Sung by an Indigenous Siren:
Epic and Epistemology in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria

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Abstract: One of Australia's most distinguished Indigenous authors, Alexis Wright, stages the fleeting presence of a popular character of Northern European folklore, the mermaid, in an awarded novel of epic proportions. The mermaid is not a haphazard appearance in this Antipodean narrative, but one of the multiple, cross-cultural ways in which *Carpentaria*, first published in 2006, invites the reader to reflect upon the ongoing tensions between the disenfranchised Indigenous minority and the empowered non-Indigenous mainstream, and their serious lack of communication due to the antagonistic character of their respective universes, one rooted in a capitalist paradigm of ruthless economic exploitation and the other in a holistic, environmentalist one of country. This essay addresses how *Carpentaria,* by writing across Indigenous and European genres and epistemologies, makes a call for the deconstruction of colonial discourse, for an invigorating Indigenous inscription into country, and for intellectual sovereignty as the condition *sine-qua-non* for the Indigenous community to move forward.

Introduction: black mistress, white mermaid

The fleeting appearance of a mermaid in *Carpentaria,* the Miles Franklin award-winning 2006 novel written by the Indigenous-Australian author Alexis Wright, reflects innovative uses of the epic in postcolonial contexts, that is, how epic may bridge across antagonistic

cosmologies and how it may empower Indigenous inscriptions into country and culture. One of the tragicomic stories that support the grand, decolonising narrative of *Carpentaria* poses the hybrid charms of the European mermaid (half fish, half woman) against interracial abjection and so comments on the dubious ethics that ground racist thought and behaviour. White bartender Lloydie falls in love with a mermaid he believes to be caught inside his wooden bar top, and consequently rejects his black mistress and mixed-descent son as the 'abominable' taboo product of what was known as 'black velvet'. This referred to sexual intercourse between white settler men and Indigenous women, which led to 'coloured' offspring managed through the eugenic policy of the Stolen Generations. Lloydie's delusion comes full circle when he unsuccessfully tries to save the trapped chimera when his coastal town at the Top End is flooded and devastated by a massive hurricane. The latter is generated by the area's displaced and long-dysfunctional Aboriginal leader, Norm Phantom, who barely survives at the town's rubbish tip; yet, a demiurge of sorts, he controls the elements through his Dreaming so as to recover vital space and tribal land from mainstream society (Wright 2006: 472, 490).

The presence of the mermaid, often an ominous symbol of seduction, deceit, doom, and natural and human disaster in Western folklore (Martos García 2016), symbolises the antagonistic worldviews of European and Indigenous Australia and the search for an Indigenous space of belonging. It is an example of the transcultural epistemological work the novel sets out to do by priming a holistic Indigenous paradigm of country inclusive of, but not assimilable to, the West. The text poises itself on the critical epistemological margins of both worlds to carve out a space of intellectual native title and sovereignty. The bartender's infatuation with the inaccessible, wood-locked mermaid stands for the narrow-minded hypocrisy and racist violence of the Outback, resulting from an assimilative, reductive approach to the world. The Western lack of empathy with the Indigenous universe is underlined by the apparent incongruity of the mermaid cameo within the Indigenous setting. More typically found in medieval Northern European legend and often likened to, and confused with, the Homeric siren (originally a seductive bird–woman; see Martos García 2016: 184), in *Carpentaria* the mermaid's hybridity (half fish, half maiden) symbolises the clash of mutually-exclusive paradigms of knowledge, 'condemned' to get on with each other. Yet, Philip Hayward points out the mermaid's "polyvalency [or] the potential for multiple associations and combinations of elements to accrue to a text and/or a cultural entity". This highlights the mermaid's inherent syncretic character despite a discrete hybrid appearance. He argues that:

> Often mischaracterised as hybrids, mermaids (and mermen) are anything but coherent entities resulting from the blending of heterogeneous elements. In physical terms they conjoin two pre-existent entities (i.e. humans and fish) around a transitional midpoint and require considerable suspension of belief to accept their coherence and viability (2018: 3).

Hayward therefore argues that "the mermaid's distinct physique allows her to manifest diverse and often disjunctive aspects" (2018: 3), and in this sense, the perceived hybridity of

the mermaid trope — both fish and human, unable to live on land but fatally attracted to it — both defines the existence of, and appeals to, the merging of antagonistic worlds: water and land; foreign mainstream and indigenous margins; European invaders and Indigenous Australians who must learn to coexist and communicate across two divergent epistemologies that meet in Australia's coastal contact zone, both sea and land-bound. Hayward highlights that:

> … folkloric and subsequent popular cultural depictions of mermaids and related aquatic entities are manifestations of what might be termed an 'aquapelagic imaginary' that explores the boundaries between marine and terrestrial worlds and experiences in various ways. Given the close — and, as I argue, generative — association between mermaids, maritime and island cultures in their original European context, it is unsurprising that a number of the socio-geographical locations to which the mermaid has been exported to and been depicted and elaborated within have close associations with aquatic spaces (2018: 3-4).

