

*Dreamtime Narrative and Postcolonisation:
Alexis Wright's Carpentaria as an Antidote to the Discourse of
Intervention*

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Abstract: On 21st June 2007, Alexis Wright won Australia's most prestigious literary award, the Miles Franklin Prize, for *Carpentaria* (2006) and received broad national attention as the first Indigenous Australian to be its sole recipient. This recognition of Indigenous cultural output coincided with the Federal decision to intervene the highly-troubled, dysfunctional Aboriginal population in remote communities of the Northern Territory with a military and police task force. This paradox of recognition-repression highlights the tense edges of the Indigenous/non-Indigenous interface in contemporary Australia and reveals the continuing gap between Indigenous fact and fiction, reality and hope for a better future. As a textual locus of Indigenous cultural regeneration, *Carpentaria* questions the invasive nature of the Federal intervention in several ways. Not only does the novel stand out for bending Western literary genres into an Indigenous story-telling mode, but also for having "Dreamtime Narrative" critically engage with the neo-colonial management of Australian resources and human relations. Mainstream readers are exposed to the "strange cultural survival" (Bhabha 1990: 320) of the Indigenous diaspora that proposes drastic solutions for the devastation wreaked upon the Australian land through capitalism and its cultural corollaries. This article contextualises Wright's fiction within wider developments in recent Indigenous literature and history, and traces how her awarded novel *Carpentaria* activates an Aboriginal epistemology of understanding human and country which defies mainstream politics of I/intervention and beckons towards a fresh beginning for Australia through a profound change of paradigm.

Key words: Alexis Wright; Indigenous Australian literature; Northern Territory Intervention

1. Introduction

Alexis Wright's writing both responds to and furthers developments in Indigenous-Australian literature in a steady commitment with Indigenous country, community and politics. Indigenous-Australian literature has flourished over the last three decades, addressing the disruption and destruction of tribal country and community tissue

through mainstream policies of alleged genocidal character (cf. Larissa Behrendt in Moses 2005: 17); however, it has also created an empowering intellectual space for Indigenous recovery. While the auto/biographic genre of life-writing, documenting Indigenous women's engagement with the issues of dispossession, removal to mission-reserves and the Stolen Generations (Grossman 2006), has been popular as a way of vindication, there has also been an innovative move towards the expression of the Aboriginal experience in experimental fiction, headed by the likes of Alexis Wright, Kim Scott and the controversial Mudrooroo.

The male authors Mudrooroo and Kim Scott veer away from documentary reflections on their lived experience and prefer to fictionalise Australia's silenced Indigenous history. In Mudrooroo's case, this choice seems informed by a politico-theoretical stance which primes community concerns over "self-interested" autobiography (Mudrooroo 1990: 149) as well as his inability to prove genetic Aboriginal belonging (Clark 2001: 59). Yet, in Scott's case the wish to prevent mainstream infringement of Indigenous privacy appears to be the motivation, as well as the conviction that fiction is better fitted to convey truths about Aboriginality under white settlement than writing about individual and community experience that may be interrogated under the bias of institutional history and statistics (Kunhikrishnan 2003). Alexis Wright's writing aligns with Mudrooroo's community concern and Scott's agenda, and reflects these authors' concern with the discursive links between knowledge, language and power in the Australian context and appropriate strategies to deconstruct them. Thus, Mudrooroo, Scott and Wright experiment with Indigenous and non-Indigenous form and content to create an Aboriginal way of story-telling adapted to the new times and its hybrid Indigenities through the Dreaming or Dreamtime.

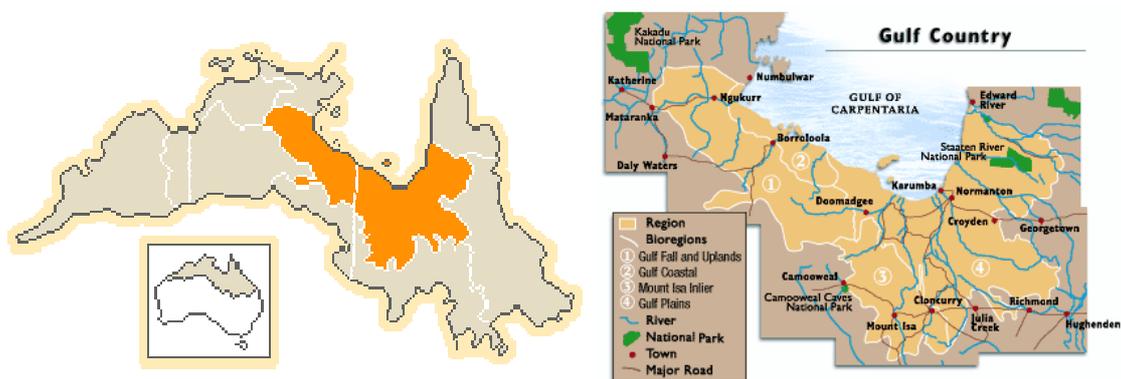
A set of origin myths forming the environmental, cultural and legal backbone of Indigenous society, the secret/sacred Dreamtime is passed on and given in custody to its members as country-mapping "songlines" guarded by totemic Ancestors. Rooted in and giving shape to tribal country and society, the Dreamtime mediates their destruction and renewal, life and death in what W.E.H. Stanner called a universal, holistic "Everywhen" linking the past, present and future (Boyer Lecture 1968). Thus it dynamically and non-hierarchically bridges a whole series of discursive fields discrete in Western discourse (Devlin-Grass 2008: 1-3, adapting Rose 2005). The levelling properties of Dreamtime Narrative, a literary transposition of Dreamtime onto Western epistemology, may be engaged in writing to "postcolonise" Indigenous country and culture, so that they are no longer informed by colonial structures and attitudes surviving after formal decolonisation (Moreton-Robinson 2003: 30). Thus, Mudrooroo, Scott and Wright's characters acquire totemic, Ancestral qualities in order to postcolonise/dissolve the race, gender and class categories of imported European epistemology, and to give way to local habitats beyond neo/colonial division and exploitation.

