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Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*: "A self-governing literature that belongs to place"


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### "Plenty of business going on"

The Apocalyptic Cyclones of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*  
as Trope of Real, Imagined, and Spiritual Australian Place

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# “Plenty of business going on”

## The Apocalyptic Cyclones of Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* as Trope of Real, Imagined, and Spiritual Australian Place

Chrystopher J. Spicer

### TEXTE

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- 1 “Place extends,” declares Alexis Wright in her essay, “A Journey in Writing Place”, “a particular place is not separate and just of itself”. Rather, it is part of the extended, national environmental place<sup>1</sup>. While *Carpentaria* is a unique and singular work of particular literary place, that place too is not “just of itself”, for Wright’s novel is situated within the context of tropical Australian literary place, and in this paper I will explore Wright’s use of the apocalyptic cyclone trope in *Carpentaria* and then the trope’s context in Australian literature by way of understanding the cyclone trope’s relationship to Australian literary place.
- 2 While Wright is the first Australian Aboriginal writer to offer a vision for society through the genre of dystopian literature, a genre that includes such texts as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1932), George Orwell’s *1984* (1949), and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985), she subverts the Western form of the genre in that it is nature, the environment, and ancestral spirits that destroy and re-create place rather than technology or nuclear warfare, and the instruments of apocalypse in *Carpentaria* are natural events: cyclones. Here, the spiritual and the natural are the vehicles by which the hopelessness of present place is transformed into the hope of future place. The Australian Aboriginal peoples’ cultural knowledge is grounded in faithfulness and faith in a particular place, its ancestry, its people, its seas and skies, and the deep interpretation of these with the sacred. For Aboriginal peoples, argues anthropologist Wade Davis, life is “a cosmological whole”, and so they understand their obligation is to “sustain the world”, as an essential part of which the “literal preservation of the land was the fundamental priority of every Aboriginal man and woman<sup>2</sup>”. In Wright’s literary world, then, there is an intrinsic relationship between the natural climate and the social climate, that is

between spiritual and physical place and the people within it. Australian Aboriginal people perceive cyclones as products of the place itself that may be actually “sung up” by a clever man or spirits for a purpose, such as chasing down and punishing lawbreakers<sup>3</sup>. Such an intimate relationship between people and environment forms what Wright terms an “extraordinary literacy of place”, and an essential element of tropical Northern Australia place is the cyclones that are so integral to it<sup>4</sup>. They are the forces of nature that are “more powerful than anything that humans can offer<sup>5</sup>.”

3 *Carpentaria* is a work within a sub-genre of Australian climate change literature in which cyclones are a significant trope and, as such, are an example of Wright’s argument that place extends: that environmental place, personal place, and literary place are interrelated. In the first part of this paper, I want to explore the literacy of the particular cyclone place in *Carpentaria*, and then I will briefly consider some examples of other Australian works that also speak of cyclone place. To my knowledge, the particular context of extreme cyclonic weather events has not been considered in any critical commentary about *Carpentaria*, although critics such as Lucy Rowland have certainly considered the novel’s relation to climate change, but I believe that it is important to consider *Carpentaria*’s contextual relevance to our relationship with both literal and literary Australian place<sup>6</sup>.

4 Occurring with seasonal regularity, tropical cyclones are historically endemic to the Northern Australia region and so, as significant meteorological phenomena impacting the area, they have been integrated into its life, culture, and literature. Their combination of high-speed winds, heavy rain, and storm surges can mean loss of life and destruction of property on a large scale, and so to live successfully in the tropics, one must not only accept the storm as an integral part of life but be prepared to heed the meaning of the storm, to embrace its new revelations, and so better understand and better enable our relationship with our environment. Because cyclones are an integral, historic, and frequently catastrophic element of the physical and meteorological Northern Australia region, they have featured in Australian literary works that form an essential part of the national literary context within which Wright tells her own epic and individual story.