One can therefore claim that the mermaid trope befits *Carpentaria* as it, despite inherent difficulties, attempts to bridge these two worlds, making the fertile coastal strip around the condemned mining town of Desperance the focus of the novel's action; it is this liminal location between land and sea, Indigeneity and foreignness where the fringe-dwelling Indigenous leader Norm Phantom eventually restores an invigorating sense of country by recovering his Groper Fish Dreaming.

The mermaid trope also operates on a metatextual level. Charting narrative songlines with her story-telling — something that Kim Scott has described as 'storying' (Buck 2006) — Wright takes on the classical role of a siren whose epic chant of Gulf Country lures the reader away from a competing paradigmatic Australian epic, *Capricornia* (1938), set in the same area. This iconic mainstream epic about the Carpentaria region was written by a — for his time — progressive Chief Protector of the Aborigines, Xavier Herbert, who from a Western perspective addressed the taboo issues of 'black velvet' and 'coloured' offspring alluded to in the white barman's abuse of the black female body in *Carpentaria*. Using the mermaid trope as an overarching metaphor for the tense and conflictive nature of their interface, this essay addresses *Carpentaria* as a sustained intent to bridge critically across two radically different epistemologies, the Indigenous Dreaming and the European Real from an Indigenous standpoint that rewrites *Capricornia's* narrative and agenda.

Carpentaria and genre

An evocation of the sovereignty of the Indigenous mind, *Carpentaria* is concerned with the search for an original and authentic Indigenous voice in literature and in doing so constitutes a generic innovation. Ian Syson praises *Carpentaria* as "a remarkable and huge dreamscape novel […] The range and diversity of form, content and influences […] [are] astounding."

Wondering whether the novel is "a rambling showing-off of Wright's undoubted literary skills […] a mere pastiche of good ideas" or "a pleasing and important document of our time", he sees it as closest to "an Australian epic" (2007: 85). Written in consonance with the parameters of the Indigenous oral tradition, it therefore "replicat[es] the story-telling voices of ordinary Aboriginal people whom [Wright] ha[s] heard all [her] life" (Wright 2007: 84).

Syson's analysis resonates with Wright's own view, as she chooses not to write fiction based on historical fact or personal history so as to avoid a Western encapsulation into realist linearity, progress, finality and authenticity, but envisages the novel more holistically as "an old saga […] stories that travel across countries, ceremonies, songs […] sagas that can take days singing the story of a country" (Wright 2007: 84). Within the Northern-European literary tradition, a saga can be understood as a "genre of prose narrative" that addresses medieval heroic characters and events from the Scandinavian, especially Icelandic, oral tradition, fictionalised in imaginative accounts employing an elevated style and building on heroism, loyalty, revenge and action rather than on reflection and inner motivation (*BCE* 2008). Wright's novel fits these terms in its use of the Indigenous oral tradition, Indigenous heroes and leaders, their loyalties and disloyalties, the revenge theme, Indigenous myth and legend, and its creation of a literary habitat and community through geographical locatedness.

But Wright also works within the genre of the epic with *Carpentaria*, positing that "the everyday Indigenous story world […] is epic," combining the merits of the oral tradition reaching back to "the laws, customs and values of our culture" with those of "epic stories of historical events" (2007: 84). Within the European literary tradition, an epic is a "long, narrative poem in an elevated style that celebrates heroic achievement and treats themes of historical, national, religious, or legendary significance". More specifically,

> […] *primary* (or traditional) epics are shaped from the legends and traditions of a heroic age and are part of oral tradition; *secondary* (or literary) epics are written down from the beginning, and their poets adapt aspects of traditional epics. The poems of Homer are usually regarded as the first important epics and the main source of epic conventions in western Europe. These conventions include the centrality of a hero, sometimes semidivine; an extensive, perhaps cosmic, setting; heroic battle; extended journeying; and the involvement of supernatural beings (*BCE* 2008, my emphasis).

As related narrative forms, it is probably best to see saga and epic as two genres that share a number of features in overlap rather than subcategorisation. As a polyvalent text, *Carpentaria* borrows from both literary conventions in celebrating heroic Indigenous achievements and treating themes of legendary significance such as the destruction of white civilisation and the survival of the Indigenous nation. It links the Indigenous oral tradition to the literary, and thus should be seen as a mixed epic. Moreover, it uses the centrality of the hero and his semi-divine character, Norm Phantom, and his ability to influence the weather through the Dreaming within the cosmic setting of the Gulf of Carpentaria, including its land, sea and sky. Lastly, heroic battle, as in Norm's struggle with local nature and his son Will's

confrontation with the mine, is joined to a multiplicity of quests by several Indigenous heroes and to the involvement of supernatural beings, such as the sea and bush ladies, and the groper fish.