Mudrooroo (1997: 104) theoretically developed an Indigenous magic realism coined "maban reality."¹ It mobilises an empowering version of the Dreamtime in his *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* (1991), a story of collective Indigenous recovery on different epistemological levels. Yet, Mudrooroo subsequently wrote out of maban reality into a postmodern "indigenous" gothic, coinciding with his identity predicament; for not having a confirmed Indigenous bloodline, the now "Afro-Australian" author has

suffered the scathing effects of the hardliner identity politics he helped design in his academic work (1990; 1997), and has fallen into disgrace (Clark 2001: 59). This loss of identity he brilliantly comments upon in his vampire trilogy (1998-2000), whose postcolonising use of the gothic rewrites the triangle of identity, place and belonging into nihilist postmodern dissolution. The vampire trilogy functions as Mudrooroo's reckoning with Indigeneity and provides him with a unique place within Australian literature and Indigenous politics (Oboe 2003: vii-xxi; Renes 2011: 45-56).

On the other hand, the "white," urban Aborigine Kim Scott has successfully written himself back into his Nyoongar community and country, after a long and arduous search fictionalised in *True Country* (1993) and *Benang* (1999). Both novels draw on Dreamtime tropes to configure an alternative reality of Indigenous belonging. In *True Country*, Billy Storey's rebirth as an Indigene takes place through a near-mortal confrontation with the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming, and in *Benang*, Harley Scatt works his way back into Indigeneity by assuming a shamanic kind of hybridism producing new, hybrid songlines for his people. What is more, *Benang's* epic form and content deconstruct the language and project of eugenics as it was once applied to Indigeneity, and do away with traditional realist requirements of transparency, linear progress and solution. *Benang's* structure is consequently opaque, heteroglossic and non-hierarchical, using a multiplicity of voices which speak into the riddle of Harley's hybrid identity from alternating points in time and place. Thus, the novel remaps the rigid patriarchal eugenics of Harley's family tree as a levelling Indigenous kinship structure. *Benang's* prose primes a rhizomatic framework of development and transformation which is neither linear nor circular but expands and reproduces in oblique, non-hierarchical ways, like the lateral root systems of some plants (Emmett 2005: 178-82, using Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Scott's take on identity, place and belonging is accordingly flexible and postcolonising but unlike Mudrooroo, he refuses total postmodern unfixity to allow for a sense of Indigeneity to develop in and through country. The novel's careful, open-minded politics of the Indigenous body and community as well as innovative content and form earned Kim Scott a shared Miles Franklin Literary Award in the year 2000.

Alexis Wright's efforts to address the Aboriginal case and cause also make for Dreamtime adaptations of the Aboriginal oral tradition into writing, on a par with Mudrooroo's "yarning" (Mudrooroo 1997: 89) and Kim Scott's "storying" (Buck 2001). Mudrooroo and Kim Scott share Western-Australian origins and as with most Indigenous authors Scott situates his writing in his homeland—now "homeless" Mudrooroo forming an understandable exception. As a recognised member of her Waanyi community, Wright's fiction also displays an intimate bond with tribal land, the "Gulf Country" around the Gulf of Carpentaria which maps across the coasts of Queensland and the Northern Territory.



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Wright writes about the dispossession of the Waanyi people, who have largely been removed from their traditional land (Wright 1998: 4/4); like Mudrooroo's, her literary agenda reflects her long years of professional commitment to local and also national Aboriginal activism. Thus, the nonfictional *Grog War* (1997) and *Take Power: Like This Old Man Here* (1998) were both written on invitation by local Aboriginal organisations and deal with community issues and politics.

Take Power is a compilation of essays and stories Wright edited for the Central Australian Land Council in commemoration of twenty years of land right struggle in Central Australia. *Grog War* documents the successful wager on the self-management of the alcohol problem that threatened to devastate the Warumungu community of Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory in the 1990s—an issue that has found a sinister Federal foil in the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention into dysfunctional remote Aboriginal communities and finds a reply in *Carpentaria*. Yet, like Mudrooroo and Scott, Wright eventually chooses fiction as a better vehicle to address issues of community and country, which allows her room for the imagination, experiment as well as hope, where political realities disappoint and fail. As we shall see, it is in this sense that Wright's two novels to date have had a marked capacity to coincide and engage with major developments in recent Indigenous politics.

2. Plains of Promise, Bringing Them Home and The Stolen Generations

While Wright's incursions into non-fiction were generally well-received (Grossman 1998), Wright had already experimented with fiction in *Grog War* by using an imaginary Aboriginal family as the protagonists of her account. Thus—like Kim Scott and Mudrooroo—she was convinced that fiction would offer better opportunities to reach a large audience without exposing her people to invasive scrutiny by the mainstream, an intuition that later political developments have proven true:

I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth—not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell ... I use literature to try and create a truer replica of reality (Wright 2002: 13-14).

Thus, her first novel *Plains of Promise* (1997) displays dark irony in its celebratory white settler reference to Gulf Country, since it addresses the plight of the Stolen Generations in fictional form. The novel depicts the troubled lives of three generations of Aboriginal women in the assimilation and post-assimilation period—grandmother Ivy Koopundi, mother Mary Doolan and daughter Jessie Doolan—as they try to trace back their roots to tribal kin and country after their separation and removal. Their attempts to reunite and locate their ancestry in an old mission reserve in Gulf Country, “home” to a deeply troubled, highly fragmented mob of dispossessed and dislocated Indigenous, are only successful on an opaque, subliminal Dreamtime level, and remain wrapped in layers of secrecy and Indigenous spirituality. The concluding short, magic bird fable presumably addresses the cause of all the troubles: the rupture of these women’s powerful spiritual link to a mysterious life-giving lake near the old mission. The story forwards an ambiguous, inconclusive message of hope and despair, its Dreamtime knowledge remaining unfathomable for the mainstream reader. The unpredictable disappearances and reappearances of the lake’s water do not clarify whether the damage inflicted upon Indigeneity by white domination is beyond repair or reversible.

