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<i>ADDITIONAL NOTES</i>	

Alexis Wright's Storytelling Novel and its "particular kind of knowledge"

By Brenda Machosky

A great storyteller will always be rooted in the people.

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1985,101)

The audience I had in my mind while writing Carpentaria was the ancestors of our traditional country. I concentrated on the way our people speak to country and each other. In that way, it always felt as though I was writing a story to the old people about the complexities and bravery of our world today but also, by linking the past and the present in this way, I was bringing the ancestral realm into a story of all times.

Alexis Wright, "The big book about small town Australia that travelled the world" (2017)

The genre of the novel is now so ubiquitous that its defining feature of "newness" is often overlooked. Everyone knows what a novel is... until faced with a novel that is true to its form and does something new and different. In its truest form, by being new, the novel is a genre of resistance. It is defined by its origins as a new form, against the structured formula of epic, the compressed intensity of lyric, the episodic structure of novella, and written predominantly in the vernacular languages, presaged by the ballad of the French troubadours, the romance, and especially the nouvelle. With each new appropriation, the novel genre resists what had come before and establishes a new form. In the hands of an Indigenous writer, like Alexis Wright, the novel in English becomes something quite different despite its familiar characteristics. When teaching novels by Wright, and also Kim Scott (another major Aboriginal writer), I have found that my students at the University of Hawai'i often have trouble, especially at the start of the book, because it is both familiar and unfamiliar, particularly in its use of language and style. The English language is clear,

but the way it is used, the rhetorical strategies, are just different enough to be unsettling. As a genre, the novel can be simultaneously widely accessible and highly protective of secrets. Because it is both commonly familiar and daringly flexible, the novel has become a popular genre for Indigenous writers (along with other marginalized peoples) seeking to tell their stories.¹ Traditional and Indigenous cultures all have a foundation in storytelling, usually in oral form. The stories held and shared by official storytellers, like the griots of Africa and the Caribbean, are complex and multilayered, as were the lengthy epics and sagas of early cultures like those of Greece, India, and Iceland. In considering Alexis Wright's massive and complex novel *Carpentaria*, it is essential to remember and acknowledge its roots in story, not simply a narrative but a complex interrelation of peoples; not only a narrative but also a history from the current moment to the unfathomable past; not merely a narrative but a conveyer of traditional law and lore within what is called Dreaming. In this expanded sense of story is all of the knowledge of a people, past—present—future—timeless. By reading *Carpentaria*, the non-Indigenous audience is exposed to what the novel itself refers to as this “particular kind of knowledge” (3), which is challenging and rewarding—if we open ourselves to it. To read this novel in its newness is to not appropriate what is different into what is familiar, to not make the novel assimilate into what we expect of the genre, but rather to dwell in its fringe and its difference, and to enter into an experience of the particular knowledge it shares.

The novel serves Wright as a genre of resistance and challenge to the imperial view of her world. As a work of fiction, it allows her to tell the truth of her world, too, the world grounded in land and water, and secured in the law and lore of the Dreaming.² She shows the harsh reality of the fringe dwellers, who exist throughout Australia, often literally near the rubbish tips (as with the Pricklebush), which are often built (as in *Desperance*) on traditional sacred ground. The characters in this novel present and represent the Aboriginal people who are excluded from the white communities that have settled onto their lands, people who are targets of racism and

¹ A brief, cross-cultural sampling: African-American writers James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison; Caribbean francophone novelist Maryse Condé; African writers Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o; Maghrebian francophone writer, Abdelkebir Khatibi; and exiled Indian writer Salman Rushdie. And, many contemporary Indigenous writers in Australia (Alexis Wright, Kim Scott), Aotearoa/New Zealand (Patricia Grace, Keri Hulme, Alan Duff), and the Pacific Islands (Sia Figiel, Albert Wendt) and Hawai'i (Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Milton Murayama).

² On the complexity and problematics of the term “Dreaming” see Brenda Machosky “Allegory and the work of Aboriginal Dreaming/Law/Lore” in *Allegory Studies: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Vladimir Brljak (Routledge, 2021).

discrimination, and who have had their lands stolen by the government and degraded by mining companies. The devious and pervasive power of capitalist industry is represented in the mine generally, but specifically through its treatment of the youngest and most delicate Phantom boy, Kevin, who does not even survive a single day below, and the assassination of Elias Smith and the desecration of his body as a lure to ensnare Will Phantom (Private Enemy Number One of the Corporation). The ability of Will to become invisible in the land, to outsmart the technical superiority of the mine, and his accumulation of traditional knowledge from his various elders, exposes the novel's non-Indigenous readers to a truth that most can only contemplate in a work of fiction.³ This essay will show how *Carpentaria* uses a strategy of mixed narratives together with the literary strategy of allegory to express a particular knowledge which cannot simply be said. This particular kind of knowledge must be related and told as a story.

