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"ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE": APOCALYPSE IN ALEXIS WRIGHT'S CARPENTARIA

ABSTRACT: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) uses the biblical Apocalypse to argue for the significance of stories in creating futures. Stories from all cultures provide a means by which cultural memory can be shared and beliefs and knowledge can be disseminated to future generations. The apocalypse, or post-apocalypse, is also a metaphor for the creation of a new literary space in which the Australian novel can encompass both Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural expression.

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* has proved to be something of an enigma in Australian literature. Critics have responded to it variously, at times rapturous in appraisal ("The Best Australian Novel for Years ..." [Ferrier]), at other times perplexed ("Uncertain Magic" [Syson] and "puzzling" [Devlin-Glass 83]). Sharrad makes a study of the disparity in responses such as "hard going " and "greatest, most inventive ... epic ever produced in Australia" (52). Syson's review summarises best the varied responses:

> I am left uncertain as to what to think of *Carpentaria*. Is it a rambling showing-off of Wright's undoubted literary skills? Is it a mere pastiche of good ideas? Is it a book that, despite what can be taken for flaws and impasses, ends up a pleasing and important document of our time? (85)

Critics have at times solved the problem of not knowing what to make of *Carpentaria* by comparing it to the works of Australian predecessors, such as Frank Hardy, Patrick White and Xavier Herbert (Syson 85; Devlin-Glass 82). While these comparisons offer some insight into some of the stylistic features and physical landscape of *Carpentaria*, they limit the understanding provided by a comparative study of Wright's work and the works of other Indigenous writers both in Australia and internationally. Wright herself draws our attention to the influences of Carlos Fuentes, W.B. Yeats, as well as the traditional storytellers of *Carpentaria* ("On Writing" 4), who inspired her to "write something down of ourselves of what has been unwritten, so as to affirm our existence on our terms" ("On Writing" 8).

By broadening one's understanding of Wright's influences one can then place *Carpentaria* not just in the Australian literary context but within a context of Indigenous writers more

broadly, helping one to appreciate the aesthetic approach she brings to the Australian context. Ravenscroft describes this aesthetic as strange and different, an "impossible dialectic" (197). The impossible dialectic of *Carpentaria* is a post-apocalyptic aesthetic that speaks from a future in which the familiarity of the contemporary Australian novel is replaced with the unfamiliar. In this novel, representations of time, plot, myth and setting privilege the epistemologies of Indigenous people, resulting in a discourse that displaces whiteness as the dominant paradigm.

Compounding the difficulty of plot, temporality and setting is Wright's rather paradoxical use of biblical references, most notably, the Armageddon and Apocalypse stories. The extensive references to biblical characters and parables may leave the reader wondering how Wright can achieve an affirmation of "our existence on our terms," but is perhaps best understood when one recognises the importance of cultural stories observed by Indigenous cultures compared with the amnesia of the non-Indigenous cultures of the novel (Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty" 88). The novel, among other things, is a story about the importance of the story and the ways in which story maintains memory and offers strength, resilience and future: "The Indigenous world is both ancient and modern, both colonial experience and contemporary reality, and the problem right now for us, is how to carry all times when approaching the future" (Wright, "On Writing" 11-12). Wright compares the Indigenous practice of storytelling—in which "the elders ... began their memory revisions. This was a daily task, a memory tribunal, undertaken with relish by the old people for everyone's matter of concern" (50)—to the white inhabitants of the town of Desperance: "*These people are not any good*"; "*They don't even remember their own religion*" (47); and "Their history was just a half-flick of a switch of truth—simply a memory no greater than two life spans" (56).

Wright uses the story of the Armageddon and Apocalypse to structure the plot. Where the sub-plots are non-linear, the apocalypse provides the arching plot; there has been a sin against God, which results in destruction of the people. Working in conjunction with the apocalypse plot is the secondary plot structure, which begins in the second paragraph with the account of the birth of creation: "The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity" (*Carpentaria* 1). This creation of the land, rivers and mudflats signifies the formation of a belief system and its people:

> When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river, no larger or smaller than the others, a river which offers no apologies for its discontent with people who do not know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin. (*Carpentaria* 2)

The creation serpent too is "discontent" and like its Christian counterpart, "permeates everything." The contrasting belief systems provide plots—one European in origin, the other Indigenous Australian—both telling the story of the destruction of those who have wronged. Both stories emphasise the imperative of stories, myths and memories and their role in the dissemination of beliefs and practices. The novel goes on to demonstrate that those who perish are those who do not know their stories.