With *Plains of Promise* Wright sought “a good portrayal of the truth which I see, and that is the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people” (2002: 15). The novel’s publication coincided with the Federal *Bringing-Them-Home* Report, which led to an official recognition of the trauma and destruction caused by the state policies to remove children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal families in the period 1930-70. Thus, the report intended to reach out to Indigeneity by addressing the actual possibilities for Indigenous inscription of this lost offspring, but *Plains of Promise*’s puzzling finale indicates that such recoveries are not easily achieved and depend on a combination of self-definition, community acceptance and lived Indigenous experience. *Plains of Promise* discomforts the mainstream with a dramatic account of removal, dispossession and cultural destruction, in which the mainstream gaze clashes with a protective, impenetrable universe of Aboriginal spirituality. Through the incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, Wright attempts to provide her people with an intellectual space in which to manage their historical awareness and cultural heritage, but at their own pace and to their own advantage. It turns *Plains of Promise* into “a call for mercy, a call for some understanding of what has been happening to our people, what our condition is ... to give us a chance to change” (Wright quoted in Ravenscroft 1998: 79-80).

The opaqueness of the plot, which refuses to release definite, final meaning to non-Indigenous readership, backfired on the novel’s mainstream acceptance. *Plains of Promise* met with mixed critical reception for its unconventional “magic-realist” treatment of Indigenous subject matter. Its “authentically Australian magic realism” (Jenny Pausacker, back cover blurb) finds peers in Kim Scott’s *Benang* and Mudrooroo’s *Master of the Ghost Dreaming*, whose treatment of reality, time and space have opaque magic-realist undertones that rely on the presence of a non-Western universe, the Dreamtime. Following Frances Devlin-Glass’s cue (2009: 205-242), I will use the phrase “Dreamtime Narrative” to describe these texts’ dynamic, engaged uses of Aboriginal epistemology in literature to write up and empower Indigeneity.

Wright uses the incommensurability of the Indigenous and mainstream universes to express a minority's relentless existential despair, which proved difficult to understand and digest for non-Indigenous Australians. Thus, the experimental nature of *Plains of Promise's* disturbing, harrowing family epic ended up somewhat at odds with the author's "ambition ... for [her] work ... to be published, to be read in Australia, to be read overseas. For the whole world to read it" (Wright 2002: 20). The agenda of vindication that underpins *Plains of Promise* remains difficult to access for the white reader, although Paul Sharrad has lately argued that the heightened general awareness of Indigenous cultural and political dynamics in the new millennium allows mainstream readership a better understanding of the novel in hindsight (2008: 4/16).

3. *Carpentaria*, *Capricornia* and authenticity

A decade of reflexive silence followed, in which Wright gathered her bearings, further developed her literary project and wrote *Carpentaria*. *Plains of Promise* had been reactive in tone and scope and written out of an almost fatal sense of disillusion with politics:

By the time I had come to making the decision to write a novel in the 1990s, I guess it was at a time of deep inner personal crisis I was experiencing about everything I had ever believed in about our rights as people. I was questioning the failures of our hopes for just about everything we fought for. Every idea and goal was overtaken by others. Governments found new ways of making our lives harder. We did not seem to gel as a political movement at either the national, state or regional level. As individuals, as communities, as peoples with Indigenous rights, *everything* we did to accomplish anything seem [*sic*] to be a meaningless exercise because the force of ingrained, inherited racism stood against us. I wrote *Plains of Promise* to deal with my inner crisis and loneliness of the soul. Writing was away of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people. I had hoped to achieve some recognition for our land. I was interested in the notion of what it meant to be ostracised (Wright 2002: 12).

However, *Carpentaria's* literary universe engages proactively with Aboriginal cultural traditions, showing that Wright's personal and political crisis is solved by engaging the literary imagination in the *transformation* of Indigenous reality. The transformative potential of writing may explain why *Carpentaria* allegedly plays on the form, content and irony of the popular mainstream classic *Capricornia* (1938), written by a former Chief Protector of the Northern Territory Aborigines when eugenics still formed the backbone of the mainstream relationship with Indigenous Australia. Rewriting the classics has been an important postcolonising writing strategy, and it stands to reason that Wright would latch on to Xavier Herbert's epic as a point of departure for an alternative, empowering depiction of the Indigenous community at Australia's Top End. Yet, in the Australian context, Wright's presumed rewrite generated controversy about *Carpentaria's* "authenticity" as a "truly" Indigenous text. Paul Sharrad notes some suggestive parallels with Xavier Herbert's epic novel in a paper entitled "Beyond *Capricornia*: Alexis Wright's ambiguous promise":

It is not hard to see a transition from Norman to Wright's central character, Normal, just as it is possible to hear an echo in his termagant wife, Angel Day, of Herbert's hotel keeper, Daisy Shay (40). These small intertextual ties serve to show up the more significant relations between the two novels, manifest as corrective surgery from an Aboriginal viewpoint. Although Herbert created something of a scandal for making explicit the then illicit relationships between white and black Australia and revealing the inhuman disregard for the mixed-blood offspring of such connections, his narration is relentlessly external and from a white perspective. If his central concern is the problematic issue of how to treat "half-caste" Australians, Herbert's anchor character Norman frequently disappears from view for long stretches while obnoxious, hypocritical and ignorant whites take centre stage to be pilloried. Moreover, it is their attitudes and language that dominate the text ... There is very little room here for a "Third Space" of undermining sly civility: it is a predominantly dualist world of struggle and death, black and white, seen from a white male perspective, albeit a drily critical one (Sharrad 2008: 7-8).²

These literary echoes riddle *Carpentaria*'s origins to a certain extent, as Wright has never suggested—and even denies—that her intention was to rewrite Herbert's novel. She has never made allusions to *Capricornia* as a source of inspiration or reference in her interviews and essays regarding her writing, or clarified whether she has read Herbert's novel. Rather, she claims the ancient Waanyi story-telling tradition and a series of South-American, magic-realist authors—Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Edouard Glissant, Eduardo Galeano and Patrick Chamoiseau—as the sources for her novel (Wright 2007: 82-3, 85-6; O'Brien 2007: 216).

