aspects which jointly contribute towards a "resistant" or a "domesticated" translation. For example, the paratextual transformations introduced by the publisher Rizzoli, and in particular the makeover of the original book cover into a different design, cannot be considered as a merely accessorial element but an integral part of a multimedial translation process. As a matter of fact, the resemiotisation of the original cover illustration into a 'pleasant' landscape design ends up communicating to potential readers an idea of *Carpentaria* which does not entirely reflect the literary features of Wright's work.

10 Considering these two aspects, the Italian translation of *Carpentaria* stands out as an exemplary case of "minor literature" in translation, where the interconnected roles of translators, authors, editors, designers, and publishers still wait to be fully acknowledged and investigated. In this respect, interviewing Sirotti has programmatically aimed, on the one hand, to contribute to make the translators' work more visible, "inviting a critical appreciation of its cultural political function and a reexamination of the inferior status it is currently assigned in law, in publishing, in education [49]", and on the other hand, to stimulate further reflection upon current understandings of 'visibility' across translation theory and practice.

NOTES

1 Amongst Sirotti's latest translations, we recall here: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Turin, Einaudi, 2014; *Cara Ijeawele: quindici consigli per crescere una bambina femminista* and *Quella cosa intorno al collo* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Turin, Einaudi, 2017; *Il pericolo di un'unica storia* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Turin, Einaudi, 2020; Arundhathi Subramaniam, *A una poesia non ancora nata* [trans. and ed. Andrea Sirotti], Latiano (BR), Interno poesia, 2018; Ambarish Satwik, *Il basso ventre dell'impero* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Milan, Metropoli d'Asia, 2010; Aatish Taseer, *Straniero alla mia storia: viaggio di un figlio nelle terre dell'islam* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Turin, Einaudi, 2010; Shazia Omar,

Come un diamante nel cielo [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Milan, Metropoli d'Asia, 2009.

2 Shaul Bassi & Andrea Sirotti, *Gli studi postcoloniali: Un'introduzione*, Florence, Le Lettere, 2010.

3 Alexis Wright, *I cacciatori di stelle* [trans. Andrea Sirotti and G. L. Staffilano], Milan, Rizzoli, 2008. Eleonora Federici provides an insightful critique of Sirotti and Staffilano's translation in her essay titled "Translating Counter-Memory in Australian Aboriginal Texts", in Sharon Deane-Cox & Anneleen Spiessens (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Memory*, London, Routledge, 2022, pp. 266-281, pp. 275-278.

4 Active as a literary translator since 1987, Gaetano Luigi Staffilano (1943-2022) gained his popularity for his translations of science-fiction and heroic fantasy books. Among the authors that he translated from English into Italian are Dan Simmons, Isaac Asimov, Robert Ervin Howard, and Terry Brooks.

5 Lloyd Jones, *Mister Pip* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Turin, Giulio Einaudi, 2007.

6 Christiane Nord, *Text Analysis in Translation: Theory, Methodology, and Didactic Application*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2005, p. 1. See also *Translating as a Purposeful Activity*, London and New York, Routledge, 2018.

7 Sirotti recalls what in Nord's methodology is referred to as "cultural translation problems", which arise from shifts in register, from the presence of culture-bound terms, and from differences in terms of text-genre conventions. See Christiane Nord, *Text Analysis in Translation*, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-62.

8 To this date, *Carpentaria* is the only book by Alexis Wright that is available in Italian. The Italian translation of a lecture by Wright, originally titled "In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?" is included in Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *My People: La mia gente* [ed. Margherita Zanoletti], Milan, Mimesis, 2021, pp. 11-29.

9 *The Kite Runner* is the first novel by Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini (New York, Riverhead, 2003). Isabella Vaj translated Hosseini's book into Italian as *Il cacciatore di aquiloni* (Milan, Piemme, 2004).

10 In his pioneering study of the covers of translated books ("Judging a Translation by Its Cover", *The Translator*, vol. 24, n° 1, 2018, pp. 1-16), Brian Mossop seems to agree with Sirotti's viewpoint, when he observes that "in a

bookstore, only a few people will read enough of the main text to determine whether the promise of the cover will be fulfilled" (p. 11). The cover of *Carpentaria* and that of *I cacciatori di stelle* are reproduced in Part 2 of this paper (fig. 1 and fig. 2).

