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

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

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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.

NOTES

1 Alexis Wright and Arnold Zable, "The Future of Swans", *Overland*, n° 213, 2013, 30 June 2016, https://overland.org.au/previous-issues/issue-213/feature-alexis-wright-and-arnold-zable/.

2 *Ibid.*

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

4 Elizabeth A. Martin (ed.), *A Dictionary of Law*, 5th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 469.

5 *Mabo and Others v Queensland* (No. 2) [1992], 107 ALR 1, p. 24.

6 Henry Reynolds, *The Law of the Land*, New ed., Camberwell, Penguin, 2003 [1987], p. 16.

7 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* [ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper], New York, Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 131.

8 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Introduction", in Aileen Moreton-Robinson (ed.), *Sovereign Subjects: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, Crows Nest, Allen & Unwin, 2007, pp. 1-11, p. 3.

9 Kevin Gilbert, *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Justice, the Law and Land*, Canberra, AIATSIS Library, 1988, p. 6.

10 Galarrwuy Yunupingu, "Barunga Statement", in Nicholas Jose (ed.), *The Literature of Australia: An Anthology*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2009, pp. 1147-48, p. 1148.

11 *Mabo and Others*, *op. cit.*

12 Henry Reynolds, "The Judges Judged: Mabo and the Disaffected Historians", *Legal History*, vol. 11, n° 2, 2007, pp. 231-42, p. 231.

13 *Mabo and Others*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

14 Nicole Watson, "What Do We Want? Not Native Title, That's for Bloody Sure", in Gary Foley, Andrew Schaap, Edwina Howell (eds.), *The Aboriginal Tent Embassy: Sovereignty, Black Power, Land Rights and the State*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, pp. 284-98, p. 285.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

16 Ben Silverstein, "Submerged Sovereignty: Native Title within a History of Incorporation", in Julie Evans, Anne Genovese, Alexander Reilly, and Patrick Wolfe (eds.), *Sovereignty: Frontiers of Possibility*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2013, pp. 60-85, p. 62.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 65.

18 Henry Reynolds, "After Mabo, What About Aboriginal Sovereignty?", *Australian Humanities Review*, n °1, 1996, http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/1996/04/01/after-mabowhat-about-aboriginal-sovereignty/.

19 *Ibid.* Sections of italicised text appear in the original of the Uluru Statement where the authors quote directly from other sources, such as the Mabo decision, as is the case here. These sources are named in accompanying documents.

20 *Ibid.*

21 Irene Watson, "Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Are We Free to Roam?", *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, n° 1, 2005, pp. 40-52, pp. 43, 46.

22 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

23 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, London: Constable, 2008 [2006], p. 1. Hereafter, references to the novel will appear between brackets in the body of the text.

24 Jeanine Leane, "Singing the Story of a Country: Reading *Carpentaria* in Twenty-First Century Australia" (keynote address), International Conference: Carpentaria by Alexis Wright, A Self-Governing Literature That Belongs to Place, 19-20 Oct. 2021, Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest, France,19 Oct. 2021.

25 Anne Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty and the Crisis of Whiteness in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*", *Australian Literary Studies*, vol. 25, n° 4, 2010, pp. 85-100, p. 88.

26 Greg Dening, "Deep Times, Deep Spaces: Civilizing the Sea", in Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthum (eds.), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean*, New York, Routledge, 2004, pp. 13-35, p. 15.

27 Lynne Kelly, "Songlines in Sea and Sky", in Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly (eds.), *Songlines: The Power and Promise*, Port Melbourne, Thames and Hudson, 2020, pp. 139-52, p. 139.

28 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 140.

29 Margo Neale, "Knowledge in Country and the Third Archive", in Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly (eds.), *Songlines: The Power and Promise*, Port Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 2020, pp. 45-66, p. 52.

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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

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