Do Wright's comments imply that the similarities are just coincidental, off-footing some readers into believing the case for an Australian precedent where none exists? While Peter Pierce notes in a review that "Wright knows well that Xavier Herbert's comic epic, *Capricornia* (1938), will be on our minds" (2006: 13), Jane Perlez mentions that: "Wright said she chose the title 'Carpentaria' as a celebration of the ancestral lands that her mother and grandmother, members of the Waanyi nation, were forced from, and not as a nod to Xavier" (2007).

This contradiction suggests that Wright's stance is profoundly political: she insists on *Carpentaria*'s uniqueness and originality out of a concern to "create in writing an *authentic* form of Indigenous storytelling" (Wright 2007: 84, emphasis added). She therefore denies the existence of a Western prequel, rejects her novel's straightforward inscription into the European literary tradition, and insists on an independent Aboriginal literary configuration while adapting Western form and content to Indigenous needs and interests. No doubt Wright emulates the trickster figure in remaining silent on the question of *Capricornia*'s presumed precedent. Her trickster "performance" can be read as a consequence of the uneven power balance underlying the hybridisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary genres and content, serving an anti-canonical intent of deconstruction.

The objective of authenticity cannot be understood in essentialist terms in a global culture, and is always conditioned by intercultural communication, which bridges divergent systems of knowledge and representation. By definition the end-product "Indigenous Australian Literature" is a collage of mixed heritage, but if recognisably Aboriginal, it may make claims to a political agenda of enabling self-definition, to follow Michael Dodson's lead (2003: 39). Adding Kim Scott's cue (2000), this means that the Australian canon should be rewritten by inclusion from the Indigenous side, and not the mainstream's, which tends to be assimilative. While the evidence suggests *Capricornia*'s form and content inform *Carpentaria*, the need to promote Aboriginal fiction as a prime inclusive category of Australian cultural production would explain Wright's refusal to recognise *Capricornia* as *a*the source. This serves to prevent a *de-authorisation* of the novel by Australian neo-con interests that reject Indigenous participation in national culture beyond the subsidiary and folkloric. The Miles Franklin Award became the official recognition that *Carpentaria* stands out as an independent work of art by the way it draws on and reworks existing narrative traditions into new and different forms of telling stories. Displaying the innovative qualities of Mudrooroo and Kim Scott's fiction, *Carpentaria* does this by employing an engaged, hybrid form of Dreamtime storying which answers back to the political context in which it was conceived.

4. *Carpentaria*, *Little Children are Sacred* and the NT Intervention

With *Carpentaria*, Wright engaged a wider national audience, and this recognition materialised in the prestigious Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2007, despite the novel's criticism of settler-Australian society and its adverse political climate—Prime Minister John Howard's long-lived conservative rule. Critics generally acclaimed the empowered Indigenous universe the novel proffered as a remedy against the damage inflicted upon the land by Western civilisation, and also celebrated the novel's innovative style ((Davison 2008; Devlin-Glass 2009; McFadyen 2006; Perlez 2007; Ravenscroft 2006; Sharpe 2007; Sharrad 2008). The publication of *Plains of Promise* had already opportunely coincided with *Bringing Them Home*, but also formed part of a long series of Indigenous texts on the Stolen Generations such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987), Kim Scott's *True Country* (1993) and Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), Mudrooroo's vampire trilogy (1998-2000) and Kim Scott's *Benang* (1999). The Miles Franklin award for *Carpentaria*, in turn, coincided exactly with the start of the Northern Territory Intervention by the Federal government on 21 June 2007, responding with uncanny timing to another key event in Indigenous history and politics.

John Howard's decision to intervene in the highly dysfunctional remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory was made after the publication of a government report on rampant child sexual abuse in these communities, published in 2007 by the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse. Howard's subsequent political decisions perverted the report's title, *Little Children are Sacred*, into an opportunistic play on the humanist concern, religious compassion and respect for Indigeneity of *Bringing Them Home*, only to enable a fully-fledged backlash against Indigenous self-determination. Howard had already ignored the HREOC³ recommendation to issue an official Apology to the Indigenous communities for the plight and trauma caused to the Stolen Generations and their Indigenous kin. Howard's conservative cabinet had also amended the new Native Title legislation (1998) to make the recovery of traditional ownership of Indigenous lands harder, if not impossible. Additionally, it had done away with ATSIC, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission in 2005, a government organ that—however deficient—had allowed the First Nations a certain measure of self-rule for longer than a decade and a half. It was subsumed into the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, opening self-determination up to state intervention. Thus, the Northern Territory Intervention topped off a series of policies which curtailed Indigenous self-determination as the answer to their predicament, and glossed over the structural inequality with the mainstream that informs Aboriginal society's dysfunctional state of affairs.

Howard's invasion of the Northern Territory competences with a military and police taskforce was only made possible by the area's incomplete Federal status; not a Federated state but a mere "major mainland territory," its Parliament's legislation can be overridden by Commonwealth decision. Significantly this is what happened in this territory whose Aboriginal population represents 32% of its total, a much higher percentage than in any of the Australian states (*Australian Bureau of Statistics* 2006: 3-

6). This disempowerment on the state level echoes the lack of control over their own lives that many Indigenous Australians still suffer today. With the excuse of creating the conditions to prevent the ongoing child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities—itsself the dysfunctional outcome of unrelenting mainstream meddling in Indigenous affairs—the Intervention suspended local Aboriginal powers of government. A Social Darwinist notion of “protection” had returned as the key to understand the mainstream relationship with the Aboriginal population.

