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

The Spell of Place in *Carpentaria*

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Christine Vandamme

PLAN

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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

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