

## ***Carpentaria*: a foray into Indigenous consciousness**

**Alessandra Solomon**

As the first novel written by an Indigenous Australian to win the Miles Franklin Literary Award, Alexis Wright's 2006 epic *Carpentaria* traverses Australia's traditionalist literary landscape and allows her readers access into the kaleidoscopic style of Aboriginal storytelling and history. Through her poignant depiction of a town in crisis, Wright challenges established notions of time and authenticity while considering the place of storytelling in contemporary Australia. Still feeling the effects of the white imperialism that arrived with the first fleet, *Carpentaria*'s predominantly white readership is forced to reassess whether it is truly 'post colonial'. Through her fairly blunt, ironic characters who serve as representations of the division between Western pragmatism and Indigenous spirituality, Wright eases her readers into the long overdue flow of cross-racial dialogue.

Set in the fictional town of Desperance on the Gulf of Carpentaria where Wright herself is from, the novel centres on the hostile relationship between members of the indigenous Pricklebush clan and the white inhabitants of the town their land surrounds. Additional animosity arises when a multinational mining company begins excavations on the Pricklebush's sacred land. With character's names including Normal Phantom, Fishman and Angel, Wright affords her readers little uncertainty as to her personal feelings on white and Indigenous relations. Reflecting a year after *Carpentaria*'s publication and in the wake of the Howard government's Northern Territory Intervention, Wright stated that her literary, "foray into a position inside the Indigenous consciousness" (2007, p87) was one designed to elucidate the dreaming and her proud heritage with the continuing negative effects of European imperialism.

Inherent to the Australian colonial narrative are considerable instances of rape, murder, theft, disease and dispossession, which in the majority of cases have been left injudiciously unresolved. As historian Barry Morris states, up until fairly recently, "colonial discourse, masquerading as history, [has] insinuated the Aborigines' complicity in their own demise" (1989, p6). Seeking to illustrate the destruction and grief caused by the initial offences as well as their erasure from history, Wright interweaves the trauma occurring in Desperance with the rich, endless spiritual history of her land and people.



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By adopting a non-linear structure that shuns traditionally recognised western literary conventions of time, place and reality, Wright suggests that an authentic reading of Australia's history must be non-teleological. Mimicking Indigenous oral tradition by creating a story that exists both in the present and past, and in reality and the dreaming, *Carpentaria* disorients white readers to remind them that regarding literature, not all Indigenous people "considers whiteness essential and infinitely desirable" (Fannon, F cited in Ghosh, D and Gillen, P. 2007, p175). Commenting on this, Wright explains,

"We see the world differently, our experience of the world differs from the rest of the population...if Aboriginal writing causes unease it is because it challenges non-Aboriginal perceptions of standard English, or white concepts, values and ways of describing events, places [and] people." (2007, p81)

Wright furthers the central concept of the variations of time and its relevance to contemporary racial discourse through the Pricklebush matriarch, Angel Day. As referenced in *Australian Historical Studies*, despite Australia's ultimate goal of assimilation and reconciliation being a unified nation, "people can also become reconciled to something, usually an unfortunate occurrence, learning to live with something which seems inevitable." (Nicholls, F cited in Goodall, H. 2002, p8) Angel, the most assimilated of the Pricklebush clan, represents this idea and acts as a "prime example of government policies at work" by collecting "fortunes" in the form of "dozens of Heinz Baked beans tins and pickle bottles full of nails, loose screws and bolts." (Wright, 2006, p. 16).

The notion of the dreamtime as opposed to 'white time' becomes apparent when Angel finds a large, black mantelpiece clock, a set of Disney stories and an effigy of the Virgin Mary amongst the rubbish. Angel imagines an entire "new sweet life" in which "no one would be guessing the time anymore from where the sun sat in the sky." And where her children, "would be marching off to bed at the correct time just like the school said was really desirable" (Wright, 2006, p. 22); this is in direct contrast to the opening of the novel in which, "The clocks, tick-a-ty tock, looked as though they might run out of time. Luckily, the ghosts in the memories of the old folk were listening and said anyone can find hope in the stories: the big stories and the little ones in between" (Wright, 2006, p. 1) This merging of Aboriginal tradition with the desperation to assimilate is additionally shown as Angel muses on the images within the books of "fair" characters with the "flowing...yellow hair" and "gentle...blue eyes" (Burke, J cited in Ghosh, D and Gillen, P. 2007, p. 172) inherent to the restrictive scope of western beauty. Her yearning for, "the luck of the white people" is made ever clearer as Angel believes that with the help of the Madonna, "they would become like the white people who prayed and said they were of the Christian faith. This was how the white people had become rich by saving up enough money so they could look down on others." (Wright, 2006, p. 22)

Despite recent thermo luminescence dating techniques calculating there has been Indigenous presence in Australia for between 50 and 65,000 years, less than 1% of NSW land currently belongs to Aboriginal people. Knowing this, and considering the Indigenous death and dispossession that has occurred to render the statistics accurate, the white inhabitants of Desperance's sense of entitlement is repulsive. Although the residents of 'Uptown' believe they "could trace back the family line on a sheet of paper...just to prove they could reach the point of infinity", in reality,

theirs is “a memory no greater than two life spans.” (Wright, 2006, p. 57) As explained by Australian historian Henry Reynolds, upon arrival in Australia, early settlers were surprised that, “There was wide spread cultural exchange over large areas of aboriginal Australia. Ceremonies, songs, dances, words and ideas all flowed back and forth.” (1990, p11) Such was the strength of the passing of oral history amongst Indigenous individuals and groups. By drawing our attention to the insubstantial memory of the white residents’ history, Wright subtly suggests that perhaps our own understanding of white history has been lost and embellished over time. In addition to this, *Carpentaria* presents the seemingly unbreakable oral tradition of the Aboriginal Dreaming and the unfortunate mockery it has faced both in the colonial era and today. This is seen most clearly when Elias Smith, the Mysterious shipwreck survivor, washes ashore. Having no memory of where he has come from, and no real understanding of where he is, Elias comes to represent both the initial colonists of the first fleet and their descendants – people with, “no history...no culture, no songs, no sacred ground” (Wright, 2006, p. 58) and no connection to the land in which they live. Initially amazed by Elias’s “fine looking skin” (Wright, 2006, p. 49), the white residents of Desperance compare the man to Poseidon, Santa Claus, The Ancient Mariner from Coleridge’s epic and the figure of Jonah from the Bible. Though seemingly innocuous, the residents’ opinions all draw from western literature, mythology and religion, and despite being made in jest, are treated with more reverence than the dreaming stories of the Pricklebush people, thus perpetuating the notion of white academic and spiritual superiority.

Insightful and long overdue, Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* is an incredible exploration of truth, knowledge, time, existence and perseverance in postcolonial Australia. It exists as a profound reminder of our past and present and will undoubtedly remain a national classic for years to come.

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