

Heeding the Warnings: 'Sucking up the seas' in Vance Palmer's *Cyclone*.

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Abstract

Climate change literary criticism calls for fundamental re-evaluations of our critical tools. In representations of extreme weather events, Vance Palmer's *Cyclone* set in North Queensland meets many of the new criterion with its story about the impact of the cyclone on individuals, community and plot. The genesis and inspiration of the novel, its writing, its publication, review and reception can be addressed. The cyclone is seen through the perceptions of different characters. Vance and Nettie Palmer knew many of the people drowned in the 1934 cyclone. Palmer drew on the historical record in his novel, which was published over a decade later. The reception of *Cyclone* was very limited given it was published locally by Angus & Robertson and had no serious critical response. The environmental imagination has been a powerful force in Australia creative writing and is undervalued in contemporary debates.

Given the complexities of climate change, as a real, scientific and cultural phenomenon, global warming demands a corresponding degree of complexity in fictional representation. How do we want to define climate change fiction? Isn't climate change, itself, a new phenomenon, but only in the sense it is an escalation and result of what has been going on for centuries with industrialisation and colonisation. Climate change is an extension of 'more traditional forms of industrial pollution', which is the reverse of what Anthony Giddens argues. He believes 'Scientists, and scientists alone, have directed our attention to it' (55), despite the chorus of past and present warnings. Climate change been addressed again and again in creative writing. Let's open up the debate as fully as possible and not foreclose it too soon. Does it need to be 'new', that is a global, networked and a controversial phenomenon as scholars Adam Trexler and Adeline John-Putra suggest (185)? What is demanded by these climate change literary theorists, in the representation of climate change in novels, is a text which 'moves beyond simply employing the environment as a setting but begins to explore its impact on plot and character' (185). Trexler and John-Putra do capture some of the urgency of the issues when they argue that climate change calls for a fundamental re-valuation of ourselves, even while it challenges us to put to use the critical cultural tools we have.

A major strand of white Australian writing has been attempting for over two centuries to come to terms with how a distinctive habitat impacts upon the human. Exploring and re-evaluating the nature of the Australian 'identity' as a product of both the natural and human environment? There is a long history of writing about European settlers adapting, or as the case may be not adapting, to the environment of the Australian continent, and the different social formations

possible. We have Henry Handel Richardson's Richard Mahony restless across two hemispheres, or Henry Lawson's drover's wife out in the bush, battling a snake, better still Bernard O'Dowd's chant of the Olympus of the Australian dispensation. Can we see many Australian writers, however much they were caught up in discourses of class, race and gender, as part of settler culture trying to come to terms with the colonial experience which does include a very changed climate and extreme weather events? We need to explore what special critical tools Southern critics have developed, especially given the strength of Indigenous cosmologies about the Australian environment.

With climate change, the Bureau of Meteorology warns that tropical cyclones are increasing in intensity, if not in number. With ocean surface temperatures rising, there is a correlation in the potential intensities of cyclones. While scientists might disagree about the extent these changes are human induced, cyclones are seen as a passive response to climate forcing (Elsner, *passim*). In the aftermath of the recent cyclones in north Queensland, concerns were expressed about the loss of public memory of the experiences of living through a cyclone, even though there is a long history of cyclonic activity. Before the event, the media generated terror among the people who were living in the path of the cyclone waiting for its onslaught, or running from it. Affronted tourists caught on coral cays complained bitterly on our television screens amid other shots of gyrating palm trees.