- 5 While working on *Carpentaria*, Wright often read the Irish poet and playwright Seamus Heaney, whom she admired for having “dignified Irish humanity and their troubles in his poetry” with a calmness and clarity that inspired her to “speak to this country [Australia] in its language” and to strive to create a sense of authenticity about our world<sup>7</sup>. To achieve this authenticity, Wright perceived that Heaney had “dug into his country with his heart, his mind, and his soul,” just as she aimed to do<sup>8</sup>. Heaney explains that there are two ways in which place is known and cherished: one is lived and unconscious, the other is learned and conscious and that “in the literary sensibility, both are likely to co-exist in a conscious and unconscious tension<sup>9</sup>”. Wright visualized this co-existence in *Carpentaria* as a “spinning, multi-stranded helix of stories”, a helix of strands “forever moving, entwining all stories together”, that form the novel’s literary DNA in which conscious and unconscious multi-cultural stories co-exist. While major characters in *Carpentaria* are Australian Aboriginal, Wright observes that she could have created characters indigenous to any part of the world “who share a relationship with their spiritual ancestors and heritage, or for that matter, any Australian – old or new<sup>10</sup>”. Place extends.
- 6 Cyclones are significant to Wright’s story, as they have been to the stories of other Australian authors, old or new, in their role as climatic instruments of apocalypse and epiphany, judgement and redemption, destruction and renewal, but in *Carpentaria* there is a spiritual relationship between cyclone, spirit, land, and people that is unique to this story. At the conclusion of the novel, when Norm Phantom and Bala sing the country afresh in the cyclone’s aftermath, they sing a new song and a new story of renewed place, in contrast to the song of Armageddon heard at the beginning of the novel. While Desperance is destroyed by a cyclone, it is also transformed by it: a disaster for white settlers is transfigured as a revelation of Australian Aboriginal cosmos. In the true meaning of apocalypse, the cyclonic destruction of the old social structure and climate reveals that change is possible and that there can be a new and different social climate. In singing a new song of Country, Norm and Bala are re-establishing and continuing the story of the spiritual as well as the physical place of the cyclone that has always been here and always will be here.

- 7 Wright’s cyclones are more than random weather events. There are reasons for their existence. They have purpose. Cyclones play significant roles in the conscious and unconscious stories of what Wright terms the “deep weather” of Country, which is why she includes them in this novel<sup>11</sup>. Structurally bracketed by cyclones, *Carpentaria* is permeated by the ancestral spirits of the wind and the Serpent that are “all around in the atmosphere”. As the serpent’s breath “fights its way through in a tunnel of wind from underground”, the rhythm of its breathing is the ebb and flow of the tide<sup>12</sup>. This is Country where the inside knowledge gathered from stories informs when the trade winds will merge in summer and when cyclones might linger and regroup, and Wright believes in the transforming power of these stories, that “once these stories are heard there is an opportunity to see this other way of knowing<sup>13</sup>”. *Carpentaria* is a story of epiphany and apocalypse and the transforming power of hope that initially appears as a prophet who emerges from a cyclone to warn a town about its hypocrisy toward a land and its people and to offer an opportunity for cultures to come together. However, when that prophet is rejected and exiled by the white townspeople of Desperance, and eventually murdered by men from the local mine, a second cyclone created by clever man Norm Phantom punishes the mine and town, destroying them in order to cleanse and recreate the land. This cyclone is a storm of great spiritual power and portent, but in the true sense of apocalypse this cyclonic catastrophe is not just about destruction: it also reveals opportunity for change, for a new beginning and for hope.
- 8 In this story, *Carpentaria* country is a place of both end and beginning, of apocalypse and re-creation, where people experience epiphanies of hope in their relationships with place, story, person, and environment, including the meteorology. Because the English word “apocalypse” is derived from the Greek *apokalupsis*, meaning literally to uncover or reveal, the word was originally associated more with revelation than with the destruction of a world-ending violent event, while current usage tends to downplay the meaningful reveal in favor of the more dramatic Big Bang, that universe-wide explosive event wrought from catastrophe. In that sense, while an apocalypse may certainly appear to be a catastrophe, according to the primary meaning of the word it happens for a *reason*. As James Berger maintains in