Mixed Narratives of a Storytelling Novel

Narrative style has perhaps the greatest effect on the reader of a novel, often determining within the first few pages if a reader wants to continue spending time with a particular book. Novels that are new and different demand more of a potential reader. Alexis Wright does not give readers an easy start. The novel begins with an all caps, strange vignette about a nation, a church, and “LITTLE BLACK GIRLS FROM A DISTANT COMMUNITY”, sent to church, who “COME BACK HOME” to announce the beginning of Armageddon (1). This beginning might seem cryptic to some readers, but it demonstrates a feature of storytelling noted by Walter Benjamin, in that this brief story “does not expend itself” and resists explanation. In this way, the story retains its power over generations, even centuries (Benjamin 1985,90). It is from Benjamin that I get the idea of a “storytelling novel,” a novel that borrows from traditions of oral story and community, resisting the isolation of creation and reading that typifies the novel (according to Benjamin). In this first chapter called “From time immemorial,” what follows this generally representative account of an unfortunately common experience for Aboriginal people being

³ Will's power to become one with the land and become invisible is most clearly articulated when mine workers, including his brothers Donny and Inso, come down in the rain to look for him. There is a rich description of how he uses animal tracks to become like the fauna, is able to dodge the arcs of torches by blending with the flora, and even able, somehow, to block these mine-complicit brothers, from his nearby thoughts. They should be able to perceive Will's presence. It remains ambiguous if have been co-opted by the mine's mentality, are simply lazy and hungry, or are letting their brother go undetected. See p. 169-74.

removed from their lands, is the ancient Aboriginal story of Carpentaria. This story of a serpent Dreaming is familiar to most Aboriginal peoples⁴, and relates specifically to a river that makes a choice to change course, land-locking the port that had defined the settler town of Desperance at its founding. “In one moment, during a Wet season early in the last century, the town lost its harbour when the river simply decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometres” (3). The white settlers had first tried to use the water by establishing a port; and when the water denied them, they ripped into the land with a mine. The book is about the land and the sea chasing them off, protecting itself.

In order to tell this story, Wright must use a variety of narrative and discursive strategies. The most immediate effect, as in the first chapter, is to unsettle and disorient the reader. (I wonder if these disruptive and unfamiliar strategies are intended to force on the reader the experience of peoples who bore the brunt of colonization everywhere, not understanding the language or the intention or the sense of the foreign force.⁵) Throughout the novel, the sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic shifts in discursive style force the reader to keep paying attention, to keep listening. At the same time, there is so much going on in the novel, with long digressions into episodes that are relevant but also autonomous, that to read *Carpentaria* is less a matter of tracking a plot and more a mode of hearing someone tell a story. Alexis Wright is a storyteller as a novelist, and that is why, at first, *Carpentaria* is a challenge for today’s audience to read. As Benjamin argues, the art of storytelling is no longer common. Further, the mode of story telling does not translate easily to dead letters on a page, although Wright has succeeded. It is why this novel is called “an epic” in many critical reviews. It is not epic because it is long; it is epic

⁴ “Aboriginal peoples” is my preferred way of referencing Australia’s Indigenous population because it recognizes the distinctions between the peoples of different Countries (proprietary lands) and resists the colonial terminology of “Aboriginal” which implies a homogenous “pan-Aboriginality.” At the time of British contact, there were at least 250 distinct Indigenous languages (not dialects) across Australia, indicating at least that many different peoples across the continent. Many Aboriginal peoples have accepted this term, Aboriginal (although Aborigine is generally considered derogatory), but as will become clear in the course of this essay, language matters, and whenever possible it is preferred to refer to an Aboriginal person by her or his Country and people. Alexis Wright is from Waanyi Country and people.

⁵ Kamau Brathwaite, Caribbean poet, cultural theorist, and historian (originally from Barbados), pursued a linguistic, rhetorical, and even aesthetic layout that intentionally put non-Caribbean English readers of his poetry at an uncomfortable disadvantage. He refused to provide glossaries to his poetry collections and forced English readers to contend with the “nation language” of the Caribbean, a language with similarities to imperial English but with its own vocabulary, cadence, style, “the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean... the language of slaves and labourers” (Brathwaite 1993,260) and the process of writing poetry with “a process of using English in a different way from the norm” (259).

because it is a story full of stories, and each kind of story has its own kind of narrative, and the whole is a weave of stories.

However, this novel is not like an epic because the narrator does not remain objective, reporting from outside the narrative, as in the Homeric tradition. If one had to assign a narrative style, it might be with the catch-all category of “omniscient narrator” and an indirect style of discourse. The omniscient narrator knows everything and adds a subjective perspective while maintaining a kind of distance, telling things to the reader without really getting involved. But, Wright’s narrative is not strictly omniscient either. A storyteller shares the experience of the story; even when telling something rather objectively, she creates an experience that is shared with her audience. This is one of Walter Benjamin’s primary characteristics of storytellers: they have the “ability to share experiences” (Benjamin 1985, 83) and to convey wisdom (86-7), which is more than knowledge. Benjamin laments the loss of communicable experience through storytelling, and he writes “The Storyteller” to draw attention to its rare instances in time of the novel and the age of information. Benjamin, I think, would find a poignant storyteller in Alexis Wright.