The impact of cyclones on communities and individuals, at first glance, seems hardly well represented in the literary imagination, that is apart from the classics notably *The Tempest*, and Joseph Conrad's *The Typhoon* (1903). Vance Palmer's *Cyclone* was published in 1947 in Australia; Robert S. Close's banned *Love Me Sailor* in 1945, and a vivid film, Charles Chauvel's 'Sons of Matthew' was released in 1949. They are three very different perspectives on extreme weather events. The film is a classic of heroism and drama, and offers a counterpoint to Palmer's more understated work; the storm in Close's novel, an extraordinary misogynist account of an all male crew on the windjammer, is surely used as a literary device to heighten the abjection of supposed inept and psychotic femininity. When we dig a little more, there are many accounts across the decades, by Nene Gare or Thea Astley, plus a plethora in young adult fiction and especially, memoirs. Patrick White's Elizabeth Hunter achieves a state of grace in the midst of resting seabirds when she emerged from her bunker through the cyclone's eye, in *Eye of the Storm*. Ian Townsend's *The Devil's Eye* is an attempt at pathos in a dramatic historical narrative of the 1899 cyclone that decimated the northern pearling fleets. Susan Hawthorne's 'cyclone inside' is expressed in poetry in *Earth's Breath*. Alexis Wright's extraordinary *Carpentaria*, which mixes capricious creation story with wit and scandal, tells of the cyclone which goes inland to the township of Desperance to seek out the law-breaker. How many Queensland writers don't have a cyclone? And as global warming catches up with us, and children need to be reassured, there are many, many children's books, so, too, YAF, young adults need to be forewarned.

A fore-runner, Vance Palmer's *Cyclone* is set in Cairns and surrounds. Like Katharine Susannah Prichard, Palmer saw his task as one of revealing Australians to themselves, and they consciously positioned themselves as Henry Lawson's heirs. The crucial difference, as Ivor Indyk has pointed out, was in their lyrical evocation of the environment. For Lawson it was an indifferent and often hostile landscape; for Prichard and Palmer, they wrote of the life and energy

of a people more in tune, that is 'at home' in the landscape (v). Palmer claimed his was a generation seeking to find harmony with the environment. For our purposes here, let us take this claim seriously, this claim by Australia's leading man of letters of the interwar period (Serle), that his generation (including Louis Esson, E.J. Brady and Lesbia Harford) sought to reconcile with the environment. *Cyclone* is an important novel by the mature Palmer, then in his 60s, written and published in 1947 just prior to what is generally agreed as his most significant fiction, the *Golconda* trilogy.

1. *Cyclone* the Novel

The possibility of a catastrophe weaves its way throughout the early section of *Cyclone*, which opens with a quiet moment in Fay and Brian Donolly's marital life, before the shrill call of their daughter when she steps on a python. Brian kills the python. The very first paragraph of the novel introduces the cyclone:

That wind, Fay Donolly was thinking as she woke, it was like a spiteful bird, swooping down and lifting away. She saw it as a brown sea-eagle, poised somewhere in the void above the house, watching with baleful eyes for a chance to strike in earnest. Now it was still as death, now it made a show of dropping for the kill. And the screech of its wings, as it swept down, stopped the heart for a moment, so that it started again with a flutter (1).

The reader is privy to Fay's hopes and anxieties that Brian will spend the Easter break with the family and not head out to sea. Brian works on a trading boat the *Gannet* with his war-time mate, Ross Halliday, and they are scheduled to deliver stores up north to Carney's River. The threatened cyclone brings to a head the tensions between the two men and a third sleeping partner, Randall, as Brian has to make a choice between his promise to his wife and children or his responsibilities to Halliday, who cannot find anyone else willing to go out in the impending weather.

The cyclone, when it finally sweeps down the coast and makes landfall, 'purges the human conflicts it has both intensified and symbolized', is how critic Harry Heseltine describes it (119). The *Gannat*, with Halliday and Brian, is caught directly in its path and wrecked. Halliday is lost, Brian survives. The third partner, the only person in the region with light aircraft, flies north to search for them, and Heseltine defines this passage as the climax of the story:

And then at the next strip of beach, Randall stopped dead, hardly daring to believe his eyes. Three hundred yards away a big figure was moving towards him, head down - a ragged figure that rolled in its walk yet kept doggedly on... There could be no mistaking that fair head and sun-darkened torso, those powerful shoulders that could so easily lump a two-hundred of flour across a twelve-inch plank; yet, for the time, the oncoming figure seemed stripped of everything individual. It was life itself that was driving on through the sand; blind, battered, yet moving to some pulse in its secret core (119-120).