Ostensibly staged as a humanitarian gesture but reminiscent of the Stolen Generation policy of absorptionist and assimilationist days (Dodson 2007: 85-96), the Intervention was to boost voter support for the conservatives in the impending Federal elections as well as geared towards the imposition of a neo-liberal paradigm of Indigenous self-help, far outdoing its official purpose. Jon Altman summarises the regressive consequences of the emergency legislation as follows:

In the Northern Territory the reforms are mandatory and affect all residents of the seventy-three prescribed communities without differentiation. All welfare will be quarantined, townships will be compulsorily leased by the Australian Government, mandatory work activities will see the marshalling of local labour through Work for the Dole, community living arrangements will be reformed, the CDEP [Community Development Employment Projects] will be abolished, and community governance arrangements will be fundamentally altered through the appointment of government business managers with unfettered emergency powers. The government has conceded that these measures are racially discriminatory, but argues that they are “beneficial” so accord with the terms of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* and the Constitution (2007: 311).

In sum, the Howard Government’s agenda sought the solution to the social breakdown affecting remote Aboriginal communities—ingrained poverty, poor education, unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual and physical violence, poor health, state and welfare dependency and so on—in their failure to assimilate into mainstream society. As Melissa Hinkson writes:

the NT intervention is aimed at nothing short of the production of a newly oriented, “normalised” Aboriginal population, one whose concern with custom, kin and land will give way to the individualistic aspirations of private home ownership, career, and self-improvement. It is suggested that this is the only possible way forward for Aborigines (2007: 6).

Similarly, Patrick Dodson argues that:

The current battle ground of the *assimilation* agenda is located on the vast new region of northern and central Australia where Indigenous people maintain their languages, own their traditional lands under Western legal title, and practise their customs whilst seeking to survive on public sector

programs whose poor design has resulted in entrenched dependency (2007: 22, emphasis added).

It appears then that multiculturalist piecemeal engineering has not substantially alleviated the permanent social breakdown that many remote Aboriginal communities find themselves in, and this failure paved the way for a conservative return to an assimilationist agenda. However, John Howard was ousted by Labor in the last federal elections of November 2007, which suggests the return of a more reconciliatory mainstream agenda. Indeed, as the first point of government action, the Prime Minister elect Kevin Rudd moved a Motion of Apology to the First Australians for the damage inflicted by White colonisation and for the plight of the Stolen Generations in particular, which was presented to and passed by Parliament on 18 February 2008.

Just half a year before, the mainstream philosopher Raimond Gaita had written that Rudd's pledge "to apologise to the Aborigines for the wrongs done to them since settlement ... would mean nothing if it were not part of a practical concern to alleviate the material and psychological misery of many of the Aboriginal communities" (2007: 303). His words proved premonitory, as a fully-sourced and funded programme for improving Aboriginal living standards was not attached to this highly symbolic national event and still remains to be formulated and put into practice. Thus, while Alexis Wright (2002: 14) denounced "the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people", Marcia Langton (2008: 155) more recently stated that "Aboriginal society is sliding into a terminal state of under-development," highlighting:

the unassailable facts in hundreds of impoverished Aboriginal communities across remote Australia: radically shortened lives; the highest national rates of unemployment; widespread violence, endemic alcohol and substance abuse; the lowest national levels of education; and lifelong morbidity for hapless citizens suffering from heart disease, nutrition and lifestyle-related diseases such as diabetes (2008: 158).

Labor rule, whether through Kevin Rudd or his successor, Julia Gillard, has not led to the suspension of the Northern Territory Intervention; though the new social-democrat government has softened some of the Intervention's harsher aspects, it basically continues the support it had already given to the "Emergency Response" formulated under Howard. A dark reading of these manoeuvres would suggest that the Apology was offered so as to create the adequate political climate for the Intervention to continue. While some kind of intervening action has ostensibly been due in NT remote Aboriginal communities—and key Aboriginal figures such as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton have acknowledged and promoted this (Langton 2008)—the assimilative policing exerted on these peoples by current mainstream politics should never become the model for Australia's cross-cultural relationships again.

5. *Carpentaria*, Dreamtime Narrative and postcolonisation

How does Alexis Wright's Indigenous epic engage with this self-serving context of mainstream intervention and rule? Published under conservative tenure in 2006,

Carpentaria can be seen to denounce the Euro-Australian powers that marginalise, objectify and stifle the Waanyi Indigenous community in Gulf Country. In the novel, neo-colonialism is given fictional shape through the ruthless land-grabbing manoeuvres of the multinational mining corporation *Gurfurrit* (Go for it?) and provincial small-town racism that marginalise and disempower two rival fringe-dwelling mobs in a hapless imaginary Gulf location called Desperance. As with Mudrooroo and Kim Scott's Dreamtime strategies to Indigenise literature, Wright's narrative solution to the Aboriginal lack of agency is to mobilise the Indigenous protagonists through the regenerative powers of their totemic Dreamings.

In *Carpentaria*, Dreamtime Narrative adapts the Western Classical tradition so that Indigenous people may engage the elements of water, fire, air and earth to work the mining town and complex's total destruction and create a fresh Indigenous beginning. This allows the Indigenous community to overcome its inner divisions, resettle its land and project an invigorating future; the latter is emblematically represented in the survival of the fringe-dwelling Phantoms and Midnights, who join forces across three generations, disputed tribal territories and prohibitions on love and intermarriage. Like Kim Scott's *True Country* and *Benang*, *Carpentaria* functions within the parameters of heteroglossia, deploying a multitude of local characters in entangled longer and shorter stories. The area's traditional owners tell the most important tales of this almost biblical contemporary origin myth, and the novel's Indigenous agenda is projected foremost through Normal Phantom, the leader of the town's Indigenous Westside mob who transforms into the contemporary incarnation of a powerful Dreamtime Ancestor so as to act upon country. The following will briefly explore his transformation as an instance of Dreamtime Narrative's postcolonising potential.