Carpentaria is composed of mixed narrative form, mixed narrative perspective, and a broadly conceived style of free indirect discourse. The rhetorical strategy of free indirect discourse, where the third person narration shifts into (and out of) an indirect first person perspective provides a way to consider Wright’s narrative style. In works like Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* and novels by Jane Austen, free indirect discourse adds an ambivalence to the text. Analyzing free indirect discourse in Flaubert and the film adaptations of *Madame Bovary*, Colin Gardner notes the effect of free indirect discourse as the mix of two distinct discursive events, the narrator alongside the character. In the hand of Flaubert, this mixing “can often take the form of two styles, two languages [*parole*], two voices, two semantic and axiological systems” (591). If we transpose this articulation from individual characters to the novel overall, there can be many more than two styles, languages, voices, systems. In *Madame Bovary*, Gardner notes how free indirect discourse creates “a defamiliarization of the discourse that opens up a space for critical exploration” and observes “that which is stated in free indirect speech is actually neither Emma’s nor Flaubert’s specific voice but that of *language* itself” (590-1). I suggest this applies more broadly to Wright’s *Carpentaria*, where language announces itself as story, as the mixture of multiple stories expressed in multiple discursive styles. As he moves to an analysis of film, Gardner

concludes that the defamiliarizing strategy of free indirect discourse creates a space in which the phenomenal world can be expressed in its complexity and its truth: “What we have discovered, in fact, is an artistic methodology that believes that the truth of the phenomenal world is ideally revealed in (linguistic) artistic expression” (Gardner 2017, 591). Gardner’s purpose is to explore the effects of free indirect discourse in film, but this fundamental observation can be applied to *Carpentaria* as a novel of mixed narratives that reveals the phenomenal worlds of Aboriginal existence.

Wright occasionally incorporates free indirect discourse, although it is not often into the mind of a specific character but into the *knowing* of the Pricklebush people. As Elias Smith leaves Desperance, forced into exile for acts everyone knows he did not commit (but it was easier to say he did), Norm Phantom watches Elias walk across the mud flats, unable to move himself. Meanwhile, the whites are watching the enforcement of their law. And then a voice wonders:

What was a good law or bad law, huh? Nobody, particularly Pricklebush, could just go out there, and say things to Elias, such as — Don't go! The Pricklebush knew how rights were minuscule. How could anybody, even somebody like Norm Phantom, interfere with the boundaries of someone's fate? You want to be called a troublemaker, Norm? (92)

This is clearly not the Uptown whites, not Norm, but then the narrator eases back in, making a more objective observation but in close empathy to the mysterious indirect thinker. “Everyone was pleased enough to accept his or her own fate from the natural flowing dominating law of white governance” (92). Readers often miss the inherent ambiguity of free indirect discourse, too easily presuming attribution to a specific character. The ambivalence of the strategy is overwritten by being resolved. One could attribute the above “thoughts” to Norm, chastising himself, standing there unable to move, but it’s not Norm. The rhetorical effect of free indirect discourse is that of an ambiguity that is allowed to remain ambiguous. Wright adapts this technique and amplifies it in *Carpentaria*, from the microlevel of characters to the macrolevel of the story. The style of free indirect discourse allows the narrative voice to slide not only between characters but also to moments past and present, to ancestors, even to land and sea.

Many Aboriginal novels push the power of unattributed narration to its limit, and also switch to other styles of narrative. The first Aboriginal novel that I taught at

the University of Hawai'i West O'ahu was Kim Scott's *True Country*, which I believed to be a straight-forward story with clear plot development, similar to the form of the Bildungsroman.⁶ But I was surprised to discover that my students struggled with the first pages because they could not figure out who was talking or what they were talking about, although it is, in fact, directly connected to the plot, as a reader eventually realizes. I had to get them past the first few pages. Māori writer Keri Hulme's *The Bone People* also had this effect. This narrative strategy tacitly trains the reader to question the narrative voice, and not to assume its authority, to question the story. I learned that to read *True Country* required first letting go of *our need to know* who was talking or thinking, and just to listen. Storytelling writers intentionally begin with a style that makes us listen rather than "read." In *Carpentaria*, Wright begins with several layers of story, the all caps story, and then a traditional Dreaming story, and then the story of Normal Phantom. Throughout the work, the narration shifts far more radically and repeatedly than in Scott's *True Country* (making *Carpentaria* an even greater challenge to teach). This narrative style is a method of disruption and destabilization that challenges the reader's attempts at appropriation and assimilation.