*After the End*, to be truly apocalyptic an event must “in its destructive moment, clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end.” An apocalypse is not actually the end in itself; rather, it anticipates, reveals, and explains the end<sup>14</sup>. For example, while a catastrophic weather event like a severe tropical cyclone may be described as apocalyptic in terms of its scope, severity of destruction, and its impact on people’s lives, as an apocalypse the cyclone has purpose and meaning. It can destroy but, in the process, it can also reveal and after that epiphany, the cyclone can be a catalyst for re-creation. The cyclone in *Carpentaria* that seeks out a Law breaker, for example, has purpose as the punishment instrument of the creation spirit, finding and revealing the person to punish and destroy them. (p. 461) The “whirly wind” that “spung up from the hills themselves” (p. 394) has purpose to revive the fire that destroys the Gurfurrit mine and punish those that violate the Law<sup>15</sup>. A multifaceted threat to the environment of Wright’s cyclone place, the mine endangers the physical health of the Aboriginal people working there as well as imperilling their cultural survival as “excavation of the land during mining activity can revise or disrupt the traditional narratives associated with that land<sup>16</sup>”. The Gurfurrit mine has provoked the ancestral spirits of the place that should have remained undisturbed: Norm’s son Kevin heard the roar of the ancestor’s voice in the explosion that nearly killed him. Damage to the environmental place has spread beyond the land, and when the second cyclone arrives, “Country people, old people, said it was the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty polluted sea.” Will can see that the country “looked dirty from mining, shipping, barges spilling ore and waste. Something had to run a rake across the lot” (p. 385). The cyclone arrives to cleanse and renew, to not only punish but to reveal a new earth to the survivors as re-creator.

- 9 The cyclone may also reveal on a more personal level. The destruction, the trauma, and the violence of such weather events can reveal and explain to survivors during and after the event unseen or unknown aspects of themselves. Consequently, in the aftermath they now perceive their very selves and their personal space differently, a revelation that may occur as an enlightening, illuminating, even spiritual experience: an epiphany. Wright also read James Joyce while working on *Carpentaria*, and in Joyce’s *Stephen Hero* his protagonist

defines an epiphany as a “sudden spiritual manifestation [...] the most delicate and evanescent of moments” that might appear without warning<sup>17</sup>. In such a moment, “the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus” finally does so, and everything becomes clear or “epiphanised,” to use Joyce’s term<sup>18</sup>. An example in Australian literature is the epiphany experienced by Patrick White’s character Elizabeth Hunter in his novel *The Eye of the Storm*. Emerging from an island shelter into the quiet eye of a cyclone, she experiences an epiphany about her true spiritual condition, or rather lack of it. Only in that still moment within the Yeatsian gyre does she realize the true nature of her soul and is epiphanised<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, she seeks a right path during the latter part of her life so that she might achieve spiritual union with the universe when she dies<sup>20</sup>. The Biblical character Saul, the persecutor of Christians, also seeks the right path after experiencing another example of epiphany. While travelling to Damascus, he is suddenly surrounded by a light and interrogated by a divine voice, as recounted in Chapter 9 of the Acts of the Apostles. Consequently, forced by his experience to question his life values and direction, he ceases his persecution, converts to Christianity, and changes his name to Paul.

- 10 For Alexis Wright, fiction penetrates surface layers to probe “deep into the inner workings of reality”, and in *Carpentaria*, her cyclones are the instruments of that exploration, rendering catastrophe as revelatory apocalypse that enables the incomprehensible to be comprehended and the seeming, random meaninglessness of violent weather to be perceived to have meaning<sup>21</sup>. In this way, Wright challenges the reader to penetrate the layers of *Carpentaria*, right from the opening words of the storyteller: “A NATION CHANTS, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY” (p. 1), for they do not know this different story told by those on the outside of the white nation looking in. Desperance may seem to be Armageddon, but *Carpentaria* place is also where, “A CHILD WHO WAS NO STRANGER TO HER PEOPLE ASKED IF ANYONE COULD FIND HOPE. THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK WERE LISTENING AND SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG ONES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN” (p. 12). Stories are significant here because it is through story that *Carpentaria* place exists and will continue to exist. *Carpentaria* expresses a profound way of re-thinking being and knowing about the world but, even more than that, this is literature that *makes* a world where le-

gends and spirits and weather live side by side in a place of cyclical patterns embodied in the cyclonic weather systems of Wright’s tropical coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