Mozzie Fishman (whose name and role in *Carpentaria* strongly resemble those of Moses in the Bible) travels the country with the Dreamtime stories. He urges as he leaves his men, "Even if I don't get through, don't survive this, the story has to go on. Nothing must stop our stories, understand?" (*Carpentaria* 413). Similarly Norm Phantom carries, in his actions and in passing stories on, both his biblical stories and the Dreamtime stories:

> 'You remember the story about the sea parting for the people to walk through it? No? Of course you people wouldn't know that story either, I suppose, because you people talk, talk, talk and you learn nothing.
>
> 'The sea could part and a man could walk on water.' What was more, he told her before she was even born, his own two good eyes actually saw the phenomenon explained in the white man's bible.
>
> 'I was walking if you please, straight out of a world that belonged to marine creatures and what have you swimming about in sea water, who had made enemies of men in the history of Dreamtime.' (*Carpentaria* 491)

Norm Phantom takes wisdom from all stories and survives the destructive cyclone as he calls on the knowledge of the land and sea provided in stories to navigate the islands and seas that lead him home. In the above passage Norm speaks to Hope, his daughter-in-law, who has no stories and no practical knowledge of how to survive at sea. What Hope symbolises is the potential to learn stories, all stories, as a means to create a future. Upon returning safely home with Norm, Hope takes his stories and knowledge back out to sea to search for Will.

The irony of *Carpentaria* is not that the resistance of the colonised destroys the colonist—although the Indigenous characters play a role in destroying symbols of colonisation—but that the colonist's God destroys the colonist because of their injustice, ignorance and failure to know their stories. It is the "innocent little black girls," coming home from church, who "look around at the human fallout" and announce the beginning of armageddon. They "shyly ask if the weather has been forecast correctly today" while the nation "claims to know everything except the exact date its world will end" (*Carpentaria* 11). Those characters who "don't even remember their own religion" (47) fail to read the signs of the approaching apocalypse, including many of the biblical plagues released by Moses. As the storm builds

around them, the rather aptly named Desperaneans cut down the bat-infested trees to rid the town of potential disease (446). Their foolhardy desperation to control the natural environment, rather than to nurture it, distracts them from an environment that is acting to remove them.

The correspondence between the characters, plot and sub-plots of the novel and those of the Bible, Qur'an and Torah broadens the importance of story beyond the novel's town of Desperance. Mozzie Fishman—"his name might have been Paul, or something Old Testament like Joshua" (*Carpentaria* 116)—becomes a modern Moses as he leads his pilgrims on constant journeys "through every desert on the continent ... totally responsible for keeping the one Law strong" (119). Those familiar with the stories of Moses will notice other similarities between the two: similar names (Mozzie is phonemically similar to the Hebrew Moseh); impaired eye-sight; the ability to divine water in the desert; lives led as desert men; as well as their roles in the release of various plagues upon the oppressors. Wright infuses the novel with some of the ten plagues released by Moses on the Pharaoh and his people: the plague of frogs, water into blood, diseased livestock, plague of flies, storms of fire, darkness and, perhaps most notably, the Passover, as the final wrath passes over Desperance. During the Passover Mozzie's car is notably marked with the signs of the cross.

This is not to deny Mozzie Fishman's role as a symbol of Indigeneity and Indigenous Law, but to assert that Wright has constructed figures who are able to traverse the broad spectrum of religious story in such a way as to be identifiable to many. Mozzie can then be Moses or a great Elder carrying the Law of all time. He comes to represent the observance of religion, the restoration of Law and the power of storytelling.