Will Phantom becomes the locus of three sets of stories connecting the disparate and often warring groups of Aboriginal people to the land and to the sea, and challenging the Uptown whites and the rapacious mine. Will was Norm Phantom's favored child, hearing the stories, learning the law of the sea in particular. He carries this with him, and when he occasionally returns to Desperance, he must always visit his home and the space and place of his father. The two elder lawmen of the Eastside and Westside Pricklebush, Joseph Midnight and Normal Phantom, remain connected to traditions but do little overtly to resist the occupation by the strangers who claim to have come from nowhere,⁷ and they dwell on the fringes of these invaders. Mozzie Fishman is the third elder, one who has chosen to follow ancient Dreaming paths in a caravan of cars, always circling back to (and away from) Desperance. Mozzie is more active in asserting Aboriginal traditional Law and ultimately takes direct destructive action that annihilates the mine. At key moments, we witness the power of tradition in all three men, Norm Phantom, Old Man Midnight, and Mozzie Fishman, and all pass their knowledge to and through Will.

⁶ The Bildungsroman genre is, however, challenged by Scott's novel, and as I have argued previously, Scott appropriates and adapts the Bildungsroman to a specifically Aboriginal context. See Brenda Machosky, "Kim Scott's *True Country* as Aboriginal Bildungsroman." *A Companion to Kim Scott*, ed. Belinda Wheeler (Camden House, 2016), 2S-36.

⁷ For this description of the settler population in Desperance, see Wright, pp. 55-9.

In a contrary mode to free indirect discourse, where the reader briefly identifies directly with a disguised first-person speaker (rather than mediated by the narrator), is a mode in which a character is completely constructed from the perceptions of other characters. In *Carpentaria*, this cipher character is Elias Smith. Elias is literally a stranger who washes up on the shores of Desperance, with no memory, no name, no known past, but memories of the sea, and one who remains a stranger for the many years he lives in the town. His strangeness is literalized in the text. He is always estranged, and he leaves the novel the way he entered it—cryptically. He is named by a white outcast of Desperance, Captain Nicoli Finn (known as “*the crazy whatever!*” (62) by the white people of Uptown), a character who has little role in the narrative beyond this episode. But it is this self-designated beach patroller who alerts the town about the man walking in from the sea, and eventually (after quite a long digression) names him Elias Smith (62-74). While the people of Uptown claim Elias, for his whiteness if for no other reason, the people of the Pricklebush construct their own narrative of the scene, and it is the Aboriginal people who encourage Finn, in their powerful minds, to come back into the story, which had been bossily usurped by the town clerk Libby Vance and policeman Constable Truthful, who cannot bully Elias into revealing himself. “*Yes, yes, Pricklebush cheered in their hearts for Finn*” (72). As soon as Elias is named, Finn disappears. Uptown creates an identity for Elias, “as a man of ancient ways who was planning his escape route from Desperance,” while the narrator tells us, “He told the Pricklebush elders he most definitely was not” (75). Like Finn, Elias is more connected to the fringe dwellers than to the whites of Uptown. Norm Phantom, we learn as Elias leaves Desperance, had been Elias’ best friend.

We know Elias predominantly through Norm Phantom and his estranged son Will. In the construction of the character of Elias, a bridge emerges between Norm and the “third and favourite son” he no longer chooses to recognize (101). We rarely hear Elias speak, and seldom know what he is thinking, and yet he is a central character whose existence weaves throughout the story, both alive and even more actively, after he is dead. Despite the many unknown number of years that Elias lived in Desperance, we only learn of his deep bond of friendship with Norm Phantom at the moment of his exile. In the entire long chapter “Elias Smith comes... and goes,” there is but one mention of “his best fishing mate Norm Phantom,” and that is only to say that he had abandoned fishing, and Norm, to dutifully patrol the boundaries of the town, the job that would lead to his exile. The narrator shares a rare insight into

Elias, in the last sentence of the chapter. “A short memory was sometimes better than a long one or having no memory at all and this was what Elias Smith thought on the day he left Desperance for good” (88). And yet, Elias is fundamental to the entire narrative, and particularly to the threaded stories that need to come together to bring the big story to its final moment.

Elias becomes important at the beginning of a chapter dedicated to Norm Phantom, “Number One house,” and oddly, as Norm watches him walk away across the mud flats, full of regret and unable to move. Only now does the reader get to hear the stories of the fishing mates, united not by their love of fishing but by their deep knowledge of fish and the Dreaming paths of the sea. While “Dreaming” is not specifically referenced here, that seems to be the kind of knowledge Elias has. Norm was surprised to learn that Elias already knows about the “gropers’ place in the middle of the sea” and how connected he is with the fish, even more than Norm himself. “Norm had been sure that there was communication between the fish and Elias” as he calls them up with a slap on the water. He remembered this as he realizes what the dead Elias wants from him: “Elias had come back to tell Norm to take him home” (226). It is only hinted at, but to me it seems clear, that Elias continues to navigate Norm after they part company with Elias’ body sinking into the sea. After Norm loses his bearings at sea, mentally and physically, when he is nearly dead himself, “he felt movement underneath his little boat driving him away with great speed” (255). I understand this as Elias, guiding Norm on the new sea path he needs to follow, the one that will take him to his future and his past, the beach where he finds Bala.