In her self-reflective essay "On Writing Carpentaria", Wright highlights *Carpentaria*'s uniqueness, in that Indigenous epic is ancient, mythical, historical, and contemporary at once; in other words, by *collapsing* history, the Aboriginal Dreamtime is taken into the present and made part of our contemporary world, blurring the Western distinction between story and history, fact and fiction. Thus, *Carpentaria,* "a novel capable of embracing all times," is, to follow the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner's cue (1968: 58), a transgressive "Everywhen", in that "this fictional work could not be contained in a capsule that was either time or incident specific". Rather, Wright meant it to be a boundary crosser:

> It would not fit into an English, and therefore Australian tradition of creating boundaries and fences which encode the development of thinking in this country, and which follows through to the containment of thought and idea in the novel […] 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 (2007: 81–2).

It took Alexis Wright a full decade to write *Carpentaria*, generating an epic tale as large and sprawling as her traditional Waanyi country at the southwestern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, with a storyline of community and country meandering like its Serpent river and expanding and contracting on the perpetual movement of the Gulf's tides. While the novel's length has been critiqued as excessive (see Davison 2007; Devlin-Glass 2007; Pierce 2006; Sharrad 2008), Craig San Roque observes that *Carpentaria* needs its 500 pages in order to bridge "contemporary insight and ancestral integrity". He also argues that Wright excels at the complex task of transposing her own culture, her "known and familiar", into a shape, content, and structure that is intelligible, sensible and aesthetic to the dominant culture, "whose conceptions of love, death, hate, knowledge, truth and continuity are enfolded into a European grid system" (2007: 4, 19). The author's inspiration for her contemporary origin story is drawn from a commanding vision of the Gulf's "ancestral" Gregory River, which reminded her of the Rainbow Serpent myth and inspired "*Carpentaria* [as] a narration of the kind of stories we can tell to our ancestral land" (Wright 2007: 79–80), the novel's setting as well as main protagonist:

> 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).

Carpentaria is indeed "an Indigenous sovereignty of the imagination" (Wright 2007: 94), an attempt at intellectual Native Title through an imagined recovery of the author's traditional country. Wright's celebration of her Indigenous homeland is peopled with a variety of Indigenous characters fighting the despairing odds imposed by mainstream society. The first chapter's title, "From time immemorial", draws the reader into the endless time-space of the Dreaming, while its capitalised epigraph denounces the impact of white society on Indigenous girls in remote communities:

> A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*. THE BELLS PEAL EVERYWHERE. CHURCHBELLS CALLING THE FAITHFUL TO THE TABERNACLE WHERE THE GATES OF HEAVEN WILL OPEN, BUT NOT FOR THE WICKED CALLING INNOCENT LITTLE BLACK GIRLS FROM A DISTANT COMMUNITY WHERE THE WHITE DOVE BEARING AN OLIVE BRANCH NEVER LANDS. LITTLE GIRLS WHO COME BACK AFTER CHURCH ON SUNDAY, WHO LOOK AROUND THEMSELVES AT THE HUMAN FALLOUT AND ANNOUNCE MATTER-OF-FACTLY, *ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE* (Wright 2006: 1).

The epigraph leads us to the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming, which tells us of the perpetual making and remaking of the river country that nowadays boasts Desperance, an outpost of Western civilisation hosting the divided society of the Indigenous Westside and Eastside mobs and white Uptown, which all three make competing claims on traditional land. The destruction sung to Indigenous culture and country by the suspect imposition of white civilisation and religion ("We know your story already") is questioned and unsettled by an Indigenous counternarrative of mythical Dreamtime proportions, moulded by the meandering tracks of the slow, sinuous and powerful Rainbow Serpent's movements through Waanyi country that determine the structure of the ensuing narrative (1–3).

According to Nonie Sharp, the interface of Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture is structured as "an epic on several planes that knits together meanings underlying the lives of the Waanyi people of the Gulf country of far north Queensland with local stories of responses to new invasions" (2007: 62). The novel goes far beyond the Western containment the first chapter's epigraph suggests and undoes its capitalised weight by the bulky impact of its interwoven, heteroglossic stories in double-spaced small print. The large print of the second-chapter's epigraph fixes the novel's Indigenous inscription and sprawling structure as the remedy for present-day despair: "THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK […] SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN" (12). Thus, the powerful Rainbow Snake's stirrings of literary creation eventually don't suggest Armageddon for the Indigenous mob, but "honour" the town's name in wiping it from the face of the earth with a devastating cyclone. A tropical storm slowly builds up throughout the text in magic–mythic interplay between the sea, sky, land and their superhuman mediator, the 'ghosted' Indigenous

leader Normal Phantom, whose vengeful anger at the impositions of white society explodes and clears the usurped land for a new and fresh Indigenous beginning at the novel's ending:

> All dreams come true somehow, Norm murmured, sizing up the flattened landscape, already planning the home he would rebuild on the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the spirits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept underneath […] It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh as [Norm and his grandson Bala] walked hand in hand out of town, down the road, Westside, to *home* (519, emphasis added).

Sharp therefore argues that *Carpentaria* spins "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" (2007: 62). Other critics have also drawn attention to *Carpentaria's* political agenda as ecologically inscribed, promoting awareness of the interconnectivity and interdependency of all life forms in their local habitats.