On one level it is indeed the climax of the narrative, which ends with the plane returning to the town (Cairns); the image of the sea eagle is replaced with that of a plover.

A very different reading is possible when the cyclone itself is given centre stage and seen as impacting on plot and character, as our climate change literary critics demand, *and* when the women characters are taken into account. The study of a variety of human responses, that is male and female, white and black, to their environment, in the process of adaptation, is characteristic of many of Palmer's novels. Fay's experience of the cyclone is markedly different from that of Brian's; it is she who galvanises the air search for him, it is she who convinces Randall to use the plane to look for Brian, and she has some agency in the events as they unfold both in the real and psychic realms. Her cyclone is likened to an enormous wounded snake:

Convulsive in his death-agony he swept his tail over cays and coral reefs, sending the tides roaring up little rivers and swamping the mangrove beaches. The great head twisted and swayed; the forked tongue shot out in lightning against the sky.

The snake had been killed, but he had risen again in anger. You couldn't destroy him, for he was in league with the dark forces behind the deceptive appearance of things... But the snake was always there, waiting under cover, ready to raise his dragon head and turn the known world to an evil waste. Now she was free from him, flying far above the tumult, adrift in a world that had lost light and colour and peering down through an eerie mist at some object far below. A boat with two figures clinging to it! (160-161).

Palmer is interested in his character's emotional and psychic responses as well as how she resolves her visions; he is suggesting something much more inchoate through Fay, some notion of the realm of nature as part of the unconscious, tied in with notions of death and destruction, as so too, the will to live. Through personal alignment with 'the secret pulse of life', that is through being grounded and clear in one's relationships, Vance's characters survive disaster. This is normalised; when Brian finally relies on his intuition and sense of portent, and retreats from a long drawn out and exhausting confrontation with Halliday, his energies are marshalled to survive the forthcoming disaster.

The cyclone is seen through the (Cairns) newspaper editor's imagination, which 'soared to a point in the sky from which, secure against a background of stars, it could look down at the dark cataract rolling in upon the coast.' Corcoran is a representative humane fence-sitter:

A cataract was it, or a leviathan bat, awakened from some cave in the night's heart? He could see its wings spread out a hundred miles over reefs and little islands, see the whirling head alive with evil power. As it swept on it sucked up the seas beneath it and threw them into chaos: it tore up coral reefs, swamped islands with its tidal floods, snapped the anchoring-chains of little boats and sent them to their doom. In a hundred little homes people would be gathering around their pinpoints of light, shivering at its approach (151).

Here we have what the environmentalists call a blue planet view of the earth, even a sense of planet?

Fay's younger brother, Tod, a poet in the making, camps with the unemployed workers at the local showground. Like all the other characters, he too has to make choices and is being tested. With his pocket full of cash, he could pursue the girl who has been eluding him, or stay solid

with the unemployed who face a town vigilante group, stirred up by the local businessmen. Tod stays in the camp. The planned violence fails with the onslaught of the weather. Tod is euphoric, youthful idealism affirmed through the intervention of the cyclone.

2. Cyclone, the event, 1934

The inspiration for *Cyclone* stemmed from the Palmers' sojourn on Green Island, for nine months in 1932 (Jordan, 2011, 142-157). Palmer had written about shipwrecks in the Tropics before in *The Enchanted Island* and *The Outpost*. While on Green Island, the Palmers got to know most of the maritime community, and became close friends with Bill Millard who worked the trading boat, the *Mossman*. The Palmers met and wrote about the three different fishing fleets and fishers that used the island: the local Aboriginal people from Yarrabah, the trochus shell and beche-de-mer fishers from Torres Strait, and the Cairns fishermen mostly from Malaytown.