It turns out, the one thing Elias does remember is how to navigate. Norm and Elias had the kind of friendship where one day they could discuss the minutiae of a topic, and then have no need to talk again for weeks, and then pick up where they had left off. “And yours?” Norm simply asked one night of Elias’s heart, continuing the conversation a year later when they met at sea” (90). And after Elias is forced out to sea, Norm stops fishing (93). What follows in this chapter, in rapid succession, are the stories of destruction and devastation wrought by the outsiders who claim to come from nowhere, the white inhabitants of Desperance. What becomes clear is that they definitely do not come from this country (land). The story of the mine begins, with its corruption of the town and threats to the Pricklebush mob (94-6).

Compared to the elaborate details of so many of the stories in *Carpentaria*, it is easy to miss the next, two-page seeming digression. Just after Uptown cheers the departure of Elias, Norm repeats for the Pricklebush elders gathered outside his gate, the story of the exploding tree, the story “exactly how his father had told it” (97). It is the story of his father witnessing the massacre of his family, peering through a pinhole between boulders, a massacre that Norm’s father survives because “he is invisible” (99). We learn, perhaps, the origin of the Phantom name, but the fundamental knowledge of the entire story of *Carpentaria* lies in these two pages. To gain this knowledge, the reader has to be listening to Norm telling the story, as he had listened to his father. The next stories are about Norm’s youngest son Kevin, who received praise from teachers for his promise, but nothing could come of it for an Aboriginal child, and so the clumsy but smart Kevin gets hired by the mine and is irreparably maimed in an accident the very first day. His existence has been tortured ever since. That is the end of Norm’s dedicated chapter.

Will carries Norm’s legacy with him, and he learns to live up to the family name and be invisible, an invisibility that comes from being one with Country. Until his perceived betrayal of the Pricklebush by marrying across the artificial division of Eastside and Westside, Will was Norm Phantom’s favourite child. Norm officially disowns Will, considering himself the father of only six children (101). This denial is only an appearance as Will continues to haunt Norm’s life, and try as he might, Will cannot really disassociate himself from the family either.⁸ With the two older brothers working in the mine, three sisters with broken marriages (and one having a partially involuntary affair with the town cop), and the youngest brother who was brain damaged in a mining accident on his first day of work, Will is the unavoidable legacy of Norm Phantom. Throughout his youth, Will heard his father’s stories and learned the ways of the sea. Through Will’s reflections on Elias, who has been found dead, murdered, and used as an unsuccessful lure to trap Will, we learn even more of his coming to know the sea. Will deciphers the mystery of Elias too far inland in his boat

⁸ Through the mind of Mozzie Fishman, we see their complicated relationship. “The light intrigued Mozzie because he realized Norm had stayed up all night too, in spite of himself. Mozzie twisted his grey beard, elated about catching someone out, even in the utmost privacy of their innermost emotions. He knew Norm would not acknowledge that he was waiting for Will.

Will was never expecting any big homecoming from his father. No one imagined Norm Phantom rushing out, carrying the fatted calf on his shoulders as soon as he got the news that his son was coming home.... Will would reach Desperance in his own good time, so let the light burn in a house where a fully grown man only had time to recognise six of his seven children” (145).

by piecing together the story that would have brought him there—all but the murder at sea and the helicopter used to fly the body and boat to the remote lagoon.

The story of saving Elias, respecting his body and bringing it to Norm for burial, is a crucial episode around which many stories turn. Will notices the sea eagle that Elias had rescued as a fledgling, who never left Elias while at sea and has flown here with him, now disoriented and hungry. The eagle directs Will to the blood stains and bullet holes. Then, the eagle is caught up in the whorl of the helicopter and pulverized, but his landing place on a log gave Will a place to escape himself (166-7). Will becomes invisible, even from his own brothers, who work for the mine for food and money but without much enthusiasm for this hunt in the rain and wind. As Will sleeps with Elias in a cave above the lagoon, he can connect with ancestors through the paintings on the walls and witnesses the spirits “protecting the country of the water people” (174). After getting a ride for himself and Elias from the country priest who refuses to be bullied by the mine security, Will returns to his home and its memory stories. Through Elias, he remembers, “We used to spend a lot of good times here, didn’t we, old man?” (186). And then we hear the stories about Norm and his magical taxidermic fish. And also the fears every time Norm was hauled away by police, just because he was convenient, and “each time... Will thought it would be the last time he would ever see him” (189). Bringing Elias home brings Will home. “He was beginning to feel as though he had never left being Norm Phantom’s son” (194) and he rows out to sea feeling “great throbs of sadness” as Norm hears him rowing away (195).