Carpentaria and epistemology

In *Nourishing Terrains*, Deborah Rose addresses epistemologies from an eco-scientific perspective, closely linking respect and care for the local natural environment to the observance of Indigenous belief systems known as the Dreaming or Dreamtime. Thus, the dreaming is at once timeless and local by dictating the Law of the land and so becomes Stanner's Everywhen. She calls attention to how these belief systems foster non-hierarchical economies of mutual benefit between the different constituents of a local habitat, connecting all country horizontally and laterally rather than vertically and hierarchically, in a binding manual of good environmental conduct:

> The totemic metaphysics of mutual life-giving draws different species into overlapping and ramifying patterns of connection through benefit. Many of these benefits are not immediately reciprocated. Rather, they keep moving through other living things, sustaining life through the twin processes of life for itself and life for others (2004: 295–297).

This analysis provides a sustained critique of the racial, gendered and classist hierarchies and economies generated by the capitalist exploitation of the Australian land. Thus, Rose specifies that Indigenous epistemologies "resituate the human" by conferring subjectivity as sentience and agency on country; by the reciprocity of all life processes; by kinship with nature through human and non-human totems; and by calling humans into action rather than having them act autonomously, so that "country, or nature, far from being an object to be acted upon, is a self-organising system that brings people and other living things into being, into action, into sentience itself" (2005: 302–3).

Frances Devlin-Glass highlights how the novel, through the use of the central trope of the Rainbow Serpent, activates "Indigenous knowledge systems". What these contain in terms of "ecological depth", local situatedness, interrelatedness with all aspects of life, and "communal construction/negotiation of reality" is hard to translate into Western systems of knowledge. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass, and McCredden speak of "dreaming narratives," which they elaborate following Deborah Rose's eco-analysis. Dreaming narratives

> […] integrate fields that are separate discursive domains in western knowledge — philosophy, religion, economics, ecology, epistemology, kinship, gender behaviour, kinship systems, interpersonal relations, geography and mapping. To separate *storying* as a self-contained discursive field is therefore not possible, and that creates an epistemological impasse for westerners which poets and prose writers have sought to bridge (Ashcroft et al. 2009: 205–9).

It is therefore tempting to consider Alexis Wright's fiction part of a larger holistic project to decolonise the Indigenous and Western mind and world by rewriting the embodied Australian experience of time, space and place along Indigenous parameters and from within the Indigenous community. As was pointed out by the Indigenous scholar, poet and writer Jeanine Leane at the 2013 ASAL congress at Wagga Wagga, Sturt University in NSW, Alexis Wright has casually spoken of 'Aboriginal Reality' as a generic term for recent Indigenous Australian fiction that fits this deconstructive purpose, to be distinguished from denominations such as Magical Realism (Latin America), Maban Reality (Mudrooroo) or, as I have defended, Uncanny Realism (Renes 2002). The generic denomination 'Aboriginal Reality' more accurately posits the Indigenous life experience as the basis of an Australian epistemology in which narrative flows from a sovereign universe whose spiritual and material effects solicit the colonial legacy of the Enlightenment. *Carpentaria* as an instance of 'Aboriginal Reality' cannot be read within the constraints of academic criticism as its narrative, style and structure spill over the discrete borders and niching of Western genre and knowledge.

Not surprisingly, Wright has an idiosyncratic view of her epic's configuration; she visualises the novelistic structure and content resulting from "our racial diaspora in Australia" as "a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories":

> […] The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining all stories together […] relat[ing] to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams (2007: 84).

This structure she sees open to the inclusion of the 'new' Australians, and in *Carpentaria*, this helix foregrounds the Indigenous perspective within the mutually soliciting coexistence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies, mixing Dreamtime, Christian and Classical lore. Frances Devlin-Glass therefore

> […] expect[s] that her Waanyi and Indigenous readers will find the integrity of this work empowering in ways that will disturb white Australia, but that her non-indigenous readers will find it illuminating, if puzzling (2007: 83).

Indeed, readers of *Carpentaria* must work hard to make sense of its heteroglossic tapestry of intermingled accounts in which the true heroes are marginalised Indigenous tribesmen[i]; tribal guerrilla warfare develops into heroic acts; language mixes mainstream English and Indigenous speak; everyday reality blends with the Dreamtime; quests develop out of old and new songlines and walkabouts; and its supernatural powers simultaneously invoke Christian and classical characters and Dreamtime ancestors, of which the mermaid is only one example. It is for the manner in which *Carpentaria* imposes a recovery of Indigenous culture and an agenda of Indigenous self-definition and self-determination onto European conventions that it inscribes itself in the peculiarities of a genre that Alexis Wright tentatively coined Aboriginal Reality.