- 11 Wright’s spinning cyclones are tropes of the “recurring cycle of existence” of her protagonists and their *Carpentaria* place<sup>22</sup>. The novel’s events “are depicted by cyclical (climatic) and generational (remembered) experiences of time rather than by the time [...] measured by clock, calendar, and chronology<sup>23</sup>”. Wright herself revealed that when writing *Carpentaria*, she was consciously striving “to create an authentic form of Indigenous story-telling” that would be a cyclic, multi-dimensional narrative differing in form and style from traditional European linear narrative, and the result is her entwined, “spinning, multi-stranded helix of stories<sup>24</sup>”. The spinning, spiral form of the cyclones in *Carpentaria* is a trope of that spinning helix of stories that “relate to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams<sup>25</sup>”. Norm Phantom and his son Will, for example, embark on journeys of self-discovery that will bring them back to their place, and Elias Smith, who is given to Desperance by a cyclone, returns to the sea from where he came. Will’s wife Hope sets out to find him, taking the stories and knowledge she has learned back to the sea and to him, having given her father-in-law Norm hope that these forgotten stories of this place can be relearned. When the apocalyptic cyclone arrives, it cleanses *Carpentaria* place, cycling it back to its original pre-creation nakedness from which it can be re-created by and through these stories in a continuation of a journey of place.
- 12 *Carpentaria* is an epic story set in an epic story place. Wright tells us that her intention “was to build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side,” where it would be as if the land “was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories about the land<sup>26</sup>”. This is a saga that will grow the land, that reaches forward into an envisioned future as much as back through layers of time and history where the natural and the mythical elements twine together to form a helix of story that the land is telling about itself and its people<sup>27</sup>.
- 13 Into *Carpentaria* country, where storms are “like second nature to these people”, (p. 84) and into its story appears a man from out of a



cyclone, a “wizard of many oceans” who has had his memory taken from him by the spirits of this once-in-a-century cyclone named Leda because he cursed the sea and angered them (p. 42). Like the mythological Leda birthing Helen of Troy, Cyclone Leda births a man with no name and no identity but who is clearly a man of spiritual significance, for when he appears a miracle occurs: lightning rises *up* from under the sea to strike the tree in the middle of Desperance at the same time as all the clocks in the town stop (p. 43). Chronological time ceases and spiritual time begins when this man is reborn out of the cyclone to be a messenger of the spirits.

- 14 This cyclone-birthing man, who materializes while apparently walking on water, is perceived differently by various groups. To the white townspeople, as a stranger appearing out of nowhere on some foreign shore, he exemplifies their origin story (p. 55). Hoping he will be able to provide answers to their local mysteries and answer their prayers, they place “the richness of prophecy squarely on his shoulders” and christen him with a prophet’s name: Elias (pp. 67, 74). Like the Biblical prophet Elias, or Elijah, who encountered the “still small voice of God” within a whirlwind and was a prophet of rain, Elias Smith has encountered sacred spirits in a cyclone from which he has emerged with a purpose. “It was”, Wright’s story-teller declares, “the beginning of the day the spirits of the seas and storms mixed their business and sent Elias from out of oblivion into Desperance for a good reason”(p. 53). To the local Aboriginal people, Elias is a man of power, a “clever man”, because in their story these spirits, appeased by the theft of his memory, cause the cyclone to skirt the town, and so the story of Elias, “which was later put alongside the Dreamtime by the keepers of the law to explain what happened once upon a time”, becomes part of their story of place (p. 53). Norm Phantom is also aware that Elias knows the sacred place of the giant groper fish out in the Gulf and can communicate with them, because he has seen Elias call the sacred gropers up from the deep. Both the Aboriginal and the white people of Desperance agree that Elias is a spiritually unique person: the latter make him the town guardian, while the former adopt him as a man of “ancient ways” with whom they sit at night to count constellations (p. 75). However, Elias perceives himself as neither. With no memory of his own identity, he cannot accept those that are imposed upon him. Consequently, the

town perceives him as ungrateful and punishes him as a scapegoat with exile into the wilderness of the sea from whence he came. Finally, he is murdered by men from the mine.