Many of the stories of *Carpentaria* weave together over long distances. Father Danny, who gives Will and Elias a ride into town, gets a mention early on as the Catholic priest, recruited by Angel Day, who tried to rid the house of its evil spirits with a thousand crucifixes (134). The story of when Norm found a dead body in the rubbish heap, dutifully reported it, and ended up in jail accused of murder (until he was finally cleared), is recounted by Will in recalling his childhood (189-90), and resurfaces in the reaction of his sisters when the body of Elias is discovered in the workshop. They try to burn it while their father wants to call the authorities to report “a felony.” But Elias can be invisible too. Despite the cop Truthful showing up to investigate the fire burning in the yard, he gets distracted by his lust for Girlie, and Norm is able to take care of Elias properly, at sea. Once the threat of Truthful has been neutralized, Norm turns to the memory and presence of Will, and a time when

“Norm wanted to help the cop hunt his son down” (222). This is the beginning of the story about Norm and Will, that is continued many pages later, when Norm thinks he sees Will on the beach, helping him survive after his ordeal at sea, after leaving Elias. “Norm could not believe it, for there was Will, as though all those intervening years had not passed” (266). While this is, in fact, Will’s son Bala, what follows are Norm’s happy memories of his children.

The story of Elias’s burial is the longest single event narrated in the novel, especially if one begins with Will’s discovery of the body and Elias’s spirit guiding Norm’s forsaken boat to the exact island where his grandson Bala has been orphaned (temporarily) after the mine security stole his parents. When Norm sets out to bury Elias Smith at sea, and especially afterwards, as he is lost at sea, finds his estranged family, and eventually navigates his way home, we understand how Norm possesses a knowledge beyond his own self. While on the journey far out to sea to release Elias into the exact right place, “the groper’s place,” Norm knows where he needs to go, but on the way, he loses track, doesn’t catch fish, and feels alone. At that point, a giant stingray appears, catching, capturing his vision. He can barely look and can’t look away: “he would lift his eyes above the shield of his tiny world on the vastness of water to capture another glimpse of the giant creature’s hypnotic power” (234). Shortly after this shepherding sea creature appears, Norm gains focus. “He saw the route of their journey laid out in his mind, from woe to finish line, and knew he was again on track” (234). This experience is akin to the Hawaiian tradition of *aumakua*, a guiding guardian spirit particular to an individual or a family, embodied in animal form. Common *aumakua* are sharks, sea turtles, rays, owls, and other birds.⁹ Throughout this long sea journey, where Norm is often without direct control, various fish, and maybe even Elias himself, take on this guardian role. Some readers might call it mystical, but it is just as much a connection to a place and respect for its beings, entering into a relationship with it. Joseph Midnight is an elder man, seemingly more detached from traditions, the head of the Eastside clan that abandoned the Pricklebush (literally and in many ways, spiritually) after the fight inspired by Angel Day (see Chapter 2). At a crucial moment, as Will sets off against all odds to find his wife and son, Hope and Bala, who have escaped the terroristic threatening of the mine security by self-exiling to an uninhabited shore, Joseph Midnight waits for Will

⁹ For more information on the relation between *aumakua* and *akua* (gods), see the Hawai’i Department of Land and Natural Resources publication, “Hie ‘Aumakua - Hawaiian Ancestral Spirits” by Herb Kawainui Kāne, <https://dlnr.hawaii.gov/sharks/files/2014/07/APaperbyHerbKane.pdf>.

in the darkness, gifts him his boat, and sings a path over the sea, “unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen.” They are connected by tradition longer than time, as Midnight “remembered a ceremony he had never performed in his life before, and now, to his utter astonishment, he passed it on to Will” (360). He sings an epic journey to a place far away.

The resistance to the invaders comes full circle after Will has found his way across the ancient sea path to Hope and Bala but is immediately captured by the mine’s stalking security team. He is promptly and swiftly returned to Desperance by air—in a helicopter that is detached from the land and the sea, and he witnesses his wife being pushed from the machine into the abyss of air (an event witnessed by Bala from the land). A prisoner at the mine, where Mozzie Fishman and his followers are about to execute a sabotage operation overnight, by happenstance, Will is rescued. Back among the wayfinding community of Mozzie, Will becomes part of a traditional burial of Mozzie’s two sons Luke and Tristrum, and his posthumously adopted child Aaron Ho Kum (the unacknowledged offspring of a white father and Aboriginal mother). These pre-pubescent boys were falsely and too easily accused of the murder of the watchman Gordie, beaten to senselessness by the white man’s lawmen, and dead by despondent suicide. This leads, however, to Mozzie navigating them to a traditional burial place where Will further witnesses the Fishman’s knowledge of the Dreaming Ancestral Law (418-24).