In his analysis of *Carpentaria*, the Jungian psychoanalyst Craig San Roque's eco-psychological tack avoids subsuming Indigenous reality and myth into the hierarchical Freudian framework of his discipline and takes this agenda into literature. He laments that his Australian peers are often not open to "the indigenous faculty of imagination — that is to say, *imagination alive in the specific context of the local environment* — in 'country'", and flags Alexis Wright's writing as a positive example for its productive/promiscuous interconnection of "ancestral themes, nature experienced, contemporary fact" (1–3, emphasis added). Driving his eco-psychological argument further, Michèle Grossman sees *Carpentaria* as an antidote to Freud's traditional patriarchal account of Indigeneity by the way the novel configures an all-embracing awareness of identity rooted in the 'oceanic' effacement of the distinction between the Self and the surrounding world:

> Sigmund Freud had his doubts about what Romain Rolland termed the "oceanic feeling" of seamless union between one's self and the world at large. For Rolland, the oceanic signified a universal human impulse towards spiritual conviction. Freud disagreed, characterising the oceanic in his *Civilisation and its Discontents* as a remnant of infantile narcissism, in which the very young child fails (at its peril in later life) to distinguish between self and other. Freud's insistence that to be truly civilised requires the abandonment of oceanic bliss in order to build an ego that can survive the traumas imposed by a capricious external reality is deeply ingrained in Western thinking about the self. *Alexis Wright's Carpentaria makes one wonder afresh what it was that Freud so feared about a relationship between self and world conceived of ecologically, so to speak, rather than forever at war* (2006: 10, my emphasis).

Grossman's reference to the French Nobel-Prize-winning dramatist, essayist, art historian, mystic and pacifist Romain Rolland (1866–1944) is not gratuitous, as he was a major influence on Freud's work. His pacifist theory of 'oceanic feeling' was developed out of his studies of Eastern mysticism and claimed an indissoluble and limitless bond between the

individual and the outer world which Freud rejected in his *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (Roberts 2011), at odds with his proposal of civilisation as a repressive means to curb individual desire and ensure social conformity.

Grossman's Lacanian discussion of Freud and Rolland's thoughts on socialisation and civilisation takes us back to the mermaid, who is a symbol *per excellence* for the communal, female sphere of the oceanic whose 'bliss' the child has to give up in the Freudian account to complete the process of education and reach its resulting state of grace: the emotional and physical isolation and self-control provided by Western civilisation. It is worth noting Philip Hayward recognises this psychoanalytical legacy in his mermaid study *Making a Splash* (2017):

> […] the particular psychoanalytic paradigms I drew on […] were formulated within a highly specific context; that is, the bourgeois milieu of late 19th/early 20th Century Vienna, where Freud and colleagues practiced and, more broadly, Europe and the Eurocentric metropolitan society of North America where psychoanalysis became established and formalised in the 20th Century (2018: 4).

The mermaid easily reads psychoanalytically, as the creature's feminine upper body contrasts with the phallic connotations of its powerful tail, and is therefore poised between the male and the female (Hayward 2018: 3). Her undeniably erotic nature (Hayward 2017: 13) makes her luringly and deceptively attractive, both passive and active, symbolising both safety and threat. In line with the latter, Grossman uses the metaphor of "a world forever at war" regarding *Carpentaria*, significant in that throughout most of the novel, the Indigenous mob is divided over traditional ownership and so never 'safe'. Joseph Midnight and Norm Phantom, the local Indigenous leaders, are "stubborn old mules who anchored their respective clans in the sordid history of who really owned different parcels of the local land […] The *old war* went right up the coastline to Desperance and out to sea" (426) and will not stop until their respective children, Will and Hope, manage to bridge the mobs' differences through a firm bond of love. *Carpentaria's* 'oceanic antidote', then, pits the modern, familiar world of Christian faith and civilising zeal against the ancient Secret–Sacred Dreamtime belief and regenerative power of the Rainbow Serpent. It is their incommensurable epistemologies that solicit each other throughout the text in unsettling ways:

> This double-or-nothing proposition marks out the territory of *Carpentaria*. It's a novel in which the doppelganger effect of indigenous and settler ways of being and knowing is fully, furiously, sustained as tandem stories and lives variously intersect and diverge, yet remain haunted by the shadows of others' truths and lies (Grossman 2006: 10).

In Grossman's understanding, as a locally specific, non-hierarchical and non-exploitative form of knowledge, it is the Indigenous approach that takes the upper hand in this narrative, against "those who claim authority over it without accepting responsibility for its care and management". As she argues, "*Carpentaria* is a swelling, heaving, tsunami of a novel" (2006:

10), whose oceanic rhythms of fictional imagination turn the biblical threat of a terminal Armageddon into a cleansing deluge for the Indigenous Australians by annihilating all vestiges of Western civilisation on the local coast. This matches Craig San Roque's decolonising perspective that "the bruising truth is that Australasia and Oceania are locations of 'end times' for many, and 'new times' for others" (2007: 4), in the crucible of life and death configured by Desperance, whose culture is based on the exploitative, materialistic, destructive economy of local mining.