Vance Palmer organised an eco-tour on Millard's boat around the tropical islands for 1934, after their return to the Dandenongs in Victoria. We can only speculate, given Vance Palmer's full biography has not yet been researched, as to what lay behind the decision to pioneer such a trip. An inevitable decision, perhaps, to share the time of harmony and attunement on the island and the glories of sailing in those waters? Given Vance Palmer's belief in the imperative of his generation to live in harmony with the environment, combined too with the economic and political devastation of the Depression, an eco-tour had much to offer. The eco-tour was fully subscribed to, mostly by Melbourne literati.

In March 12, 1934 a cyclone struck North Queensland. The barometer had fallen to twenty-eight inches, but the warnings from the Bureau of Meteorology were too late. It crossed the land near Cape Tribulation with a 9.1m storm surge on Monday morning. The damage extended from Bloomfield to Snapper Island destroying property, livestock and banana plantations. The cyclone caught many of the fishing fleet out at sea and they were destroyed. Enormous seas of thirty to forty feet pounded the boats at anchor; then suddenly, when the wind changed to blow from the right, the boats were caught broadside, and, in the case of the *Mildred*, turned over completely (McDonald, 13). Millard's boat (he was out on a fishing trip with two others) broke up and all three men were lost. Tom McDonald, old friend of Captain T. Kono, took off in his Gipsy Moth to search and rescue. Graphic photographs McDonald took of the broken up wreck of the *Mossman* high on the rocks at South Beach were published in the *Cairns Post* ('Three Launches'). The total figures for loss of life and boats are still in dispute;¹ contemporary newspaper accounts put the figures as high as seventy-eight lives ('78 Died').

Palmer was devastated by the loss of his friend Bill Millard. He sent a wire to Lillian Millard, Bill's wife. He wrote a tribute in a letter to the editor of the Melbourne *Herald* about Millard's 'uncommon character and ability'.

¹ The Cairns Historical Society has worked through the newspaper sources with lower final figures. Pers. Comm. Janice Wegner.

I have unforgettable memories of days spent on the *Mossman*, coasting Dunk Island and Hinchinbrook, as well as those less-frequented waters off Cape Tribulation, where the final disaster fell. Camps on small islands, anchorages in sheltered bays, tramps through the scrubs along mainland creeks... people along the coast, black and white, liked and trusted Millard and the *Mossman*' (9 April 1934).

He and Nettie talked over the cyclone, 'experiences going deep'. Lillian moved to Melbourne with their two children, to live with her mother. 'Frail' and 'penniless' she visited the Palmers and was 'very brave'. The Palmers sent her a cheque. She and the children stayed with the Palmers on and off throughout the following year. There are tantalising glimpses in Nettie's diaries of the impact of Millard's death on Vance Palmer (1934, *passim*). His ideals and ideas about male friendship, about mateship, about male physicality were at issue; he likened his friendship with Millard to that of his with Jimmy Throssell, Katharine Susannah Prichard's husband, and Ted Heitmann. Jim Throssell had suicided after financial loss during the Depression.

Cyclone is a fictional account of the March 1934 cyclone, but Palmer took a decade to write about it. Soon after the cyclone, he turned to nonfiction to research and write his first major historical work – *National Portraits* – and full length studies of A.G. Stephens and Frank Wilmot. In part motivated by his compassion for the Australian working people in various fields and roles, as flying doctors and pastoralists, those men 'originating ideas and tapping springs that were later to enrich the national life', he opened up debates, challenged the prevailing discourses about the strengths of Australian identities. Just as his experience of the Great War had galvanised his decision to move away from modernist experimentation and, as Heseltine finds, 'its cool and sophisticated detachment could not easily have been made an amenable medium for the warm sympathy with struggling men' (38), the 1934 cyclone was the catalyst for a change of genre. *Legend for Sanderson*, where he prefigures *Cyclone*, and in *Hurricane* set in New Guinea (a later version of *The Outpost*) were the only novels in between the real and the fictional event. He began work on *Cyclone* in 1945.