Devlin-Glass has suggested that the difficulty of reading *Carpentaria* is due to the "incommensurability of Aboriginal mythological systems and Western representations" (83), which is true if the reader limits their reading within cultural bounds. But it could be argued that while Mozzie ostensibly argues against Christianity—"Biblical stories lived in somebody else's desert" (*Carpentaria* 136)—and spends his time preaching Indigenous Law, Wright has constructed a character Christian readers should recognise from their own stories: a prophet who leads his people out of slavery. The use of the modal *might* in "his name *might* have been Paul or something Old Testament" (*Carpentaria* 116, my emphasis) suggests that Mozzie is a type of character, someone familiar who plays a role that has been played by others in stories across cultures. His character becomes symbolic of those who fight for justice and the observance of religious law. *Carpentaria* relies on an understanding of the value of stories for providing knowledge by way of apprenticeships (Ong 9). Stories provide rules and guidance for living with the corollary that the lost story leads to the loss of life.

Carpentaria tells the story of existence from the creation of land by the ancestral serpent to the Christian Apocalypse foretold as destiny. The novel opens with the announcement

(annunciation perhaps) of the beginning of armageddon, the last battle of the apocalypse. The novel is marking the end of time for the "wicked" (*Carpentaria* 1). And although "wicked" is not immediately aligned with whiteness, Wright makes it clear that "wicked" is not "innocent little black girls" (1). The use of the apocalypse as a plot device creates a platform for the overt political statements on justice that Wright posits, such as the murder and enforced slavery of native people, the right to lands, as well as a criticism of the powerful occupier's corruption. *Carpentaria*'s allusions to the biblical story of the Apocalypse suggest that the narrative will address the punishment of the unjust or evil. The innocent are to be delivered from their plight by an earth-bound figure through whom God speaks and acts. In the case of *Carpentaria*, Joseph Midnight sings the navigation of the seas to Will Phantom, Will destroys the mine, Norm Phantom rescues Hope and Bala and returns to the town to continue caring for the ancestral serpent's land, and Mozzie Fishman delivers the three dead boys to the Ancestral Spirits. And the divine hand of the Creator wreaks punishment on the oppressor by delivering destruction.

The opening paragraph's declaration of finality—"Armageddon begins here" (*Carpentaria* 1)—is immediately contrasted with the second paragraph, which tells the story of the creation serpent carving the land at the beginning of all time. After creation, the giant serpent resides deep under the ground, permeates everything and "attaches to the lives of the river people like skin" (2). The river people maintain this attachment by observing the serpent's story and caring for its place and land. Norm Phantom's home is on the nest of the serpent, creating for some a sense of unrest but for others a sense of belonging. The invocation of the creation serpent in the novel's opening reinforces the importance of ancient stories to the modern people of the post-apocalypse. The narrator tells the story of all time, keeping it alive and present, observing an obligation that ensures his survival but also affirms for the reader his value as their guide. The observance of ancient story in *Carpentaria* fulfils the narrator's obligation to keep the stories, as well as meeting Wright's objective to write a story that would speak to her people and her land (Wright, "On Writing" 2).

Story in *Carpentaria* is not the exclusive domain of one culture over another, but a valued custom held by cultures to carry memory. Stories share many of the same objectives: to explain creation and humankind's obligations as part of the contract of creation; to establish a code of rules for moral living, including "what to do, how to live like a proper human being" (*Carpentaria* 246); to provide practical advice on physical survival; and to act as a warning against living beyond the physical and moral boundaries of humanity. Stories obligate the cultural group to maintain, care for and sustain the story, as well as informing listeners of other obligations such as those to other members of the group, to the land and environment and to themselves. The apocalyptic hand of destruction is the hand of those who fail to meet the obligations of the story and as a result destroy themselves, as the novel suggests of the white inhabitants of Uptown who allow the mine to destroy their land. In the Indigenous Law stories it is the land, and, through the idea of relatedness in Indigenous ontology (Kwaymullina

and Kwaymullina), the environment that rid the town of the mine and those who support it, whereas a biblical reading of the novel suggests that God, unhappy with the white inhabitants of the town and their injustice and sin, rids the landscape of their presence. Both readings conclude that humanity's obligations as found in story are imperative to survival.