Norm(al) Phantom's totemic Fish/Groper Dreaming is a minor manifestation of the powerful creation myth of the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming. The Dreamtime's inclusive, holistic nature allows Norm to straddle and join the sacred, spiritual forces of the Normal (!) river, home to the Rainbow Serpent, and of the Gulf sea, home to his Groper Dreaming (6). Indeed, according to local wisdom Norm is a powerful shaman able to defy storms at sea and return safely where others perish. Desperanians feel compelled to honour his legendary life-saving powers, believed to enhance the local fishermen's survival. Thus, in an epistemological twist, the local river's name is changed—postcolonised—“from that long deceased Imperial Queen to Normal's River” (8, 230).

Paradoxically, Norm is also “an old tribal man” condemned to live “in the dense Pricklebush scrub on the edge of town ... a human dumping ground next to the town tip ... All choked up, living piled together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump” (4). A “well-respected” outcast, Norm's existence is thus strongly affected by the Indigenous subjugation to Western civilisation. His natural habitat has perverted into a fringe location associated with disposal, destruction, disease and death, which puts into question the universal benefit and efficiency of the Western capitalist production mode and culture. This liminal site scarcely provides for the redundant, dispossessed traditional owners of the area, who subsist by scraping together a meagre living from white society's cast-offs. The existence of an underclass beyond the town's “invisible safety net”—an ironic metaphor for the “distance of

tolerance” instituted against Indigenous people and “other evils”—marks the exclusionary race, gender and class boundaries of white Uptown society (100).

However, marginal dump society unsettles Uptown through Norm’s ability to recycle capitalist effluvia into perpetual artistic beauty. Taxidermy earns him international fame and status, but the workshop where he brings fish corpses “back to life” inspires Gothic fear in the locals (205-8), as the site is associated with the spirit world of Norm’s Groper Dreaming and the uncanny “life-restoring” science of taxidermy. Through Norm, but unacknowledged as the country’s norm by the white settlers, Indigeneity becomes haunting for Desperance. Its white sense of place is built on a false sense of history and belonging: “Their original forebear, a ghostly white man or woman, simply turned up one day ... their history was just a half flick of the switch of truth—simply a memory no greater than two life spans” (57). Un-rootedness is returned as the haunting Indigenous spirit: despite the settlers’ superficial inscription into country, neo/colonialist domination fixes Norm Phantom’s ghostly presence as absence in the margins of white civilisation, as his oxymoronic name reveals.

Norm’s presence and status are also questioned by Joseph Midnight’s Eastside mob, who occupy the Indigenous fringe on the other end of town. In a comic wink to some of the fraudulent materialistic excesses provoked by Native Title legislation, they make a false claim on the location through the invented tribal identity of “Wangabiya, so as to benefit from mining royalties” (52). The Eastsiders emulate white settlers’ territorial claims, unsustainable but spurring Indigenous division. The wandering Aboriginal Lawman Mozzie Fishman therefore reminds us that “for four hundred years, the Midnight people have been doing the wrong thing ... When the mine was built it exacerbated the situation because it created a window of opportunity for Joseph and his family to start making Native title claims over the area” (426). With the local White economy fuelling the feud between both patriarchs, the separation of both mobs has become deeply entrenched and turned into a convenient divide-and-rule for uptown and its mining business.

Norm’s unsettling location between presence and absence, life and death, associates him with the Dreamtime and provokes his total marginalisation. Abandoning Desperance, he takes the corpse of his white soul mate Elias, another prophet-like character rejected and left to his meagre luck by the uptown population, out to sea. Their sharing of epistemologically different navigational knowledge has earned Elias a dignified last resting place, the original site of Norm’s Groper Dreaming—the powerful location from which his Ancestral wrath against Uptown develops into the cyclone that postcolonises Desperance. Indeed, marginalisation and death have spurred Norm on a transformative “walkabout” along his Groper songline that puts many of his beliefs to the test but reactivates his Indigenous agency. It is this Dreamtime confrontation with life and death that challenges/postcolonises his ingrained race, gender and class-informed convictions and acquiescence with the Indigenous status quo.

Norm’s confrontation and reconciliation with the “female” element of water, which has forever shaped Gulf Country, are inscribed in the conflictive relationship with Angel Day, his former wife. Angel Day’s predilection for the town’s rubbish tip reads as an ironic metaphor for incomplete, even impossible assimilation into whiteness. A tribal

queen of sorts (447), she is responsible for choosing Desperance's dump as their home. This is much to Norm's disgust, who leaves this place of "haunting spirits" in impotent rage to fish at sea for five years (16). Angel's retrieval of an old clock implies assimilation into the mainstream: "In the new sweet life, the Phantom family would be marching off to bed at the correct time, just like the school thought was really desirable, then they would march off to school on time to do their school work" (21). She also inscribes the dump as sacred country after painting a found Virgin Mary statue into an Aboriginal Madonna (39), rekindling the land local conflict with her greedy claim to traditional ownership of the rubbish tip (24-6). To complete her fall into local disgrace, Angel chooses the celebration of the Bicentennial, honouring 200 years of white colonisation, to commit adultery and leave Norm. It turns into a long and slow journey out of the unhealthy margins of her homeland into a viler fringe location—the ghettos of the imperial metropole, London. In *Eastsiders' D/dreams*, Angel Day parades as a ghostly outcast of both Indigenous and White society: assimilated by the metropole, "In the end Angel was lost" (454-5).