In his account, Palmer moderates the extent of destruction and loss of life; he allows many more to survive, including the skipper, Brian (modelled on Bill?) of the trading boat. The key incident in the novel is Brian's experience of the boat disintegrating in the storm and his will to live. Both in the novel and the real cyclone, a large lugger, was anchored off the coast from Bailey's Creek alongside the trading vessel. It was the *Mildred*, seventy-two feet, a two-master, the largest lugger of the trochus shell fleet. Onboard was Marshall Roberts, a fifteen year old. He recalled how, after attempting to shelter overnight, the skipper, Captain Kono, dropped the masts and the rigging was cut away (Roberts). Below deck, there were twenty-two people in the for'ard. When the boat was swamped, there was a traumatic scramble in the dark to claw out the hatch before the *Mildred* sank. Several of the men tried to support three young women as they attempted to swim to shore, but two of them, Adelaide and Annai Pitt, drowned. Phelesia Pitt survived. In Palmer's novel the two Torres Strait sisters who were on the fictional lugger, are found washed ashore, alive. Palmer's awareness of the clumsy racist headlines in contemporary newspapers in 1932, 'No White Folk in Crew', is dramatised through both characterisation of Torres Strait Islanders, and Fay's desperate fears at the insensitivity of the locals.

The historical account of Thomas McDonald's search and rescue is more complex, too, than given in Vance's account; both Mrs Milliard and Mrs I Askew, mother in law of C. Seagrave who was also on the *Mossman*, approached H.J. Freeman of the Agricultural Department, who then approached McDonald. The Harbour Master at Cairns delayed search by boat, because Cooktown was closer. McDonald's gypsy moth was taken by truck to the beach where it took off (the airstrip was underwater), landing at Port Douglas, and further north at a home where Captain Kono had reached safety. Then McDonald flew to Cooktown, and tracked down Captain Hayles who had reported the *Mossman* lost. He was forced to make three beach landings because of the dense rain. Approximately 30 miles south of Cooktown, at Weary Bay, he walked the beach to inspect wreckage he identified as the *Mossman*:

She was in a frightful state, battered to pieces, with the engine lying submerged in the water at the foot of the rocks. Not one part of the boat was intact. Torn sails, fishing nets, ropes and wires were in a twisted mass all over the rocks. Not a sign of the three members of the crew could be found (13).

He landed again at Cape Tribulation, before returning to Cairns, collecting stories of extreme courage and survival by those forced to swim for one day and two nights. McDonald was a Cairns jeweller.

Vance appears to have researched the cyclone. One newspaper account in the *Courier Mail*, of the wrecking of the *Rotophia*, is based on the survival story of three men out of fourteen, two from New Guinea, the other a Murray Islander ('Cyclone's Toll'). In their ten mile swim to Cape Tribulation, they were washed ashore on the rocks. One of the survivors said they owed their lives to their diving glasses, donned at the last minute to protect their eyes from the salt, just as Brian manages to do in *Cyclone*.

The confrontation between town burghers and the unemployed was also based on a historical event – 'the battle of Parramatta Park', at the height of the Depression, when the Palmers were camped on Green Island, and the unemployed, the relief workers on susso, were camped at the local showgrounds. The same mayor, Alderman W A Collins, who gave the Palmers permission to camp on Green Island, refused a deputation from the unemployed camper's committee who had received notice to leave, so the townspeople could prepare for the annual show (Walmsely). Palmer's nuanced reading of the unemployed organising themselves while the police, council and media stood aside and the local business entrepreneurs roused a drunken vigilante group underplays the temper of the struggles going on in North Queensland. In 1932, the unemployed were attacked by a group of locals, blood was shed, and the weather had not intervened in the battle.