15 When Norm’s son Will Phantom, another exile, discovers the body and returns it to his father, Norm is traditionally obligated to start the body on its return journey to its spiritual place: the home of the proper in the Gulf of Carpentaria, where they gather on their nightly and seasonal journeys to and from the sea and the sky. Norm believes they are waiting here to receive Elias and take him into the sea of stars, and so he embarks on what will be a journey of great spiritual epiphany and revelation to return the man from the cyclone to his spiritual home<sup>28</sup>. As he sails on his sacred mission over the vast network of underwater song lines and under the map of the stars, spiritual secrets are revealed to him. After years of pain, anger, and loneliness, he now sees the hope of a path home where he will reunite with his family, his people, and his country. In fact, Hope is literally his family, in the form of his daughter-in-law, but Norm has had a problem with her being related to a destructive cyclone. Hope’s grandfather was “old and clever” Cyclone, a believer in and user of magic who was reputed to be the “first person in contemporary times to turn imagination into reality”. Cyclone’s imagination was a dark place, however, for it was rumoured he had the ability to bring lies to life (p. 147), and this long-standing family background is why Norm was consumed with anger over Will’s relationship with Hope and exiled him<sup>29</sup>. In *Carpentaria*, then, from one cyclone emerges Elias the prophet figure who is the herald of another cyclone and who turns Norm’s heart to Hope, his son Will, and his grandson Bala, for it is on this physical and spiritual journey inspired by Elias’ death that Norm re-establishes his relationship with them. This, he concludes, “was the solace of Elias: how he used his death to help an ignorant old man find his grandson, to rekindle hope in his own joyless soul” (p. 294).

16 As a result of this journey, perhaps because of this journey, the prophet’s mantle of judgement once worn by Elias falls across Norm’s shoulders. In that last verse of Malachi, Elijah is also identified as the prophet who will herald “the great and terrible day of the Lord”, and now it must be Norm who calls down the great and terrible day of judgement on Desperance in payback on the town for its hypocrisy, its ignorance, its racism, and its willingness to destroy this Carpent-

aria country. To do so, he draws on his spiritual power in a sacred place to “sing up the spirits in the water” (p. 467), creating the apocalyptic cyclone that will destroy it<sup>30</sup>.

- 17 In *Carpentaria* place, cyclones have spiritual function and bear portent far beyond their literal form. As Will shelters from this storm, he sees storm clouds

carrying the enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds [...] the sounds of the great spirit ancestors roaring [...] the spirit waves being rolled in by the ancestral seawater creatures of the currents [...] This was the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another. (p. 385)

- 18 He understands that this cyclone is more than weather: it is an apocalyptic event of profound significance that will change everything as part of the eternal creation cycle, because

history could be obliterated when Gods moved the country. He saw history being rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making. (p. 473)

- 19 For Australian Aboriginal people, a cyclone reveals the way home to not only the living but also the spirits of the dead, and this cyclone has plucked the lost drowned souls from the depths (p. 458) as it crossed the waters of the Gulf, carrying them to shore. When Will climbs into the confined space under the roof of the Desperance pub to seek shelter, then, he is not surprised to discover that he is sharing it with spirits of ancestors and of drowned fisherman, including the very old Queen of the Pricklebush, who reminds Will that as a child he saw a Creation Spirit in the form of a cyclone follow a Law breaker along a river-bed until it found him hiding in a town and killed him. Cyclones have purpose as instruments of judgement, she declares, and this spiritually powerful cyclone raging around them has been brought into existence for that very purpose, ‘sung’ into existence using a creation ceremony in a sacred place and then directed along the secret paths of underwater currents specifically to Desperance. “Cyclones don’t come from nowhere”, she states emphatically, “be-

cause there is plenty of business going on when cyclones come onto the country out of the rooftop of the world” (p. 461).

20 That cyclone business, in the true sense of apocalypse, is more than destruction: it is also to reveal and renew. Will knows that in revealing new knowledge to him, this cyclone experience is preparing him for “the knowledge of intuition, of understanding the vibrations of subtle movement in the environment” (p. 444). It is preparing him for change. In his mind, Will sees huge masses of the waters of the sea circulating, and “a mysterious change of great magnitude [...] taking place in the wetted atmosphere”, and so this change is not restricted to just the land. (p. 443) Will understands that this cyclonic event is part of the on-going story of this entire great creation place that is his homeland, his country, where “predetermined knowledge” dwelling within a world full of memories is “told, retold, thousand upon a thousand times from the voices of all times” (p. 443). This cyclonic event is not just about the despair of the past and destruction: this is an apocalyptic spiritual storm that reveals a new future of hope.

