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

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Anne Le Guellec-Minel

PLAN

Introduction
Note on authors

TEXTE

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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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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