11 On the diffusion of Australian translated literature in Italy from 2000-2021, see Part 2 (by Zanoletti) of Francesca Di Blasio & Margherita Zanoletti, "Australian Studies and the Reception of Australian Literature and Culture in Italy: A Survey", in Maria Dolores Ramírez Almazán (ed.), *Encrucijadas en la cultura italiana*, Madrid, Dykinson, 2022, pp. 47-63, pp. 53-59.

12 Françoise Palleau-Papin, "Wright's Poetic Prose Epic", *Commonwealth Essays and Studies*, vol. 44, n° 2, 2022, DOI: 10.4000/ces.10481 (https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.10481).

13 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, London, Routledge, 1995.

14 Lawrence Venuti, "Translation as Cultural Politics: Régimes of Domestication in English", in Mona Baker (ed.), *Critical Readings in Translation Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, pp. 65-79, p. 75.

15 On this topic, see Antoine Berman, "Translation and the Trials of the Foreign" in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, London, Routledge, 2004, pp. 276-289; Franca Cavagnoli, "Translation and Creation in a Postcolonial Context", in Simona Bertacco (ed.), *Language and Translation in Postcolonial Literatures*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, pp. 165-179; "Errare, sviarsi, vagabondare lungo il sentiero della traduzione letteraria", Altre Modernità, n° 4, 2017, pp. 176-189, p. 178.

16 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London, Constable, 2009, p. 153. Further references to the novel will appear as page numbers between brackets in the body of the text.

17 Alexis Wright, *I cacciatori di stelle*, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-179.

18 Eleonora Federici, "Translating Counter-Memory in Australian Aboriginal Texts", *op. cit.*, p. 277.

19 Françoise Palleau-Papin, "Wright's Poetic Prose Epic", *op. cit.*

20 "We Are Going" by Oodgeroo Noonuccal is a powerful poem about the struggles of Aboriginal Australians in the face of British colonialism. Alexis Wright cites this lyric in her lecture "In Times Like These, What Would Oodgeroo Do?", *op. cit.* p. 14.

21 As Federici observes ("Translating Counter-Memory in Australian Aboriginal Texts", *op. cit.*, p. 274), "non-translation comes into play where the italicized presentation of racist, derogatory terms in the source text, such as 'blackfella', 'boong', 'gombo' reappear in the translation. This signal both the translator's awareness of the significance of the terms to the interpretation of the text and the difficulties of balancing the weight of the words with the needs of the reader".

22 Sirotti's reference goes to Salman Rushdie's article "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance" (*The Times*, 3 July 1982, p. 8), which discusses the ways postcolonial voices respond to the literary canon (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_canon) of the colonial centre. Rushdie's article has given the title to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's renowned book on postcolonialism *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York, Routledge, 1989).

23 Alexis Wright, *I cacciatori di stelle*, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.

24 Alexis Wright, "The Inward Migration in Apocalyptic Times", *Emergence Magazine*, n° 27, January 2021, https://emergencemagazine.org/essay/the-inward-migration-in-apocalyptic-times/.

25 Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, p. 21.

26 Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist (ed.), Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981. See also Susan Petrilli, "Translation and Semiosis. Introduction", in Susan Petrilli (ed.), *Translation*, Amsterdam, Rodopi, 2003, pp. 17-37; "Semioethics and Literary Writing: Between Peirce and Bakhtin", *Language and Semiotic Studies*, vol. 3, n° 1, 2017, pp. 12-29; Mona Baker, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, 2nd edition, London, Routledge, 2011, pp. 274-299.

27 Alexis Wright, "The Big Book About Small Town Australia that Travelled the World", *The Guardian*, 7 September 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2017/sep/08/the-big-book-about-small-town-australia-that-travelled-the-world.

28 Here Sirotti's reference is to the anaphor in grammar, rather than to literary anaphora.

29 In translation studies, *realia* (from Latin language, "real things") are words and compound phrases whose referents are lexical gaps in all the

other languages, because their original referent exists only in one country. See Peeter Torop, *La traduzione totale*, Milan, Hoepli, 2010, p. 226.

30 Alexis Wright, private correspondence with Andrea Sirotti, 28 April 2008.

31 Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-22.