As Mozzie Fishman leads his religious pilgrimage across country, carrying the traditional story and observing the obligations he has to telling the story to the land and its people, Wright carries out this role too with her telling of *Carpentaria*. She writes:

> ... realising the largeness of standing where countless generations of people whose ancestry I share would have left their footprints, that I decided I wanted to return something of what I have learnt and to continue the story of this country of my forefathers. So in a very small way, I would like to think that *Carpentaria* is a narration of the kind of stories we can tell to our ancestral land. (Wright, "On Writing" 2)

J.D. Woods, a South Australian journalist, wrote in 1879 about the Indigenous Australians, "Without a history they have no past; without a religion they have no hope; without habits of forethought and providence, they can have no future" (qtd. in Nanni 75). This assertion was premised on the ideological relegation of Indigeneity to the past, and an awareness of the colonial project to eliminate natives from the land in order to replace their presence (Nanni 13; Said 207). The construction of the futureless native trope is an example of Said's orientalist mechanism for creating truths in language (203), and in the case of Indigenous Australians, a truth based on ideology and commerce.

Tropes that pertain to the futureless nature of Indigeneity prevail because of the difficulty in challenging the cultural strength that supports pervasive discourses (Said 41), discourses whose self-referencing denies the possibility of alternate truths (Moreton-Robinson "Whiteness" 87; Wolf 209). When the subaltern voice is heard to challenge the dominance of the European system, the act is "attributed to religious, magical, fanatical behaviour" (Fanon 46) rather than a legitimate challenge to inequality.

Wright encapsulates the difficulty for the Indigenous writer who writes from the margins of society to challenge the dominant discourse:

> I tried to come to an understanding of ... how to understand the idea of Indigenous people living with the stories of all times in this country, and secondly, how to write from this perspective. ("On Writing" 2)

How to write from the perspective of the Other and maintain a truth commensurate with that perspective, as opposed to the constructed truths of the dominant discourse, is the challenge for not only the Indigenous, but all marginal groups whose truth is not found in the

discourse of the dominant. Aileen Moreton-Robinson's examination of the difficulty for the Indigenous writer reveals that, because Indigenous literature is circumscribed by a dual audience, there arises a potential for conflict between the expected, acceptable representations of Indigeneity and the authentic representations desired by an Indigenous audience. But Moreton-Robinson suggests that working within a white paradigm can enable forms of resistance: "One can conform and resist simultaneously because conformity enables access to certain knowledges about whiteness which can be appropriated to use strategically in the act of writing itself" ("Whiteness" 86). Michael Taussig summarises the process succinctly: "the power of the copy to influence what it is a copy of" (250).

Carpentaria attempts to "critically engage with and deconstruct the white cultural representations of Indigeneity" (Moreton-Robinson, "Whiteness" 86) in a literary form. Familiar representations of Indigeneity exist within the novel: the young petrol sniffers, the dilapidated living conditions, the children who are late to school, and the men who become miners despite the ruin to native land. But these familiar representations of Indigeneity are deconstructed by Wright's inversion of discursive tropes: Indigenous characters are granted agency by occupying the subject position of the novel, and are portrayed as wise and heroic, while whiteness occupies the margins and is represented as out of time and place; Indigeneity is temporally and spatially situated; counter histories are voiced, such as in the voice of Micky and his war museum, and written; and the small town setting is familiar but the view is from a different angle, that is, from the outskirts of town rather than the white centre. Wright engages with the novel as a predominantly white art form to create a form that enables resistance. *Carpentaria* can be read as a strategic use of appropriated literary forms and language to create a new way of understanding both Indigeneity and whiteness, and for that reason the appropriated form of the novel is as important in creating meaning as is the content (Tapping, "Oral Cultures" 91).

One of Wright's difficulties in creating a form for *Carpentaria* was the choice of its narration. *Carpentaria*'s predominantly oral form was a point that occupied Wright for some time (Wright, "On Writing" 2). Her hope that the oral voice would both observe the tradition of storytelling as well as engage more Indigenous readers is an attempt to construct a text that is authentically Indigenous, "to create in writing an authentic form of Indigenous storytelling that uses the diction and vernacular of the region" ("On Writing" 6). While creating an authentic voice, the choice to adopt an oral form for the narration of *Carpentaria* is also a means of resisting European hegemony.

