

“Mapping *Carpentaria*: Voices, Stories and Journeys of the Gulf Country”

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Introduction: *Carpentaria* as Challenge to Interpretation

Carpentaria was first published in 2006. It is Wright’s second novel, and in 2007 it received the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Since its publication, the novel has elicited an impressive number of interpretive responses: it has been construed as a contribution to a better understanding of indigenous knowledge (Devlin-Glass 392), and as a reflection of the transcultural quality of the region of the Gulf of Carpentaria (Martin, Mead, and Trigger 341); it has been read as an ecofeminist narrative that decolonizes and dismantles imperial and patriarchal structures of oppression (Rigby 123), and as an example of how the modes of the carnivalesque and of magic realism unsettle traditional assumptions about Aboriginal people (Molloy 1); and finally, it has been read self-reflexively, as a novel with a modernist aesthetics whose equivocality, irresolution and uncertainty ought to make non-Aboriginal readers notice and reflect on the irreconcilable differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of doing, knowing and being (Ravenscroft 69–70). The literary power of *Carpentaria* resides in its ability to open up a spectrum of responses without ever confining itself to one. Wright’s second novel resists hermeneutic undertakings, and this literary complexity and quality partly explain its success.

The second reason for the success of *Carpentaria* is that it is also a formidable epic narrative about colonial and capitalist oppression and marginalization, about indigenous resistance and about the intestine strife for land rights. Taking center stage is the coastal town of Desperance, “marked on no map” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 49), its white population of Uptown and its Aboriginal population named the Pricklebush, which is divided into two communities. On Westside, Normal Phantom is a keeper of the Aboriginal Law, which is the “inside knowledge about [the] region [...] handed down through the ages since time began” (2). Normal and his family are said to be the rightful traditional owners of the land (44), and they are reluctant to admitting the authority of the state. On Eastside, Joseph Midnight’s family has taken advantage of the colonial regime to claim ownership of the contested land through Native Title rights.¹ Caught up in the conflict between Eastside and Westside, Normal’s son Will Phantom is an environmental activist who has married Midnight’s daughter Hope. Will is engaged in a sabotaging crusade against the mining company Gurfurrit International, said to be “pillaging the region’s treasure trove” (7).

Orbiting Desperance is a constellation of secondary characters. Elias Smith is an amnesic shipwrecked fisherman of European descent. Friend and spiritual brother of Normal Phantom, Elias is exiled from Desperance after being wrongly accused of burning down the Shire Council, murdered by Gurfurrit International, and used as bait to attract Will Phantom

¹ Following the Mabo courtcase of 1992 and the Native Title Act of 1993, it was recognized that “native land title had largely not been extinguished, that native title rights were enforceable under the common law, and Aboriginal people could assert these rights if they could prove a ‘traditional connection’ with a specific tract of Crown land” (Beinart and Hughes 348).

out of his hideout. Mozzie Fishman is a water diviner and religious zealot who leads a convoy of cars across the Australian continent to reenact the journeys of the ancestral serpent, and who takes in Will Phantom to hide him from Gurfurrit International. One of the few female characters, Angel Day is Normal Phantom's ex-wife and Mozzie's new one; she is stubborn and bad-tempered, and when she paints a statue of Virgin Mary in black and rainbow and gets in a fight over the dump next to Desperance, she accidentally triggers the schism of Eastside and Westside. *Carpentaria* is also riddled with caricatures of colonial power: the mayor of Desperance, the racist, abusive and sadistic Stan Bruiser also happens to be a murderer who has framed three Aboriginal boys for the murder. Bruiser is accompanied by the naïve, lewd and ironically-named Truthful, the town's policeman who repeatedly abuses Normal's daughters.