The novel names locations, entities and characters with an ironic, premonitory touch. The town Desperance is both the Western outpost where exploitative capitalism can show its meanest face and the uncanny margin from which Indigenous culture can write back and decolonise. Desperance is also named after its founder, Captain Matthew Desperance Flinders. This toponym ambiguously shuttles between doom and hope by engaging different morphological possibilities across a variety of languages. Its connotations range from 'desperate', 'despair' (English), 'désespoir' (French), 'desesperado' and 'desesperanza' (Spanish) to 'd'espoir' (French), 'de esperanza' (Spanish), and thus 'of hope' or 'hopeful'. Many names of white Uptown's population join form and content — 'Mayor Bruiser', 'Constable Truthful E'Strange', 'Y. Pedigree', 'I. Damage', 'A. Clone', 'U. Torrent', 'B. Easy' reveal and mock their respective personalities, while a blurring lack of identity is suggested for a whole range of anonymous inhabitants taking their last name after the Jesus-like Elias Smith, a visionary who came to Desperance from the sea. Responsible for Indigenous dispossession and dislocation, the Gurfurritt Mining Corp is reminiscent of the powerful Century Zinc mining company's impact on Waanyi country (Devlin-Glass 2006: 82; Wright 1998; Wright 2001: 135–43), its phonetic transcription of the expression 'go for it' blatantly referring to its unscrupulous land-grabbing policy — nowadays embodied by the imminent destruction of the Great Barrier Reef through the Adani coal-mining project, which receives Federal support.

Irony in *Carpentaria* engages with the town's history from an Indigenous perspective. The seaboard town's natural marine economy is cut short by the changing tracks of a meandering "river that spurns human effort in one dramatic gesture" (3). It cuts its port off from the sea, and the economic activity shifts to the exploitative impact of mining. However, Lloydie's luring mermaid and a mine explosion foreshadow the destructive tidal wave which turns Desperance onomatopoeically into a "boomtown" (98) and returns the area's life-sustaining link with the sea. Norm's grandson Bala's perception of the location as a "big yellow snake" places the destruction wrought by the cyclone in the mythical realm of the Great Creation Being. And Norm's relief that "[t]hey were home" is based on the secure bearings provided by his Groper Dreaming, overruling the fact that "he could not discover one familiar feature of Desperance" at their arrival. The clima(c)tic D-day of the local habitat's rebalancing has D-/decapitated the alien presence of white civilisation and reinscribed the coastal strip as the locus of 'Esperance' for its host of Indigenous characters, enabling them to "sing the country afresh" from an epistemologically-valid and environmentally-sound perspective (515–19).[ii] Given the current impact of storms, flooding, and mining on the Australian continent's environment and economy, Desperance's fate as foreshadowed by Lloydie's impossible love

for the mermaid stands as a metaphor for Australia's destruction by the global capitalist production system, in its impact through extraction and climate change.

Craig San Roque takes his eco-psychological critique into an analysis of the unique ways in which *Carpentaria* reveals its disquieting truths to mainstreamers. Praising Alexis Wright as a skilful, didactic and generous translator of the unconscious into the conscious, San Roque commends *Carpentaria*'s deconstruction of Freudian analysis, and highlights its engagement with a country and society fallen upon hard times:

> *Carpentaria* is my 'recommended text' mainly because it is a direct counterpoint to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* which draws extensively upon Australian Aboriginal material […] speaking out about the broken children of Vienna. *Carpentaria* is a psychiatric cultural text. In Oceania, there are many lost thoughts wandering like spirits looking for a thinker (San Roque 2007: 10–13).

San Roque's reference to *Totem and Taboo* positions the novel as antidote to the Freudian classification of civilisations, as *Carpentaria* constitutes a sophisticated, invigorating Indigenous epic tale of origins against the Western sublimation myth of art and science developed by the Viennese psychiatrist, who, as a male urban-middle-class Central European, developed his discipline using questionable late 19th century anthropological data from Australia. *Totem and Taboo* takes the premise that inasmuch as they maintain the capital penalty for incestuous behaviour, indigenous peoples (and most of all Indigenous Australians) 'show' they have not yet managed to control the incest wish, unlike Westerners. As Freud considers the management and sublimation of the oedipal incest wish in the nuclear family unit to be at the root of all human civilisation — art, society, religion, justice, ethics — the imposition of patriarchal and colonial authority is conflated and justified; this, in turn, creates a social underclass of 'primitive natives' in alleged need of Western civilisation for the management of their so-called child-like state. Thus, it is mainstream initiative and control that is put in charge of their purported progress and improvement modelled on the example of the West. Aileen Moreton-Robinson deconstructs the Freudian inscription of white prevalence and privilege from an Indigenous point of view. She writes to this effect that "the belief that the assumption of patriarchal white sovereignty is morally right and legally correct" has a fatal consequence:

> The disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people is not perceived as an effect of this assumption; rather, the implication is that indigenous people lack the core values required to contribute to the development of the nation (2007: 100).

In the face of the havoc wrought by the Western irruption into Indigenous Australia, *Carpentaria*'s inscription into Aboriginal Reality necessarily makes an antidote to the crippling Freudian account of incomplete, stunted adulthood. Wright writes:

> *Carpentaria* should be written as a traditional long story of our times, so the book would appear reminiscent of the style of the oral storytelling that a lot of

> Indigenous people would find familiar […] I thought by writing this way, I might contribute something to disrupting the stagnating impulse that visualises the world of Aboriginal people as little more than program upon countless program for 'fixing up problems'. Surely, we are more than that (Wright 2007: 80–1).