Allegory: Layers of Stories

Wright’s novel tells the big story of British occupation and settlement with the small story of Desperance. In this way it borrows features from allegory as a way of saying what cannot be said in another way. In Wright’s novel, allegory is not a simple 1:1 coding of this for that.” Rather, allegory is a way of writing multiple meanings in a single story, of *polysemy*. In my book, *Structures of Appearing: Allegory and the Work of Literature*, I emphasize allegory as polysemic in a radical way and I argue that allegory is a structure that defies logic, allowing two things, two worlds, to be in the same space at the same time. In this sense, all literature is allegory because readers exist in the world of the text and the world in which they read the text, but the implications of multiple worlds co-existing, an experience made quite possible in literature, has far greater implications for contemplating epistemologies that are not limited to a singular, linear, progressive world view. For a writer who perceives the world as a

multivalent place, where ancestors co-exist with biologically living beings, where the ancient world remains a living part of the landscape (and seascape), the rhetorical structure of allegory can be effective in both concealing and making visible, or experiential, these layered worlds. Allegories must always be founded on a literal level, the story, that can be read on its own terms, without reference to any other meanings. From that basis can be layered multiple possibilities, simultaneous possibilities. Allegory gives a western-trained mind a way to think, to begin to understand a culture that sees the world in which they live as simultaneously the world of their ancestors, and even simultaneously the world at the moment of its creation. At the same time, the story can be a story, and thus it can protect the more sacred and secret knowledge from those that cannot understand. This is the same way allegory was seen as operating in the Bible and many Christian texts. Only the initiated can comprehend the deeper meanings. This is also the feature that has made allegory an attractive structure for writing under authoritarian regimes, where saying what you mean can be dangerous, even deadly. But also, allegory is a mode of telling a story when what you have to say cannot be said. Wright seems to appreciate these features of allegory in her writing, and this allows an exploration of continuing depths for her reader.

As readers we are tempted to center our reading of *Carpentaria* on Norm Phantom, the character who seems to appear most regularly and at both the beginning and the end of the novel, but the story is not about any one person, and we must flow with the narration from one key character to another, focusing not on an individual's development or psychology, but on the way in which story manifests in that character. Will is the focal point of several significant stories, even though he does not really appear until well into the novel (page 138) and in the chapter focused on Mozzie Fishman, not his father, Norm Phantom. We can perhaps see Will as an allegorical figure who embodies the full spirit and potential of the Aboriginal people and their rightful Country, both in this story and in the contemporary context of Australia. Wright describes this in her own explanation of the novel: "In creating the main characters of Norm Phantom, Will Phantom, Angel Day and Mozzie Fishman, I wanted to demonstrate how the powerful essence of country is in our people. We are also the country's spirit. Country and its people are one" (Wright 2017). In *Carpentaria*, Will is an allegorical *emblem* of that oneness, but he should not be seen as the singular embodiment of Country and People. By "emblem" is intended the baroque allegorical understanding of emblem, a combined image that was both clear and cryptic. The emblem is Will Phantom, sole survivor of the cyclone as it hits the town of

Desperance, floating at sea on a pile of garbage that becomes a thriving ecosystem. The new land may or may not be discoverable, as Hope sets out to find him near the novel's end. The promise of the story lies with Will's son Bala, who walks alone with Will's father, an ending that cycles back to a beginning. An entire novel captured in an image of lineage, and the experience of hope that this novel shares in its stories. It is not coincidental that Hope, Will's wife and Bala's mother, is a minor character who has a major impact, protected by the story and fundamental to it.

The fraught, complicated, and power-driven relationship between the white settlers and the fringe-dwelling Aboriginal people parallels the general condition of post-contact Australia. Rather than encouraging direct identifications, I suggest that this is an allegory that should be felt in its specific relations but not necessarily in its particular details. The fact of a mine, owned by non-traditional outsiders who bribe and divide the local community, and then violate contracts express and implied, is quite typical in the north of Australia. This example may be a more direct allegory, or even a case study. However, the capitalist colonizing of the mine also serves as a microcosm of the general occupation of the continent by foreigners who destroy, divide and violate the Indigenous peoples, in the present as in the past.¹⁰ It is an allegory of the continuing systematic colonization of the Australian continent. There is also a microcosm of the current state of Aboriginal peoples in relation to each other. In Carpentaria the deep-seated conflict between the two Aboriginal groups on each side of Desperance is both an active vestige of the marginalizing and divisive effects of colonization and simultaneously a resistance and challenge to the presumed sameness of all Aboriginal people.

¹⁰ There are two recent American examples of this continuing capitalist colonization of Indigenous lands, already reduced and marginalized by government policies. One is the Dakota Access Pipeline at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, where protests by Native Americans failed to prevent oil from flowing through reservation land (after it was diverted from a non-reservation city nearby) but did achieve a court-ordered environmental impact review. The Trump administration refused to halt use of the pipeline during the review process; and as of April 2021, the Biden Administration is maintaining this flow of oil. In Hawai'i, the construction of a massive Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT) project on the sacred volcano Mauna Kea drew significant protests in 2019, which prevented the beginning of construction. The standoff between Native Hawaiians and the State of Hawai'i (including the University of Hawai'i, which is involved in the project) halted without resolution by January 2021 (when it gets very cold on the mountain) and has not resumed, in part because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For more information on the Dakota Pipeline, see: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/climate/dakota-access-pipeline-sioux.html> and <https://earthjustice.org/brief/2021/biden-delivers-disappointment-on-the-dakota-access-pipeline>. For information on the TMT at Mauna Kea, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/22/us/hawaii-telescope-protest.html> and local reporting at <https://www.hcn.org/issues/52.3Zlatest-mauna-kea-telescope-project-halted-after-months-of-protests>.