Traditional oral storytelling resists the generic imperatives of the literary novel vis-à-vis temporal sequencing, linear plotting and the centrality of whiteness, and Wright hopes that its use in *Carpentaria* portrays, "the reality of the Indigenous world differently than in the context of how novels might normally be written ..." ("On Writing" 3). Wright explains that fiction, and in particular English and Australian fiction, is limited by boundaries "which

encode the development of thinking in this country, and which follows through to containment of thought and ideas in the novel" ("On Writing" 3). To liberate the ideas encapsulated in *Carpentaria*, in particular ideas regarding beliefs and knowledge, Wright resists the traditional boundaries of the novel, and presents instead a form that is a hybrid of the literary and oral traditions. In this way the voice of *Carpentaria* maintains Indigenous authenticity whilst conforming to some conventions of the novel. Wright addresses the dual audiences that circumscribe Indigenous literature, and offers a form that at once conforms to and resists "white regimes of knowledge" (Moreton-Robinson, "Whiteness" 86).

One of Wright's objectives in writing *Carpentaria* was to "question the idea of boundaries through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world ..." ("On Writing" 3). The traditional oral narrator is a mechanism for allowing the text to question the boundaries and expectations some non-Indigenous readers refuse to acknowledge (Heiss and Minter 2-4). These boundaries and expectations take the form of generic textual expectations and representations, and cultural epistemologies.

Orality has a unique set of syntactic forms that have been relinquished with the advent of the written text, forms that often align with the cultural beliefs and knowledge of the storyteller. For example, the syntactic structures common to oral texts, particularly parataxis and apposition, resist the typical hierarchical structures of the novel, in particular the necessity for linearity and progress, or plotting (Brooks xi), and instead support the idea of things being in equal relationship. Parataxis is the process of accumulating clauses in coordination rather than subordination:

> Everyone had seen these boys walking about town, speeded up on petrol fumes and looking like zombies, walking straight past people as though they did not exist, sometimes with their little girls in tow, initiated by older boys on petrol as well. (Wright, *Carpentaria* 313)

The accumulation of equally weighted clauses prevents the description from progressing. Instead, the temporal moment is held still as the description builds. Similarly, apposition, the process of placing two phrases, normally noun phrases, side by side with one element identifying the other, is used to accumulate information with regards to the noun:

> So, the 'edge' people, all of the blackfella mob living with quiet breathing in higgily-piggerly, rubbish-dump trash shacks, all popped any old where in the prickly bushes, all along a cobweb of dirt tracks running crooked, left, right and centre outside of town ... (Wright, *Carpentaria* 53)

The apposition results in the elimination of the verb of a supporting clause with the effect of description dominating over action. Like parataxis, information is cumulative and

serves to disrupt linearity by holding the moment still. These syntactic structures work to resist the privilege of linearity and plot, opting more for the privileging of ideas and descriptions.

The use of the syntax common to the oral tradition is not in itself enough to disrupt linearity. Another feature of orality is its emphasis on a series of episodes rather than the development of a climactic linear plot. Walter J. Ong's study of orality and literacy has shown that while orality has no tradition of lengthy or novel-sized linear plots, *Carpentaria*, which is epic even for a novel, is created in the tradition of extended stories, or strings of related episodes that form to create a plot (Ong 144). Traditionally, the progress of the story tended to be episodic or thematically driven rather than plot driven. Episodes could be re-arranged without losing the thematic driver of the text, and without needing to strictly adhere to linearity. The singer, poet or storyteller's role was to transfer traditional thought from the songs he had heard sung to his listeners (Ong 145-146). The focus of the story or song was not simply to entertain but to disseminate knowledge in a series of theme-based episodes. *Carpentaria* takes up the tradition of emphasising episodic themes over plot, creating a non-linear plot that appears to spiral through a series of temporal reference shifts and flashbacks.