Not surprisingly, "all [Norm's] obsessions of what was not right, were metaphors for his failed marriage" and thus inscribed in gender (246-7). This conflict is eventually mediated and solved on his sea quest, where he is haunted by Angel as the "sea lady". The appearance of this "sorrowful woman, a cursed spirit of death who had come to find them" (245) brings the notion home that:

life is always haunted by death ... Caught in the sphere of the sea lady, Norm saw, over in the distance, ghostly dark waves moving like haunted spirits. In the air he heard a melancholy swishing monologue humming and drumming the advance of the front moving helter-skelter towards him, while up in the skies, its spiral disappeared into the heavens. Norm, centre stage, prepared himself ... and out would fly the navigator's mental map of the groper's travel line (261-5).

Norm reaches Joseph Midnight's tribal island country after surviving the Sea Lady Dreaming, configured as a violent electric thunderstorm. Once on shore, he also has to negotiate his life with the land in a Dreamtime prelude to Desperance's destruction and recovery as Indigenous country. Norm is lured by "the devil woman Gardajala singing out from the bush," and provoked into ritual sexual joining with country: "he cried singing faster and thinking of her, wanting her, and she cried, until their ecstasy was consummated. Then, they both curled up in foetal positions on their earth beds, hers of grass, his of sand, and went to sleep." The postcolonising character of Norm's experience with the Bush Dreaming is manifest in the sense of rebirth, recovery and resolution on waking up, and heightened by the recovery of his lost grandchild, Bala, "the child of hope" and future (271-6).

Thus having incorporated the destructive/creative forces of land and sea, Norm "incarnates" as the mythical Rainbow Serpent, sending a cyclone against Desperance in retaliation for Elias's death. Its devastating results are witnessed by his son Will, who returns from a sea quest to recover his wife Hope Midnight and son Bala:

The roar of the sea showed no mercy. There would be no letting up. No respite for quietness. There was noise in the movement of water flooding back to the sea carting the wreckage with it. All passed over the flooded land groaning with the remains of buildings, boats, cars, trees, rocks, electricity poles, fences, cargo from fallen ships, plastic consignments scrambled like licorice allsorts and dead animals. All this rolled along, slamming together in the water, just like it had on the beach in his dream. A beach plastered with waste, brown stinking froth and foam where a cyclone had struck. Will was too shocked to move from the realisation of his father's payback to the town (487).

Norm's totemic wrath forms the prelude to a larger, inclusive project of Indigenous recuperation which, informed by Elias's expulsion from white society and later assassination, makes room for those mainstreamers "who dare to be different." Indeed, Elias was murdered by the mining company in a plot to catch and kill Norm's son Will, an Aboriginal activist who campaigns against Gurfurrit's harmful environmental policies and plans to blow up the mine—which he later manages in a minor replica of Norm's revenge. Despite father and son's profound differences on political engagement and action, Norm's destructive potential is framed within a postcolonising framework of Indigenous environmentalism and recovery. Performers of Dreamtime tropes, both Norm and Will Phantom employ postcolonising violence for the recovery of ancestral, nurturing links to country. Unlike the rather nihilistic postmodern vampire feeding on Australians no matter their race, gender, class or creed in Mudrooroo's vampire trilogy, they are life-restoring guardians of country: they re-establish Indigenous identity, place and belonging while levelling and deconstructing the exploitative distinctions associated with neo/colonial economies of race, gender and class. Thus, the Dreamtime Narrative employed in *Carpentaria* "becomes a powerful allegory for our times: the Earth's retaliation in Gaia-like fashion, responding to the deep tramping marks of our footprints on the climate, on the places of both land and water (Sharpe 2007: 92).

Dreamtime Narrative proposes a return to a holistic understanding of nature, community and country. It creates new cycles of sacred songs or "songlines" in writing which map out country and allow for postcolonising walkabouts—physical and spiritual journeys of re-encounter with and re-instatement of tribal land. Wright claims that the empowering hybrid nature of her writing:

follows the original pattern of the great ancient sagas that defined the laws, customs and values of our culture. The oral tradition that produced these stories continued in the development of the epic stories of historical events, and combining ancient and historical stories, resounds equally as loudly in the new stories of our times (2007: 80).

Thus, from the perspective of Indigenous Australia, Wright's *Carpentaria* winks an eye at European epic conventions—not least Xavier Herbert's *Capricornia*—in its celebration of heroic achievements and themes of legendary significance such as the destruction of an alien civilisation and the survival of the proper nation and culture. The postcolonising character of Dreamtime Narrative in *Carpentaria* forges an enabling view from the fringe and works across different cultural frameworks so as to create a

textual embodiment of what could be termed the “strange cultural survival” (Bhabha 1990: 320) of diasporic, dispossessed First-Nation members (Clifford 1994: 309, quoted in Pulitano: 40).

As an origin or creation myth, *Carpentaria*'s storyline meanders like its inspiration, the Gregory River in Gulf Country and home of the Rainbow Serpent, weaving local stories together into an interconnected levelling whole—Wright (2006: 12) speaks of “a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories” to describe this structure. Following *Carpentaria*'s threads as they weave through Gulf Country, it is the author's traditional homeland which emerges as not only the novel's setting but also as its main protagonist, making its characters manifestations of country itself. Wright emulates Kim Scott's focus on the land as *True Country*'s real protagonist when she writes:

I develop my novels on ideas of seeing how the land might respond to different stories. The land is ... one of or even the central character. Most of the images and ideas relate to the land being alive and having important meaning, which is tied to the ancient roots of our continent. The people who populate the landscape of my writing usually come afterwards—after I have built a place for them (Vernay 2004: 121).