Carpentaria, however, cannot be summed up neatly by describing its plot or its characters, for its narrative style and aesthetics bring such complexity and depth to the novel that as a result, I argue, the latter can be read as a sung map of the Gulf Country, of its cultures, of its environments, of its peoples and of its histories. The novel both maps and sings the region of the Gulf by presenting a complex juxtaposition and entanglement of meanings: *Carpentaria* is a symphony of voices and stories that come together in the course of reading to produce a polysemous, polyphonic and polymorphic storyworld, the form of which enacts principles of Australian Indigenous ontology and epistemology while subverting colonial and capitalist discourses of oppression, assimilation and marginalization. What is a symphony could easily have been a cacophony, if it were not for the cohesion brought to the novel by the journeys of its Aboriginal characters Normal Phantom, Will Phantom and Mozzie Fishman, which bring together the places of the storyworld and reassert the foundations of Aboriginal ontology and epistemology. Reading *Carpentaria* thus amounts to mapping out the social, cultural, ecological and mythical relations and interactions that constitute the matrix of the Gulf Country. By doing so, reading the novel not only contributes to keeping alive certain aspects of Aboriginal Country, Dreaming and Law,² but it also gives their voices back to the silenced populations marginalized by the imperial invasion of Australia.

Singing and Mapping

In light of Australian Indigenous understandings of the relationship between story, being and place, it is not incongruous to read *Carpentaria* as both map and music, as cartography and song. As the anthropologist Howard Morphy explains, Aboriginal depictions of the mythical journey of ancestral beings can be understood as maps, for artistic representations—be they paintings, drawings, songs, or stories—are first and foremost “representations of [a] totemic geography” (106). Alexis Wright herself explains that one of her intentions was “to write the novel as though it was a very long melody of different forms of music, somehow mixed with the voices of the Gulf” (“On Writing *Carpentaria*” 9). She continues and explains that the novel captures the “heartbeat of the Gulf of Carpentaria,” which is “alive,” “belong[ing] to

² Country, Dreaming, and Law have specific meanings in an Aboriginal Australian context. “Country” denotes a living matrix of relationships that connects beings, spirits and features of the ecosystem. “Law” encompasses the knowledge of how to interact with the environment, with the spirits and with other people. “Dreaming” denotes the journeys of ancestral beings that have fashioned the landscape, its features, its inhabitants and their customs. For more information, see Deborah Rose’s *Nourishing Terrain*.

the here and now,” “stronger and enduring even while tortured and scarred through and through” (12). The story of *Carpentaria*, she continues, “does not only come from colonisation or assimilation, [...] but is sung [...] from those of our ancestors who wrote our stories on the walls of caves and on the surface of weathered rock” (12). Reading the novel is like hearing the voice of Country mapping its own creation. This literary mode blurs—when it does not erase altogether—the ontological boundaries between story, body and ecology, and it celebrates the entanglement of Law, Country and Dreaming in storytelling.

The cartographic and musical nature of *Carpentaria* is present at both ends of the narrative. The novel indeed opens with the capitalized sentence “A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*” (1), which sarcastically and subtly points to how colonial discourse and the myth of the Nation have erased the history of Aboriginal presence in Australia and have invaded the consciousness of Aboriginal people. The capitalized account is immediately followed by a story of the “ancestral serpent” creating the rivers of the Gulf Country (1) and leaving its essence “under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers” (2), thereby “permeat[ing] everything” and “attach[ing itself] to the lives of the river people like skin” (2). This story of origin is also a journey of creation that connects the mythology, geography, geology and society of the Gulf of Carpentaria and grounds them in an Aboriginal epistemic mode. By telling the Australian Indigenous story of the serpent immediately after sarcastically mentioning the colonial myth of the Nation in capital letters, Wright makes clear that *Carpentaria* is both a critique of colonialism *and* a reaffirmation of Australian Indigenous cultures, both a map of the effects of colonial history *and* a song of the multiple voices and of the various ecological practices that compose the Gulf of Carpentaria.

This twofold creative process of mapping and singing the Gulf Country is dramatized at the end of the novel. In the opening, the colonial myth of the Nation and the ancestral being’s creation of the land are two distinct processes, but at the end of the novel, the creative journey of the ancestral being coincides with a destruction of the embodiment of colonialism, *i.e.* the city of Desperance. Two episodes show this. The first depicts the tension between colonial history and Aboriginal mythology. When Will Phantom witnesses the obliteration of Desperance by a cyclone, the text characterizes the “Gods mov[ing] the country” (415) and destroying “everything man had ever done” (415) as a “catastrophic requiem” (416), thereby connoting the ancestral beings’ refashioning of the Gulf during their journey as a musical performance. The second episode takes place in the ultimate paragraphs of the book, when Normal Phantom and his grandson Bala go back to Desperance after the cyclone. As they walk, they “listen to the mass choir of frogs – green, grey, speckled, striped, big and small, dozens of species all assembled around the two seafarers” (438). Then, the narrator adds that in this phase following the destruction engineered by the cyclone, “there was so much song wafting off the water land, singing the country afresh” (438). The novel thus ends with the reaffirmation that Country has voice and agency and that these features are expressed in song and ecology. The *tabula rasa* of the end of the novel, from the linear Euro-Australian perspective of the white population of Desperance is considered destruction, but in the Aboriginal voice of the narrator, it is merely another song cycle that perpetuates the journeys of the ancestral beings who have created the features of the Gulf.