When examined as a series of thematically based episodes, *Carpentaria*'s structure is somewhat like the boxes within boxes described by Ong (144), or as Wright puts it in *Carpentaria*, "anyone can find hope in the stories: the big stories and the little ones between" (12). The big story that encapsulates the whole is the thematic episode of the creation and destruction of the town of Desperance as described in the opening two paragraphs: "Armageddon begins here," followed by the ancestral creation serpent coming down "long before man was a creature ..." (1). Between creation and destruction are a number of other episodes that serve to contextualise themes regarding topics, such as: the importance of story in providing knowledge for the survival of all things; the living nature of space and its participation in its own survival; the importance of Indigenous Law and kinship; and the necessity of observing the spirits of the land. These themes are explored in the episodes of the arrival, death and burial of Elias; the imprisonment, death and burial of the three young Aboriginal boys; the development of the town and mine, and the destruction of both; the white invasion of the Indigenous people; and the Indigenous people's ongoing culture and return to sovereignty by the cyclone. Weaving in and out of the episodes are characters who offer various additional information by way of focalised third-person narrative. In this way, episodes are visited at several points throughout the novel, resisting linear climactic plotting.

Part of the difficulty of *Carpentaria* is in its use of focalisation to narrow in on episodes of particular importance. Wright manipulates the character of the narrator to have him focalise through different characters in the text. While focalisation, and even the changing of focalised characters, is of no particular interest, what is interesting in *Carpentaria* is the blending of temporal changes with a change in focalisation. Elias Smith's arrival in the town

after being washed up in a storm provides a good example. After a large electrical storm, local children see Elias walking in from the sea. He collapses on the sand and is unable to speak. Over the course of 30 pages, Wright describes the arrival of Elias using a blend of first- and third-person narration. The first-person narration slowly moves to third person, decreasing in narrative bias, as the focalisation narrows from the town to the Uptown people, to the Uptown people on the beach, and to individual characters. Complicating the narrative is the interjection of past and future episodes. The narrator takes over the story, slipping into the first person, as well as sliding in temporal reference points to relay tangential episodes leading to or from the moment on the beach. The significance of Elias arriving on the beach is emphasised by the narrative circling, the multiple voices telling the story of his arrival, and Elias's placement in the future and past of many stories: "This was the story about Elias Smith which was later put alongside the Dreamtime by the keepers of the Law to explain what happened once upon a time …" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 53). The complicated grammatical structure in this sentence reveals a disruption to the practice of fixed reference points (Reichenbach 74) and challenges the reader's expectations of temporal fixity.

The oral form in *Carpentaria* has the additional effect of placing Indigeneity in the subject position. The narrator's occupation of this role in the text displaces the dominant white narrator, and thus places Indigeneity in the default position (Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty" 87). The narrator's adoption of the subject position disrupts the discursive race-dying-out trope (Wolfe 208), whereby Indigeneity is defined by a lack of agency (Brewster, "Indigenous Sovereignty" 87), and repositions the Indigenous characters as the instruments of action. Brewster suggests that the effect of Indigeneity assuming the default or normalised position in literature is to defamiliarise whiteness ("Indigenous Sovereignty" 87). By defamiliarising whiteness, the received assumptions about literature, as well as the value of the colonising project, may be brought into question by virtue of occupying the Other position, a position to be studied and examined (Said 32). For example, Wright's Indigenous narrator assumes Indigeneity as the default system of belief and knowledge. His temporal ordering of the novel becomes merely an artefact of the text, an assumed shared knowledge. Because the novel assumes Aboriginal temporal knowledge as the default, European knowledge, particularly temporality, is moved to the margins, thus positioning the reader to question its assumed dominance and relevance.

The centrality of *Carpentaria*'s traditional oral narrator creates a sense of the performativity of the oral tradition. In the oral performance the narrator occupies the same space as the audience and characters created in the story (Ong 46), and in this shared space the story invokes all participants. *Carpentaria*'s narrator becomes a character who carries the authority of the elder, the wise old man who speaks to his audience, like "some old Aboriginal person was telling the story" (Wright, "On Writing" 11). His wisdom is accentuated by his vast knowledge of the space and all its stories. But his wisdom is incorporeal, as revealed in the first page of the novel when he describes the creation of the land. The language is heavily

loaded with images of the event, with the detail of the images suggesting the narrator's presence at the event. Emphasising the narrator's omniscient presence is his invocation of the audience as he slips briefly into a second-person narrative; he remarks, "if you had been watching," and, "picture the creative serpent …" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 1). The use of second person compares the status of the reader, who is earth- and time-bound, with the narrator, who travels time and space to be present not only in the ancient past, but also the distant future from which he speaks. But the recruitment of the audience into a participative role in the story also creates empathy in the audience (Ong 46), an empathy that Wright conjoins to the normalised Indigenous centre.