Not surprisingly, Wright professes herself to be "very disappointed" with the state of government policies and public resources for Aborigines, of which she said: "I think we're at an all-time low now" (O'Brien 2007: 218).[iii] Indeed, *Carpentaria's* receipt of the Miles Franklin Award in 2006, Australia's highest literary distinction, coincided to the day with the start of the controversial, repressive Northern Territory Intervention, which put remote Aboriginal communities under ongoing, direct Federal control of the conservative Howard and later governments, after insistent rumours and reports about child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities.[iv] Specifying Wright's lament, Marcia Langton states 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" (Langton 2008: 155, 158).

Carpentaria and *Capricornia*

Despite its expansive Indigenous inscription, critics have pointed out that *Carpentaria* follows the structure, content, style and humorous tone of the epic novel *Capricornia*, written some seventy years earlier by the mainstream author Xavier Herbert (England 2006; Perlez 2007; Pierce 2007; Sharrad 2008; Syson 2007). Herbert held the post of Chief Protector of the Northern Territory Aborigines for a brief period between 1935 and 1936, and delivered an origin story of the Gulf area from a white settler's perspective, dealing with cross-cultural contact through the issue of 'black velvet'. Paul Sharrad notes some parallels suggesting that Wright's unwritten intention in writing *Carpentaria* was to decolonise Herbert's text:

> 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 [*sic*] critical one (2008: 7–8).[v]

These echoes cause *Carpentaria*'s authenticity to be inflected by *Capricornia* — albeit only to a certain extent, as Wright never makes allusions to *Capricornia* as a source of inspiration or reference in her interviews and essays regarding her writing, or clarifies whether she has read Herbert's novel. Rather, she holds that she works from the sophistication of the ancient Waanyi storytelling tradition and a series of South American, Magical-Realist authors[vi] to produce a provocative decolonising tale that is familiar as well as strange.

Does the former imply that, rather than Indigenising the characteristics of a European-style epic, the similarities are just coincidental, wrong-footing some readers into believing the case for an Australian precedent where none exists? While Peter Pierce notes that "Wright knows well that Xavier Herbert's comic epic, *Capricornia* (1938), will be on our minds", 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" (Pierce 2006: 13).

This contradiction suggests that Wright insists on *Carpentaria*'s originality out of a concern to "create in writing an *authentic* form of Indigenous storytelling" (Ashcroft et al. 2009: 212–13, emphasis added). She therefore denies the existence of a Western prequel, defies inscription in the Western literary tradition, and insists on an independent Indigenous configuration of truth through fiction. No doubt Wright adopts a trickster stance in maintaining a revelatory silence on the question of *Capricornia*'s presumed precedence. This silence appears politically inspired and embedded in the problem of the uneven balance of power underlying the hybridisation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous literary genres and content. It is with both of these fields that the author is obliged to work when transposing the oral into the written. Ashcroft, Devlin-Glass and McCredden maintain that the discursive struggle inherent in hybridisation tends to raise discomfiting issues of the *Capricornia–Carpentaria* kind:

> In Sam Watson's *The Kadaitcha Sung* and Mudrooroo's *Master of the Ghost Dreaming* trilogy, Dreamtime tropes are the medium in which the authors satirise colonialism, westernisation or urbanisation […] In doing so, they deploy literary forms as diverse as magic realism and, in the case of the elder Watson and Mudrooroo, more populist and inventive forms, such as gothic, fantasy thriller and dirty realism. Within western paradigms, such symbolic systems are available for re-use and hybridisation within western genres. However, within both communities questions increasingly arise about the

'authenticity' of the 'translation' of mythic material into western representations (Ashcroft et al. 2009: 212–13).

One may conclude that the objective of authenticity can never be absolute in a global culture — let alone in an isolated culture — and must always be tainted when intercultural communication sets the oral against the written, resting on the incorporation of divergent systems of knowledge and communication. By definition, the end-product 'Indigenous Australian Literature' must be a mixed heritage and collage, although recognisably 'Indigenous' to maintain its claim to a political agenda of enabling self-definition, to follow Michael Dodson's lead (1994: 39). No doubt Wright had prior knowledge of *Capricornia*'s content as Sharrad shows, but this does not imply loss of originality, or that her novel is a rewrite of a prequel, or that it lacks substance — in short, that it can be *de-authorised*. The important point is that *Carpentaria* is able to stand out as an independent work of art by the way it draws on and reworks existing cultural traditions. It appears the author has been successful at this, as the prestigious Miles Franklin award may serve to prove. The general public recognition of *Carpentaria*'s merits may thus help lay to rest the disturbing ghosts provoked by the *Capricornia* issue.