Framing the beginning and end of the novel with the twofold process of singing and mapping the land establishes *Carpentaria* as a prominent instance of a new literary mode that artistically combines Aboriginal conceptions of stories, bodies and environment: a literary mode of the Dreaming and the Law. The novel is indeed grounded in the “social and historical and earthed reality” (Devlin-Glass 392) of the Gulf of Carpentaria. As such, the narrative contains some secret-and-sacred aspects of Aboriginal cultures—inaccessible to non-initiated readers—but it also contains colonial and postcolonial traits of Euro-Australian communities: the novel is indeed a tangle of cultural traditions (Martin, Mead, and Trigger 332), and this polyvocality, which is inherent in the Gulf of Carpentaria, is made overt in *Carpentaria* by the juxtaposition of a multiplicity of narrative voices. Ultimately, as I will show in the three sections below, the multiplicity of voices and stories is given coherence by the protagonists’ journeys and their struggle the neoliberal regime enforced by the transnational mining company Gurfurrit.

Voices of the Gulf

In *Carpentaria*, the narrator’s voice is powerful and knowledgeable, wise and cynical, and Wright herself describes it as that of “some old Aboriginal person” (Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*” 11). However, in the novel are inscribed numerous indigenous and non-indigenous voices, languages and cultural narratives, and the text draws attention to these juxtapositions of perspectives. On numerous occasions, Wright makes use of italics to signal a change of voice, tone or the use of Aboriginal languages, or to mark emphasis, imitation, parody, or sarcasm. More importantly, the shifts in voices that italics signal draw attention to the polyvocal nature of the work and of the region it depicts. In an episode of the beginning of the novel, on the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the port of Desperance, the mining company and the city authorities decide to rename the river from a “long deceased Imperial Queen” to “Normal’s River” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 8). However, the ceremony is not greeted with much enthusiasm by the local population:

Traditional people gathered up for the event mumbled, *Ngabarn, Ngabarn, Mandagi*, and so did Normal in a very loud and sour-sounding voice over the loudspeaker in his extremely short thankyou address, although those who knew a fruit salad full of abuse in the local languages knew he was not saying *Thank you! Thank You!* and belly-laughed themselves silly because the river only had one name from the beginning of time. It was called *Wangala*. (8)

This episode is particularly representative of the text’s representation of the colonial and capitalist authorities. By ridiculing the ceremony of renaming, not only does the narrator expose the wooing strategy of the city of Desperance, but she also shows that the Pricklebush are perfectly aware of the mining company’s transparent manoeuvre. This is made explicit when the narrator presents Normal’s sarcastic comment “*Ngabarn, Ngabarn, Mandagi*” as being interpreted as a “thankyou address” by those who do not know the local language, while also noting that those who are initiated to the local culture perceive it as an insult. More importantly, renaming the river is described as a ridiculous political attempt at gaining Normal’s support for the mining project. This shows that the mining and state authorities are not aware of or do not care about Normal’s role as holder of the Law. As custodian of the

land, he knows well that the river's name cannot be changed by the state. This strategy of ridiculing colonial naming is part of Wright's counterdiscourse of resistance: instead of falling prey to victimry,³ the narrator uses humor to subvert the monological imposition of European names onto country. By opening a gap in the discourse, symbolized by the non-translated use of Waanyi language, the text reverses the configuration of power: it translates a transparent colonial practice into an opaque Aboriginal counterdiscursive practice. The narrator thus reasserts the presence of Aboriginal language and its continuous connection to the features of the land, all the while mocking the inability of colonialism and capitalism to understand the socioecological situation of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