There are also occasions when the narrator moves into a first-person narrative, implicating himself in the action:

> The soundwaves coming off the explosion in the aeroplane hangars at the biggest mine of its type in the world, Gurfurritt, were just about as tremendous a sound you could ever expect to hear on this earth. Like guyfork night. Boom! Boom! Over and over. But one hundred times more louder than that. Ripped the lot. We were thinking, those of us lying on the ground up in the hills smelling ash—what if our ears exploded? What would deafness sound like? We should have thought of that first. (Wright, *Carpentaria* 393)

The first-person narrative heightens the effect created by the occasional use of second-person narrative. This implicates the narrator into the story, blurring boundaries between the roles of narrator and participant, and audience and participant, eliminating the necessity for temporal logic since the story is always at the time of its performance, and its concerns are always the concerns of its audience. The use of the participatory narrator and audience personas effectively challenges the boundaries within the novel that limit knowledge, as identified by Wright, since knowledge is expanded by the development of the empathetic relationship with the Other.

Wright's use of the participatory oral narrator has the secondary effect of challenging the language of the novel. As the narrative moves into first person, the narrator adopts the vernacular of the men he describes, through the use of repetitive onomatopoeia, the misspelling of Guy Fawkes (which is an interesting play with the vernacular in the literate, graphological form), and the grammatically irregular "more louder." The narrator adopts the persona of one of the men, the hero in the novel, which lends to his account a greater authority as well as giving him some earthly status. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin consider the use of code-switching and adoption of the characters' vernacular as a means to appropriate the power of the colonial centre. Language, which has been the source of power, is controlled by the narrator, who first appropriates then alters it to better represent those who exist at the margins of the dominant language (72-74). Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's analysis of the code-switching in Joseph Furphy's 1903 novel *Such is Life* is particularly relevant to *Carpentaria*:

The linguistic multiplicity outlines both the complexity of the society and the complexity of a language in the process of formation. Variance in this novel is a signifier of a radical Otherness, not just as a construct which continually reinserts the gap of silence, but as a process which relentlessly foregrounds variance and marginality as the norm. (75)

The confidence of the narrator, his part in resistance as well as his omniscient state in the novel, asserts the continuing cultural resistance and resilience of Indigenous people, their story and knowledge. The code-switching and vernacular transcription assert not only confidence but a necessity to move the marginal and silenced voice of the Other to the centre. In the case of *Carpentaria*, failure to learn the syncretic language of the narrator results in the difficulty of decoding the meaning.

Whilst *Carpentaria*'s apocalypse motif may be seen as an argument for the importance of story, the decolonisation of native land, as well as the right to sovereignty of Australia's First People, it is also an argument for the decolonisation of intellectual space. Wright argues against the colonising nature of Western ontologies with a particular emphasis on time, Law and space, both physical and intellectual. While time, Law and land are dealt with extensively in Carpentaria, it is Wright's treatment of intellectual space as manifested in her creation of a post-apocalyptic novel that argues for Indigenous sovereignty.

Wright's post-apocalyptic future is a place that offers hope for both the recognition of First Australians' sovereignty as well as for a shared future for all Australians. *Carpentaria* is the model for shared storytelling between cultures and from those shared stories comes the opportunity to value the differences that have previously been lost to the dominance of the European culture. Where whiteness has required assimilation, Wright argues for Indigenous sovereignty and demonstrates in her creation of *Carpentaria* a successful blend of cultures where what is valued is in the stories and the ways of living encapsulated in them. This is a space in which a literate novel influenced by an oral tradition benefits from the differences in culture and becomes the hallmark for a truly Australian novel.

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