32 See Eleonora Federici, "Translating Counter-Memory in Australian Aboriginal Texts", *op. cit.*, p. 278.

33 Mossop ("Judging a Translation by Its Cover", *op. cit.*, p. 11) suggests that in some cases translators contribute to the book cover design, although in an indirect way: "translators do sometimes provide a summary translation or an even shorter gist translation of a text in another language. Thus if a book cover can be said to convey the 'gist' of the accompanying text, it would seem to count as a translation."

34
The book cover of the 2006 edition was designed by award-winning Australian designer Harry Williamson; the image appearing on the cover of the Italian edition is by Gina Triplett and Matt Curtius, while the design project is by Francesca Leoneschi.
While in the interview Sirotti criticises the difference between the book cover of the original edition of *Carpentaria* and the cover of *I cacciatori di stelle*, Federici ("Translating Counter-Memory in Australian Aboriginal Texts", *op. cit.*, p. 277) claims that *Carpentaria* and its Italian edition are rather similar in the choice of book cover, whilst she points out other paratextual differences: "both present a background landscape with palms and flowers. Yet, while the original title indicates the geographical position of the story – the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Queensland, between the Northern Territory and Cape York Peninsula – the Italian title *I cacciatori di stelle* refers to the story's protagonists. In terms of page layout, the different font used for the beginning of each chapter has been maintained in the Italian translation (though it changed from capitals to italics) and the terms or sentences in italics scattered throughout the text are also present."

35 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, 2008, *op. cit.* pp. 1, 11; *I cacciatori di stelle*, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 23.

36 "Nella mia esperienza, il confronto con gli autori (per e-mail, Skype o, in alcuni casi fortunati, anche di persona) è stato spesso molto fertile e arricchente. Così come lo è, generalmente, il confronto e lo scambio con il revisore incaricato dalla casa editrice, soprattutto se è anche traduttore e

quindi in grado di cogliere appieno le difficoltà del lavoro e le caratteristiche dello stile da riprodurre." Intervista ad Andrea Sirotti, traduttore di letteratura postcoloniale, Tradurre per l'editoria, 20 April 2014, https://lamatitablu.com/2014/04/30/intervista-ad-andrea-sirotti-traduttore-di-letteratura-postcoloniale/.

37 Alexis Wright, private correspondence with Andrea Sirotti, 18 March 2008.

38 "Tradurre è un modo di tornare a casa, più ricchi, dopo il lungo viaggio nel testo." In: Elisabetta Favale, "La mia lettera al mondo di Emily Dickinson. Intervista al traduttore Andrea Sirotti", *Linkiesta*, 24 November 2019, https://www.linkiesta.it/blog/2019/11/la-mia-lettera-al-mondo-di-emily-dickinson-intervista-al-traduttore-an/.

39 The original expression "tradotta per differenza" sounds like a pun. In Italian language, the closest syntagm to this expression is "per sottrazione", that is, "by subtracting". The wordplay relies on the word "differenza": as a matter of fact, "difference" can refer both to the result of an arithmetic operation of subtraction, and to the process or set of properties by which one entity is distinguished from another.

40 "Una traduzione che aspira a farsi portatrice di una fedeltà". Elisabetta Favale, "La mia lettera al mondo di Emily Dickinson", *op. cit.* The volume cited is Emily Dickinson, *La mia lettera al mondo* [trans. Andrea Sirotti], Latiano (BR), Interno Poesia, 2019.

41 Here we refer to Roman Jakobson's seminal definition of dominant as "the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure." Quoted in Peeter Torop, "Translation as Communication and Auto-Communication", *Sign System Studies*, vol. 36, n° 2 ,2008, pp. 375-397, pp. 381-382.

42 Séverine Hubscher-Davidson, *Translation and Emotion: A Psychological Perspective*, New York and London, Routledge, 2018; Caroline Lehr, "Translation, Emotion and Cognition", in Fabio Alves & Arnt Lykke Jakobsen (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Cognition*, London and New York, Routledge, 2021, pp. 294-309; Susan Petrilli & Christine Ji (eds.), *Exploring the Translatability of Emotions: Cross-Cultural and Transdisciplinary Encounters*, Cham, Palgrave, 2022; *Intersemiotic Perspectives on Emotions: Translating across Signs, Bodies and Values*, London and New York, Routledge, 2022.