Wright enables her Indigenous characters by relocating them in traditional country, against the odds imposed by mainstream society. Like Mudrooroo's *Master* and Scott's *Benang*, which is “part of a much older story” (1996: 497), *Carpentaria* could be considered an attempt at Native Title of the mind: “*Carpentaria* is the land of the untouched: an Indigenous sovereignty of the imagination” (Wright 2007: 94).

Thus, *Carpentaria*, as well as Kim Scott's *Benang* and Mudrooroo's *Master*, represents what Carole Ferrier (1992: 215) terms “resistance writing,” since it interrogates contemporary Australia with a call for Indigenous self-definition and self-determination in the face of intervening, assimilative politics. While recognising the incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies in their treatment of time and space (Devlin-Glass 2007: 83), *Carpentaria*'s Dreamtime Narrative *does* also work towards closing a series of Eurocentric gaps: between the oral and written, tradition and modernity, nature and human, fact and fiction, the past and present, and story and history. Thus, the novel's epistemological universe emerges as a “micro-narrative” (Lyotard 1984: xxiii-iv) against the race, gender and class binaries underlying the Western distinction between Self and Other/World. Wright employs Dreamtime Narrative as a levelling, performative agent of the Aboriginal Secret/Sacred in writing, and like Mudrooroo and Scott opens up new horizons in fiction for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Wright explains this agenda as follows:

I wanted [*Carpentaria*] to question the idea of boundaries through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world, while at the same time exposing the fragility of the boundaries of Indigenous home places of the mind ... The fundamental challenge I wanted to set myself, was to explore ideas that would help us to understand how to re-imagine a larger space than the ones we have been forced to enclose within the imagined borders that have been forced upon us (Wright 2007: 94).

6. Conclusions

Wright's novel *Plains of Promise* and the official *Bringing Them Home* report were published almost simultaneously, as were *Carpentaria* and the *Little Children are Sacred* a decade later. Placing the two consecutive reports on Indigenous children and their political consequences in perspective reveals how the mainstream attempt to recognise its responsibility in the Indigenous plight is eventually returned as an Indigenous failure to function in Australian mainstream society, and serves to recover a questionable discourse/policy of protection and assimilation under conservative rule—police and military control and a culture of individual responsibility. Wright's two novels to date question the agendas of these reports and their discursive interpretations, which display a vexed move from official recognition and respect of Indigeneity to its rejection and control. *Plains of Promise* voices the pain of Indigenous trauma and despair at the harsh realities of life at the margins of an intolerant settler culture. In describing structural Indigenous disempowerment and the seemingly irreparable damage inflicted by intercultural contact, it questions the very notions of Reconciliation and Apology that structure *Bringing Them Home*, and urges a debate on cultural self-definition and political self-determination.

Carpentaria, on the other hand, turns trauma, despair and the failure to assimilate into resilience and survival by imagining an inclusive hybrid transformation from within the Indigenous cultural paradigm, thus rejecting the assimilative neoliberal agenda John Howard derived from *Little Children are Sacred*. In doing so, *Carpentaria* speaks out beyond Wright's local community and attempts to engage with a national audience: "I hope the book is of one heartbeat. Not only for us, but for everybody in Australia as we move towards the future and try to understand better (Wright quoted in O'Brien 2007: 218). These words, spoken in the year of both the Award and the Intervention, appeal to an Australianness reconfigured on inclusionary Indigenous terms, as the novel's structure and content reveal. In this sense Wright's agenda coincides with Kim Scott's by advocating a hybrid form of Australianness which is not assimilative. Indeed, Wright's fiction forms part of a larger movement amongst Indigenous writers, notably Scott, and once Mudrooroo, to open up Indigenous spaces in national culture by questioning Western epistemology with their own.

It is for the latter reason that *Carpentaria* is not an easily accessible text. As with *Plains of Promise*, Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* and Kim Scott's *Benang*, its length, structure and epistemological scope are the result of employing a postcolonising strategy we could call Dreamtime Narrative, a literary configuration of the Aboriginal Secret/Sacred or Dreaming which often proves opaque for mainstream readership. Beyond its epistemological, environmentalist implications for the management of Gulf Country, *Carpentaria* also responds to the ongoing crisis in Aboriginal-mainstream relations and rejects a recovery of Indigeneity as romantic nostalgia belonging to a distant past. Like *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* and *Benang*, the text is wrapped up in a political project of revealing and reversing a silenced history of Aboriginal dispossession, displacement and extermination. Through the enabling stories of Norm and Will Phantom and Hope and Bala Midnight and many others, *Carpentaria* "sings" white Desperance and its mine to destruction, seeking repair for the human and

environmental disasters caused to Gulf Country by market-capitalism and neo-liberal culture, and promotes an Indigenous, holistic paradigm of managing country as “authentically Australian.”

Finally, *Carpentaria* lays bare the oft-incommensurable interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures. Thus, the novel highlights the profound division that lack of understanding creates in a mainstream population partly in recognition, partly in denial of the Aboriginal predicament and its corollaries, and consequently reveals the divergent perception of responsibility and repair this engenders on the political level. At present this conflict is played out in the remote north of Australia, where the needs of dysfunctional Indigenous communities are most acute and misunderstood by the establishment. *Carpentaria*'s empowering universe is a pertinent antidote to the drama of assimilative I/intervention at the Top End: although the novel was written and published before the Northern Territory situation reached its unsuspected Federal climax, it was also generated within the political climate that preceded the latter. Bearing in mind this context, reading the novel without recognising the political implications of its cultural difference and location is tantamount to falling into the assimilative trap of the Northern Territory Intervention.

Notes

1. A maban is a tribal shaman in the Nyoongar language.
2. Homi Bhabha coins the “third space” in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, and describes its cultural hybridity in Fanon-like supra-dialectic terms: “... for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third arises, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom” (Rutherford 1990: 211).
3. HREOC = The Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, in charge of the *Bringing Them Home* report.

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