3. Publishing *Cyclone*

Why did Palmer moderate the impact of the cyclone? Palmer finished the manuscript in June 1945 and offered it to the publishers Angus and Robertson. Frank Dalby Davison had read it and was 'highly enthusiastic'. Beatrice Davies, 'immensely enjoyed' it, admiring in particular his 'handling of the setting, the feel of the sea, and the characterisation of Fay and Brian and Tod' (Angus & Robertson, 10/07/1945). While she wanted more character development, he had made

some compromises in characterisation to increase the dramatic tension. 'It is dramatic and cuts to the bone', he told her (Angus & Robertson, 4/06/1945). The novel was short by contemporary standards, that is only 50,000 words. There is a simplicity and clarity in *Cyclone* that allows the novel to unfold. The plot readily involves the reader; it was the reader's emphatic engagement with his characters that determined the narrative rather than the enormity of the tragedy. Palmer defended his decision to 'keep close' to the main theme, 'to keep on target', even at 'the cost of limiting the story' (Angus & Robertson, 12/07/1945). If he had extended his number of inside characters, they would have 'sucked the interest away from the main theme.' Davies sent Palmer an agreement for Australian and New Zealand rights.

Angus and Robertson published *Cyclone* in 1947. Advance copies were sent to the Palmers in mid July. Palmer was nearing completion of *Golconda*. He told William Cousins, of Angus and Robertson, 'that I have been treated rather shabbily by A&R. I could list instances, but they might seem the querulous complaints of an author who has not sold well'. The publication of the book had been delayed for over two years since the acceptance of the manuscript. Two thousand and five hundred copies at 8/6d each were printed. Sixty-five copies were sent out for review. In 1952, three hundred copies were remaindered and the book was deemed sold out.

Vance asked that the manuscript be sent to North America. Angus and Robertson's American agents were Leland Heyward in New York, who first read the manuscript then sent it off to publishers in the US. The agent's reader who 'read it word for word' was so enthusiastic the agent, Miss Pindyck, read the manuscript herself. 'Here you've really got a book' Mrs Smythe, the agent's reader had opined, 'A novel, Australian'... with 'feeling, pace, tension, and real competence in handling' (Angus & Robertson, 9/11/1945). The agent also liked it enormously and sent it off, immediately, to Simon and Schuster. Simon and Schuster's publisher thought that while there were many touches of interesting, sensitive writing, both atmospheric and personal' the author was 'uninterested in organisation or basic themes'. No matter how much Palmer sacrificed to keep on 'target' this reader could not find his central theme. The rejection letter from Thomas Y. Crowell Co. suggests American publishers were looking for something quite different in a novel:

I was set to go head over heels for the book. I'm a sucker for that strange exotic quality, and... Australian background... If the story were as good as the background, this book would be something.'

After a third American publisher, Duttons, rejected *Cyclone*, the typescript was returned and sent to London. Palmer explained to Cousins that he was 'too old a bird to build too solidly on the enthusiasm of agent's or publisher's readers', but had been glad they were interested in it (Angus & Robertson, 9/11/45). Palmer had long ago rejected amplifying the exotic as an expression of the literary imagination. Palmer was becoming increasingly concerned about the delays well aware, as he complained to Cousins, that 'a book has a poor chance when this atmosphere of low priority surrounds its birth' (Angus & Robertson, 25 May 1947).

There are a couple of things important to note: the smallness of the print run and the short time the book was kept in print, that is, for five years only. Nettie Palmer frequently pointed out that an Australian novel was 'one of the most fragile things'. Critics were forced to make the most of

the prominence a book could expect when it was new. 'I still think it unfortunate' she told William Cousins, 'in my experience, many a book has more life and gains in significance when a few years old than when younger' (qtd. Jordan, 1999, 155). In the 1930s, Nettie also complained about the lack of reviews, or weeklies, for longer essays or studies; critical comment, (apart from short book reviews) on *Cyclone* had to wait until Palmer's death, and the publication of Harry Heseltine and Vivian Smith's monographs on Palmer in the 1970s).