43 Nonie Sharp, “Review of Carpentaria”, *Island*, n° 111, 2007, pp. 61-62.

44 In this context, the term “minor” is borrowed Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose concept of “minor literature” can also be associated with the phenomenon of Australian Indigenous literature. According to conceptualization of the French critics, the three characteristics of a “minor” literature (or art) are the deterritorialisation of language, the political content and collective enunciation. Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* [transl. Dana Polan], Minneapolis, University of Minnesota, 1986, pp. 16-17. See also Venuti’s “Introduction”, in Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *Translation and Minority*, special issue of *The Translator*, vol. 4, n° 2, 1998, pp. 135-144.

45 “In Italy, too, the main concern is often that the prose be void of lexical ambiguity, and that morphology and syntax be orderly and proper. When translating the text of the Other into one’s own language, instead of receiving the foreign elements of the other culture and the possible deviations from the standard language, the text’s distinctive marks, the stylistic peculiarities, one tends to manipulate the text, repressing innovation […] and making the Other similar to the self”. Franca Cavagnoli, “Translation and Creation in a Postcolonial Context”, *op. cit.*

46 Francesca Di Blasio, Margherita Zanoletti, “Australian Studies and the Reception of Australian Literature and Culture in Italy”, Part 2, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

47 Susan Petrilli & Margherita Zanoletti, “Intersemiotic Approaches to Translation”, in Kobus Marais, Reine Meylaerts (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Translation Theory and Concepts*, London, Routledge, 2022, forthcoming.

48 Brian Mossop, “Judging a Translation by Its Cover”, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

49 Lawrence Venuti (ed.), *Rethinking Translation: Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*, London and New York, Routledge, 1992, pp. 12-13.

RÉSUMÉS

English

In 2008, the literary translator Andrea Sirotti co-translated with Gaetano Luigi Staffilano Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* into Italian, less than two years after the publication of the original. The translation introduced Wright to the Italian public for the first time. However, I cacciatori di stelle

("The Stars Catchers") never achieved the expected commercial success: in fact, it was a sales flop, and for years the Italian translation of the novel, published by Rizzoli, has been almost unavailable on the market.
This interview with Margherita Zanoletti revolves around the genesis and the outcome of the project of translating *Carpentaria* into Italian, offering close micro-readings of the novel as an exemplary instance of polyphonic writing. The discussion touches on the ethical and practical choices related to the translation process, the relationship between the author and the translators, and the editorial intervention of the publisher – from the transformation of the title and the book cover design to the attempts to normalize Wright's distinctly Indigenous Australian style. The interview also aims to emphasise on the one hand, the twofold role of the author as a storyteller and spokesperson for the Indigenous minority and, on the other hand, the role of the translators as readers, interpreters, mediators, and co-authors.

Français

En 2008, le traducteur littéraire Andrea Sirotti a traduit, en collaboration avec Gaetano Luigi Staffilano, le roman de Alexis Wright *Carpentaria* en italien, moins de deux ans après la publication de l'édition originale. La traduction a introduit Wright au public italien pour la première fois. Cependant, *I cacciatori di stelle* ("Les chasseurs d'étoiles") n'a jamais atteint le succès commercial attendu : en effet, les ventes ont été un échec et pendant des années la traduction italienne du roman, publiée par Rizzoli, a été presque introuvable sur le marché.
L'interview de Margherita Zanoletti tourne autour du projet de traduction de *Carpentaria* en italien, son origine et son résultat, en portant une attention particulière au roman comme exemple d'écriture polyphonique. La discussion porte également sur les choix éthiques et pratiques liés au processus de traduction, sur la relation entre auteur et traducteurs, et sur l'intervention de l'éditeur, de la transformation du titre du livre et du design de sa couverture jusqu'aux tentatives de normaliser l'écriture aborigène australienne de Wright. Le but de l'interview est aussi d'accentuer d'un côté le double rôle de l'auteur en tant que narrateur et porte-parole de la minorité indigène et, de l'autre côté, de souligner le rôle des traducteurs comme lecteurs, interprètes, médiateurs et co-auteurs.

INDEX

Mots-clés

traductologie, traduction littéraire, entretien rétrospectif, analyse textuelle, Carpentaria, Wright (Alexis), littérature australienne, Premières nations, traduction italienne, traduction interlinguale

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