The text also parodies Euro-Australian depictions of Australian Aboriginals. For instance, in order to rescue Will Phantom from the mining company, Mozzie Fishman and his men set fire to the pipeline. At this moment, the narrator's voice becomes one of Mozzie's man's and reads:

What a turnout. Gee whiz! We were in really serious stuff now. We were burning the white man's very important places and wasting all his money. We must have forgotten our heads. We were really stupid people to just plumb forget like – because the white man was a very important person who was very precious about money. Well! He was the boss. We are not boss. He says he likes to be boss. He says he's got all the money. Well! We haven't got the money neither. And now, all it took was a simple flick. A flick, flick, here and there with a dirt-cheap cigarette lighter, and we could have left the rich white people who owned Gurfurrirt mine, destitute and dispossessed of all they owned.

Straight out we should have been asking ourselves – Why are you not hanging your head in shame to the white man? We were supposed to say, Oh! No! You can't do things like that to the, umm, beg your pardon, please and thankyou, to the arrr, em, WHITE MAN. (344)

In this passage, there is a double appropriation at play: the narrator takes up the voice of a character who is himself mimicking the patronizing and paternalist talk of a homogenized “WHITE MAN” who regards Aboriginal people as primitive and submissive. The boundary between the written and the oral, between the diegetic and the extradiegetic, between the indigenous and the foreign dissolve, which reveals that in the region of the Gulf of Carpentaria identity is not fixed and is not a discrete category that can be easily delineated. On the contrary, as Martin *et al.* suggest, “[i]dentity in the Gulf Country is not just ‘Black’ or ‘White’ but rather mirrored between local understandings of Aboriginality and Whiteness and other identities in complex relations of mimesis and alterity” (341–342). In the episode above, the intricate juxtaposition of various identities in one narrative voice enacts this unstable mirroring.

³ The Anishinaabe writer and critic Gerald Vizenor explains that “victimry” is a representation of indigenous people as passive victims of a tragic and inescapable colonial narrative. Those who fall prey to victimry are merely enacting, and thus promoting, a simulacrum of indigenous identity created by the colonizers. For more information, see his book *Native Liberty: Natural Reason and Cultural Survivance*, published in 2009 with University of Nebraska Press.

The juxtaposition of voices also manifests itself when the Aboriginal population critically appraises the value of Euro-Australian scientific or technical knowledge. For instance, the geographical map that defines the boundaries of the town of Desperance is described as “gammon” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 50), for it is “invisibly defined on the surface of the earth by old surveying methods” (51). The abstract and arbitrary limits of the town are indeed contrasted with the way the Pricklebush perceive “huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town, even inside other folk’s house, right across any piece of the country” (50). In this passage, geographic discourse is transposed into an Aboriginal mode of knowing, and therefore becomes irrelevant. The text operates a reversal in the authority of knowledge, and this reversal is echoed by Wright’s use of Aboriginal stories and storytelling techniques within the main narrative.

Stories of the Gulf

In *Carpentaria*, Aboriginal stories occupy the crucial function of structuring the production of the storyworld. The opening story of the ancestral serpent’s journey is particularly revealing of this: the narrator makes use of an oral mode to depict this moment of creation, which took place “billions of years ago” (1), and with the use of grammar she draws attention to the very event of storytelling: after saying that the serpent “moved graciously” (1), the narrator adds a dash followed by the phrase “if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground” (1). Here, the use of the second-person singular positions the narrator’s audience within the storyworld, above the land being created, literally giving them a bird’s-eye view of the event, which is reminiscent of traditional Aboriginal paintings. This immersion through language is made even more salient in the second paragraph, when the narrator, with the use of imperative, consonance and alliteration invites the audience to “[p]icture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys” (1). This poetic use of language makes more vivid and immersive the creation of the Gulf by the serpent, thereby drawing the reader *into* the storyworld. Poetic language brings the story to life, while breathing life into the storyworld: the audience is indeed asked to “[i]magine the serpent’s breathing rhythms as the tide flows inland” (2).