The term “Aboriginal ” has come to imply a sort of pan-Aboriginality that exists only in the wake of colonization and settlement by an occupying force. To the colonizing British, the Indigenous people were perceived as less than human and all of a kind, and thus the generalized term “Aborigine” or “Aboriginal” became standard in the colonizer’s English. Aboriginal people themselves identify with their ancestral group(s), although some members of the Stolen Generations struggle to trace their lineage and their sense of self-identity is traumatized.¹¹ The earliest memoir about an experience of discovering Aboriginal ancestry is Sally Morgan *My Place* (1987, Fremantle Arts). Morgan’s mother and grandmother were both victims of the policies that led to the Stolen Generations, they did not acknowledge their Aboriginality with their children out of fear. Sally gradually gains their trust, then their knowledge, and eventually journeys to Corunna Downs Station, where she meets more elders and pieces together the stories of the difficult past of her family. Many Aboriginal people are not able to find the communities or peoples from whom they descended, despite the best efforts made by the organization Link-Up to reunite families, and although the Australian government sponsors a website called “Find and Connect” that provides resources and records to help the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of the Stolen Generations find their stories and their elders. While *Carpentaria* does not overtly reference the Stolen Generations, the consequences of this part of the Aboriginal story weaves throughout the narrative, from the individuals who find traditional ways and Dreamings, like Mozzie, Will, and Normal, to the feud between the Aboriginal peoples of the Westside and Eastside, about who are the “original owners.” Even this claim is a legacy of the invading settler system and the Australian government’s current litigation of Native Title to determine “original ownership” more by western law than traditional Law.¹²

Alexis Wright is of the Waanyi people of the north coast of what is now Australia, from the Gulf of Carpentaria (which crosses from the Northern Territory into Queensland). After contact with the British, the number of Aboriginal peoples (tribal groups) and individuals was dramatically reduced by the decimation of the

¹¹ “The Stolen Generations” refer to Australian Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people who, as children, were forcibly removed from their families without consent, by state governments and missionaries acting on behalf of the government For more information see: <https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/stolen-generations>.

¹² This division of an Indigenous community into two “sides” also begins the Maori writer Patricia Grace’s *Dogside Story* (2001, University of Hawai’i Press). And in current events, the TMT on Mauna Kea in Hawai’i has supporters and protestors in the Hawaiian community.

Indigenous population across the continent by introduced disease and mortal persecution through hunts and sanctioned massacres, and divided by the massive forced or otherwise involuntary movements of individuals to missions and locations far from traditional lands and family. All of these stories are told in *Carpentaria*.

Out of Time

Wright appropriates the constitutive elements of the western novel to conform to her own style and purposes. Within a few chapters, readers are often disoriented as to time. Angel Day's discovery of a working old clock in the dump brings her joy because her family will be able to "tell time." It is not coincidence but also not explicable that when Elias arrives that kind of time stops in Desperance, all clocks and watches rendered useless. Desperance and its book are a world outside of time. One could appropriate the novel as having a typical arc from beginning to end, with what might be identified as flashbacks. This is to read *Carpentaria* as just a novel and to reduce its knowledge to the plot it recounts. Instead, I propose that *Carpentaria* should be read as a storytelling novel, closer to the mode of epic and its episodic structure. Stories from the past are not flashbacks; rather they become present, as Erich Auerbach describes the episode of "Odysseus' Scar" in *Mimesis*. The lengthy story of Odysseus' childhood encounter with a boar is not for suspense, not merely a flashback to the past, but it becomes "for the time being the only present, and fills both the stage and the reader's mind completely" (1953,3). Moments of this kind of present, stories that are present in the moment of their telling, like Norm's telling of his father's story of the massacre, are what constitutes the new novel, the storytelling novel *Carpentaria*. The linear structure of time is constantly disrupted. Readers need to let go of a need to know exactly what happened when, as in a more conventional novel. The cyclic structures of time by which Indigenous peoples eschew clocks, are threatened by colonization, but they cannot be conquered. The cycles of Australian weather, from extreme wet to extreme dry, have always posed a challenge to the British desires for a predictable narrative of nature. But, nature does not follow the narratives of humanity. *Carpentaria* and Wright's more recent *The Swan Book*, both give Nature a voice, against the imposed narratives of humans. The lesson of Australia might very well be that human beings must learn to listen to the stories of the natural world. The cyclone that ends the novel and the small town of Desperance, is both literally cyclic in its power and metaphorically cyclic in returning the land to a more original state, cleared of debris and houses and the trappings of "western

civilization”—debris which becomes a “new land” settled by an Aboriginal person, ironically. The story at its end returns to the promise of a beginning, an elder and a child, having been through it all, holding hands and ready to rebuild. In that end, though, are encircled all the stories we have heard in the novel, across all time and outside of it.

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