Conclusion: Indigenous sovereignty and the imagination

Published under John Howard's conservative tenure in 2006, *Carpentaria* can be seen to denounce the neocolonial powers in contemporary Australia that marginalise, reify and stifle the Indigenous world out of agency. Such neocolonialism is given fictional shape through the destructive manipulations of the multinational Gurfurritt mine against Native Title and through the stunting impact of small-town racism. The novel questions the race, gender and class divisions that hold exploitative, capitalist relationships in place in Australia and employs dreaming narrative in a generic configuration we could call Aboriginal Reality to achieve its postcolonising thrust. It proposes a return to a holistic understanding of man and nature, and creates contemporary storylines and structures recognisably drawing on Australia's oldest cultural heritage, the Dreamtime, but also incorporates European legend and myth. Wright centres her discourse on an enabling focus from the fringe, but works across both cultural frameworks to create a textual embodiment of her people's "strange cultural survival" (Bhabha 1990: 320). The hybrid, dichotomous aspect of the mermaid, a figure of fantasy come alive in Wright's dreaming narrative, stands for the epistemological tensions in the text and the way they can(not) be bridged, and signals what effort may be needed to reach beyond mere tolerance and coexistence.

Importantly, Alexis Wright not only primes her own oral tradition but also engages with the European literary tradition so as to allow non-Indigenous readership access to *Carpentaria* (arguably she does the same with the black swan trope in *The Swan Book* 2013), making for myriad interpretations that circulate through and solicit each other. This blend is manifest in the Rainbow Serpent's Dreaming/mother nature's powers in the land and sea against the

imposition of the stark reality of racist exploitation by white Uptown and the mine. It is evident in the merging of quest, odyssey, songline and walkabout in the journeying of Norm, his activist son Will, and his preacher friend Mozzie/Moses. It also manifests itself in Norm's miraculous recovery from a defeated, ghosted fringe dweller to a maban/cleverman bridging the forces of life and death and wreaking havoc upon Desperance. It evinces itself in Will's haunting terrorism in the service of the recovery of the ancestral link to country and Indigenous community. It is addressed in the inscription of the father–son–grandson triad/trinity Norm/Will/Bala as configured in a local inscription merging the Christian Fisher King myth with Indigenous regeneration. It comes to the fore in the wish-fulfillment of Gurfurritt's and Desperance's destruction and in traditional country's renewal as the signified of the area's ambiguous belonging to end times and new times. It is also apparent in Norm's wife Angel Day's merging of Christian and Indigenous beliefs and conversion into a white Metropolitan ghost appearing only in Norm's dreams. It reveals itself in Elias's biblical sacrifice to redeem a lost Indigenous mob holding on to the spirit of country. And it is, finally, reflected in Lloydie's exchange of 'black velvet' for the fatal love professed for an enchanting siren trapped in the wood of his bar top, perhaps the product of alcoholic delusion.

Reading Alexis Wright's fiction is like being sung to by an Indigenous siren who lures one into an alternative, enabling, holistic universe. The sophistication of Wright's epic "resistance writing" (Ferrier 1992: 215), a call for self-definition and self-determination, is evident in the ways *Carpentaria* participates in the multicultural complexity of contemporary Australia while steering clear of a crippling discourse on Indigenous authenticity rooted in essentialist identity politics. While recognising the perceived incommensurability of Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies in its treatment of time and space (Devlin-Glass 2007: 83), *Carpentaria* works toward closing the hierarchical Eurocentric gap between the oral and written, tradition and modernity, nature and human, fact and fiction, past and present, story and history. With its inscription in a holistic cycle of destruction/renewal and life/death through a strategic employment of Dreamtime tropes as well as Western ones such as the mermaid, *Carpentaria* constitutes a grand "micro-narrative" (cf. Lyotard 1984: xxiii–iv) against the race, gender, and class binaries underlying the Western distinction between Self, Other and World that has wrought so much havoc in our society.

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Endnotes

[i] Wright says that "my hope was that the novel would allow a space where Indigenous heroes are celebrated" (Wright 2007: 85).

[ii] Desperance's location is marked by the Southern Fish or Fomalhaut star, "the brightest in the constellation Piscis Austrini which followed the water carrier's jug of Aquarius [...] It was the groper who swam from the sea at certain times of the year to the sky and down again, falling back into the shallows of the groper's hole" (515).

[iii] No doubt this comment was partly inspired by the 2007 invasion of the Northern Territory by the conservative Howard government, after insistent rumors and reports about child sexual abuse in remote Aboriginal communities — for detailed criticism of these governmental actions, see *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena 2007). Note also Marcia Langton's statement 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"; Langton, "Trapped in the Aboriginal reality show," *Griffith Review* 19 (Autumn 2008): 155, 158.

[iv] For detailed criticism of these governmental actions, see *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Jon Altman & Melinda Hinkson (North Carlton, Melbourne: Arena 2007).

[v] Homi Bhabha coined the 'third space' in an interview with Jonathan Rutherford, and describes its cultural hybridity in Fanonesque supradialectical 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" — see Jonathan Rutherford, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990): 211.

[vi] She mentions Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Édouard Glissant, Eduardo Galeano, and Patrick Chamoiseau as important influences (Wright 2007: 82–3, 85–6; O'Brien 2007: 216).