Prefiguring the polyvocal aesthetics of the novel, which juxtaposes and contrasts Aboriginal and colonial voices, the first chapter then provides a story that accounts for the socioeconomic situation of the Gulf. Appropriating the voice of the Euro-Australian population of Uptown, the narrator describes the Pricklebush community as a “foreign infestation on the edge of Desperance” (3), and offers an alternative colonial story of origin, in which “[t]he descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said *the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all [and] was dumped here by the pastoralists because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages*” (4). The difference of scale between the Aboriginal and colonial stories of origin is striking: if the former spans “billions of years” (1) and accounts for the geological creation of the Gulf over deep time, the latter is only a couple of centuries old. The place of Aboriginal people is substantially

different in both stories as well. In the story of the serpent, the spiritual essence of the serpent is “attached to river people like skin” (2), which renders the very existence of the indigenous population an embodiment of the ancestor’s act of creation. This connection with the ancestral serpent therefore entails claims of belonging that, as the chapter title suggests, exist “from time immemorial” (1). In contrast, the Euro-Australian voice is not only tainted with racism (the homogenization of indigenous peoples with the use of the singular “*the* Aboriginal”), but denies the Pricklebush claims of belonging by describing “the Aboriginal” as a leftover from a colonial era, a relic of the past, and this argument is then used to justify their marginalization. If the text juxtaposes Aboriginal stories and colonial history, the sarcastic tone of the Aboriginal narrator clearly favors the former over the latter in a counter-narrative move that unsettles the imperialist discourse while reaffirming the validity of Aboriginal oral storytelling.

Aboriginal stories underlie the geological and historical processes that have given rise to the storyworld of *Carpentaria* in the past, but they also structure the meteorology of the Gulf Country in the present. Set during Normal’s sea journey to bury his close friend Elias Smith murdered by the transnational mining company Gurfurrit, the beginning of chapter 9 opens with a short narrative that explains the origin of the upcoming cyclone: “Oh! Magic big time. A land full of tricks. The sea full of spirits. Poor land woman devil Gardajala. The sea woman, whose name must not be mentioned because she might be listening, far out at sea, was spinning herself into a jealous rage” (233). The cyclone is thus a manifestation of the combat between two spiritual women caught up in a jealous relationship. The four fragments at the beginning of the quote ground the story in an Aboriginal mode of knowing, and the absence of verb in these suggest that the combat between land woman and sea woman is a general truth.

Stories structure the storyworld of *Carpentaria*, but they also inform the characterization of Aboriginal people. The text says of elders who hold the Aboriginal Law that they keep “a library chock-a-block full of stories of the old country stored in their heads” (207). The exchange of stories, the narrator continues, is considered “*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” (207). Stories therefore structure Aboriginal persons’ interaction with their social, physical and spiritual environment.

Stories also function as catalysts that move the plot forward. A practical application of stories to propel the plot takes place when Joseph Midnight gives Will Phantom the directions to find Hope and Bala’s hideout, thereby allowing Will to attempt to rescue them. These directions take the form of a “blow-by-blow description sung in song, unraveling a map to a Dreaming place he [Joseph] had never seen” (316). This passage lays bare the entanglement of song, map and journey in Aboriginal ways of knowing; it also makes plain how the trading of stories permit persons from different groups with different agendas to act towards a common goal. In this example, the common goal is the love between Will and Hope, which translates, in the allegorical mode of the novel, into *the will to find hope*. This allegory is at the core of Will Phantom’s fight against the mining company, and at the core of Alexis Wright’s attempt to escape the “typical, pathological, paternalist viewpoint from which Australia typically portrays Indigenous people – as pathetic welfare cases unable to take care

of [them]selves” (“On Writing *Carpentaria*” 7). Indeed, by giving Aboriginal characters⁴ the agency to act upon the storyworld in substantial ways, the novel goes beyond a reductive view of indigenous populations. This non-reductive characterization manifests itself first and foremost in the form of journeys.

Journeys of the Gulf

In *Carpentaria*, journeys occupy a central place in the plot and in the production of the storyworld, but they also bring coherence to the multiplicity of voices and stories. Journeys expand the world of the story and inscribe the text in a continental geography by connecting the city of Desperance to the rest of Australia, including the surrounding seas and islands. The novel is composed of several journeys,⁵ among which are Normal Phantom’s sea journey to offer a traditional burial ceremony to his friend Elias Smith, Mozzie Fishman’s land journey to militate for land rights, and Will Phantom’s land and sea journey to find Hope and Bala and rescue them from the mining company. The motivations behind each of these journeys are inscribed in a larger struggle against colonialism and its successor capitalism, but they are also grounded in an Aboriginal mode of being in which journeys partake of the continuation and reaffirmation of the ontological connections between Law, Country and Dreaming.