The *Bulletin* reviewer did not like the book. *Cyclone* was compared with the impassioned excesses of Christina Stead and found to lack 'inner conviction' (2). The reviewer did find, however, Palmer's Indigenous characters carried conviction, 'they give the novel its principal attraction, its descriptive authenticity'. The very passage that Heseltine found was the climax, this reviewer found 'an impression of pumped up enthusiasm'. As for the extreme weather event itself, it was only compensation for the 'falling-short in dramatic tension' by overemphasis. Those in cyclone territory were more open to the book's importance. The *Northern Standard* in Darwin reviewed it as about 'human emotions drawn against the background of a cyclone', with the 'conflict throughout about opposing loyalties' ('Book Reviews'). Others picked up the influence of Joseph Conrad on a style 'etched' as 'full of light and shade' ('Rich Life Patterns').

If the smallness of print run, limited length of time in print and scanty number of reviews of a novel by a senior Australian author is characteristic, it is hardly surprising that the literature of place (and weather) has had very little impact globally upon mainstream ecological thought, as Peter Hay finds in *Main Currents of Western Environmental Thought* (154-5). Hay does find it surprising, for other reasons, that is given literature's concerns with empathy with place, place conceived primarily as natural place; its ethical and political edge; and its privileging of the insights of Indigenous people. Vance Palmer's work has not been included in any traditions of regional writing in Australia, as it might in America or Britain, nor does it fit readily in terms of environmental writing or nature writing, given that it is about the impact of environment on character and plot. Writing based on place is not always based in ecological phenomenological investigations built on the experiences of the poet, writer, inhabitant and so on finds Hay; other critical traditions of space and place focus on production and commodification of space, such as in contemporary Marxist geography (155-6). Palmer's work often combines both currents of thinking; as we have seen each of his key characters are presented phenomenologically, yet also located in terms of production and space.

The Australian preoccupation with climate and weather comes from 'remnants of a deeply held and felt ancient belief' Alexis Wright hopes in a recently article (70). Do Australians sense a different, more powerful law than the Australian law, she asks. She also raises the question of whether we see Mother Nature as destroyer or provider. Vance's characters are shown to believe in more powerful forces at play; for Fay her understanding moves towards some great Rainbow Serpent, yet more evil and destructive rather than loved. Corcoran's leviathan bat could hardly be compared to Wright's Great Earth Mother. In *Cyclone*, the most explicit warning of the coming dangers is voiced by a drunken Murray Islander. Wright challenges us to find a space of respect and acceptance to be able to hear the ancient stories from Australia's Indigenous elders about how to understand the weather. Palmer shows in *Cyclone* how extreme weather events test us with about what it means to be human. Climate change scientists take very seriously the increasing intensity of cyclones, yet all cyclones are doing, in their function of 'sucking up the

seas' is mixing the layers of warm and cold ocean waters, of oxygenating blobs of ocean, the black holes we create through the discharge of pollutants through our drainage and river systems.

Let us turn to the broader theme of rapid environmental change, in conclusion, as represented in creative writing in Australia in context of literary rather than ecological debates. Some theorists criticize nationally based forms of identity and hold our cosmopolitan identification as a plausible and politically preferable alternative. With the current globalisation and de-territorialisation, there are calls for the development of an eco-cosmopolitan identity, with a sense of the planet, and an attempt to engage with the developing scientific discourses on adaptation. An innovative approach to climate change argues that the concept of the risk community is all important, as too the coming 'world risk society'. How does a particular culture select risks for awareness, interpret their meaning and manage them? One context for the eco-cosmopolitan writer is in the study of extreme weather events, such as cyclones.

Some scholars emphasise the importance of holding on to national and local modes of belonging as a way of resisting the imperialism of some forms of globalisation. Alexis Wright calls for the settled mind; and the Palmers' generation, including Prichard, sought to find harmony with the environment. They were fore-runners in the field of environment, empire and culture, and, not relying on a discourse about authentic belonging to the land, theirs was a vision of aesthetics committed to politics, and aesthetics based in the human love of nature. The environmental imagination has been a powerful force in Australian creative writing and is undervalued in contemporary debates.

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