Mozzie Fishman’s journey across the continent of Australia begins when he first protests against the mining industry and its settlement upon his grandfather’s land, twenty years before the main events of the story (115). The media attention given to his land rights activism transforms him in the public opinion into a spiritual leader, which is seen critically by the narrator. Mozzie’s journey is indeed described as a “never-ending travelling cavalcade of religious zealots” (100).⁶ Despite this criticism of the person, however, Mozzie’s undertaking is described in a positive way, as the text explains that he and his men are “[b]earers of the feared secret Law ceremony [that] continued an ancient religious crusade along the spiritual travelling road of the great ancestor, whose journey continues to span the entire continent and is older than time itself” (100). In their travelling, Mozzie and his men follow the tracks left by the ancestral serpent’s Dreaming during its production of the Gulf, thereby contributing to the preservation of Country and the traditional knowledge of the Law. In their journey, they also participate in a rewriting of the colonial space by reconnecting “every desert in the continent” (104), “isolated back roads” (104), “isolated communities” (105) into a network of places grounded in the ancestral serpent’s creative journey. It is important to note that, due to the entanglement of journey and story, the rewriting of the colonial narrative is literal, and the text makes this clear as it defines the “crossing of the continent [as] a rigorous Law, laid down piece by piece in a book of another kind covering thousands of kilometres” (104). This passage is more than a comparison between story and

⁴⁴ It is important to note that in *Carpentaria*, these characters are mostly males. Wright’s next novel, *The Swan Book*, features an Aboriginal female protagonist.

⁵ Worth noting are also Mozzie’s land journey to bury his son after the latter has been murdered by Bruiser (366-377)

⁶ The narrator’s cynical attitude vis-à-vis Mozzie is characteristic of the novel’s overall distrust of Aboriginal leaders. This can also be seen in Wright’s next novel *The Swan Book*, with the ambivalent figure of Warren Finch, who is both a savior of the Aboriginal world and a tormentor of the protagonist Oblivia.

journey, for the journey *is* the story, and Country *is* a material book, albeit one not written in verbal language, but rather one made up as a “matrix of communicative inter-action” (Rose, “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism” 100). By journeying across Australia, Mozzie and his men are therefore retracing the lines and tracks of the ancestral serpent’s ecological and spiritual text.

Normal Phantom’s journey on the waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria to bury his friend Elias Smith is an important episode of the plot. It is during this journey that Normal chances upon his grandson Bala, and takes him back to safety, thereby preserving a glimmer of hope for the future of the region, the child being the link that will reunite the Eastside and Westside communities. But the sea journey is also a way of marking the syncretism of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures in contemporary Australia. Elias Smith is of European descent, but he is well-integrated in the Pricklebush community, so well that Normal even believes that Elias’s home is the same place as the “spirit world, where the congregations of the great gropers journeying from the sky to the sea were gathered” (199). In taking Elias—who has been murdered by the mining company—back to a final resting place that happens to be on a sacred Aboriginal site, Normal’s journey signals the necessity of acknowledging the transcultural nature of the Gulf Country. To the colonial and capitalist discourses that separate Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, the sequence of events proposed in this episode dramatizes the connections between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in the Gulf.

Normal’s sea journey also permits the reader to immerse more fully into the storyworld of *Carpentaria*. The text details his interaction with the environment in minute ways, thereby offering an insight into the traditional ecological knowledge of the indigenous population of the Gulf. Normal’s skills at fishing and wayfinding are indeed given much emphasis, and the text often makes use of poetic devices to render his experience more vivid. For instance, while looking at the sea to check whether his fishing lines have caught something, Normal sees a manta ray, which is characterized as his “companion” (204). As he watches the “prolonged movement of the suspended ray,” Normal becomes “intoxicated” by the fact that the “creature moved so tantalizingly slowly by suspending itself in the drift of tidal movement” (205). Normal is hypnotized by the ray to the point that his “vision slipped into and out of the waters, breaking the surface so many times, he became lost in time” (205). Here form and content enrich each other as Normal’s state of mind is echoed by the rhythm of the passage. At first, the episode is described with a profusion of multisyllabic adjectives and adverbs that connote slowness, but gradually as the calm and meditative observation becomes frenetic confusion, long words are replaced by short ones, adjectives are omitted, and the tempo accelerates until reaching a climax where space and time, air and water, body and environment, man and animal seem to become one. As Normal is drawn into his environment, so is the reader drawn into the storyworld through poetics and empathy.

The third journey that brings coherence to the storyworld is the one where Will Phantom, after being rescued from the mining company by Mozzie’s men, decides to go back to Desperance to find out about his son Bala’s whereabouts. This journey “into the wall of the cyclone” (386), a “towering blackness of clouds” (386), constitutes the climax of the novel

during which Will witnesses how the town of Desperance and “the order of man” (415) are washed away by the cyclonic embodiment of the ancestral beings. During this journey back to Desperance, Will is surrounded “[a]ll day and night [by] the wind play[ing] ancestor music” (387) as it moves over sea and land countries, its “magnificent hand [...] push [ing] into [Will’s] back, and its song whistl[ing] in his ears like a devil, and into his mind” (387). The difficulty of walking through the misty hills and against the threatening winds, however, is countered by Will’s traditional ecological knowledge of the area:

He saw through all this, navigating the atmosphere, like a fish, where predetermined knowledge dwelled from a world full of memories, told, retold, thousand upon a thousand times from the voices of all times, through his father’s voice. ‘A homeland,’ a great creation site covering these hills, ‘this is the story of...’ that somehow, Will felt, was creating the tension he felt in the air. (389)

In this sequence of events, the wind’s musical cacophony and the mist’s veiling of the environment are overcome by the stories inherited from previous generations and ingrained into Will’s consciousness by his father Normal. What is most striking however is the fact that the “predetermined knowledge” that enables Will to cross the hills resides and arises from Country itself and is channeled through storytelling. A corollary of this formulation is that journey, story and Country are to be conceived as coemergent. The stories of the ancestral beings’ Dreamings that have produced Country are being sung by Country, and the journey across Country is informed by these stories at the same time as it actualizes them and keeps them alive. In this episode, Will’s journey into the cyclone—initiated by his struggle against the mining company and his search for Bala—therefore reveals the entanglement of story, Dreaming, body and Country and inscribes this principle of Aboriginal ontology into an environmental and postcolonial counterdiscourse of resistance against colonialism and capitalism.

Conclusion

When *Carpentaria* came out in 2006, it was Alexis Wright’s most accomplished novel. Its evocation of the multiplicity of voices, stories and journeys that make up the Gulf Country is epic, and so are its plot and storyworld. The complex aesthetics at work in the text is reminiscent of the socioeconomic and ecological aspects of the Gulf, but it is also grounded in Wright’s understanding of Aboriginal epistemology and ontology and in her critical attitude towards European imperialism. There is indeed a tension that is created by the rhetorical prowess of the Aboriginal storyteller-narrator and her inclusion—through appropriation, mimicry, sarcasm and parody—of colonial and capitalist narratives. This tension is resolved, I have argued, by the journeys of the protagonists Normal Phantom, Will Phantom and Mozzie Fishman, which crystallize and reconcile Wright’s postcolonial counterdiscourse and her conception of Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being. This reading of the novel suggests that Aboriginal resistance against the colonial and capitalist regimes cannot exist without the combined action of voices, stories and journeys. By extension, Aboriginal systems of knowledge and ways of life can be preserved and promoted only through a poetics that takes account of the entanglement of Dreaming, Country and Law, and that deploys its effects in all compartments of the narrative system. *Carpentaria* does just

that: by expressing the voice of a strong Aboriginal storyteller, by making plain the tangle of colonial, postcolonial and Aboriginal stories that populate the Gulf Country, and by dramatizing indigenous resistance in the journeys of its protagonists, the text informs us that *we do not know the story already*, and rather invites us to pause and hear out how the “ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 1) to shape the region of Carpentaria and the storyworld of *Carpentaria*.

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