21 When Norm and Bala reach the site of Desperance after the cyclone, the land has been wiped clean of all trace of humanity. There will now be need for hope, and for Norm’s daughter-in-law Hope, as a new cycle begins. Norm, the man who lost hope, finally finds Hope in the cyclone. Wright’s constant puns and allusions to “hope” throughout the novel leave little doubt that her choice of this name was quite deliberate, and it is significant that these references become more positive as the novel progresses. While Will is trapped under the roof with the spirits during the storm, he has a vision of Hope in which she is apparently walking on water, and when Norm and Bala discover Hope wandering along a beach, she has emerged from the sea with no memory of how she came to be in it. Both these events are reminders of the first sightings of Elias and suggest that Hope has emerged as his spiritual successor and a messenger of hope from out of the second cyclone. Will’s epiphany is that he will survive and see her again. Norm has believed that miracles do not happen to anyone unless God has given them a miracle key such as the one he considered was given to Elias, and he has refused to believe that Hope had it. However, as Hope prepares to embark on her own journey to find Will after the storm and restore a people to country made new by the cyclone, Norm has an epiphany that she now has that key and

that he believes in her. (p. 498) Like his son, this man who lost hope has found Hope. As Norm’s journey-cycle through sadness and revenge culminates in his spiritual awakening and renewal sung by the voices of frogs awakened by the rain, another cycle of hope begins for him, as it does for this cyclone place.

- 22 Wright envisages a cyclone country made spiritually animate through the interrelationship of human and non-human forces, and thus her novel challenges attitudes to what it means to be in and of that place. Wright’s cyclones, that both begin and complete the cycle of her story, are more than weather: as apocalyptic instruments, they are spiritual voices and messengers with purpose to not only punish and destroy but also to reveal and transform. Cyclone Leda transforms Elias from person to prophet, a journey that continues after his death until he is eternally visible in the constellations as a spirit guide of great power. Will’s meeting with the spirits within the second cyclone enables his spirit to be renewed and redefined. Norm Phantom, a man with more than normal power that can create cyclones, is guided to find Hope by the very cyclone he creates – a cyclone so powerful it changes landscape and lives. Ultimately, this cyclone country is cleansed in order that new life can be re-created in a renewed land under which the Creation Serpent will still sleep. The cyclone in *Carpentaria* is a spiritual as well as a physical experience that, told in this time, is a story of all time about the need for and understanding of our relationships through story with place and our environment.
- 23 It is a place that Ronald and Catherine Berndt describe as a “speaking land” that, “resonant with sound and presence”, constitutes a “primary force” that “speaks unequivocally” through Australian Aboriginal stories that hold up a mirror in which can be seen the actions of the environment and of the people within it<sup>31</sup>. It is a voice of place in sharp contrast to the historical “great Australian silence” of white Australians to the presence of Aboriginal people<sup>32</sup>. Wright expressed a desire to entwine these stories to form “a literature growing out of the country itself” that was capable “of changing the way we think about literature in Australia”, and so find “ways to sing this country more powerfully<sup>33</sup>”. *Carpentaria* voices an Australian Aboriginal view not only of Carpentaria place but of national place that challenges Western assumptions of our relationships to the natural environment. However, to understand that relationship to national place, we

need to understand *Carpentaria* as it sits within the national literary context, within that small unique group of Australian literature that also features the cyclone as a literary trope of revelation and renewal. Wright was conscious when writing *Carpentaria* of the “power of stories” that grew out of place, and as her story grew out of a cyclone place, so have other Australian stories. To understand the Australian literary context of her use of the cyclone trope, we need to briefly overview some of the other Australian works in which that trope also appears, while understanding that *Carpentaria* is different and detached from the literary tradition of those previous works and speaks of another culture while yet speaking with a national voice. Recognizing the novel as Australian Aboriginal story-telling that is also part of a national story-telling of place enhances the power and the inclusiveness of *Carpentaria* as a new song within a vast story.

24 *Carpentaria* is positioned within a sub-genre of Australian climate literature that includes short stories, poems, and novels in which cyclones are major tropes and catalysts of events. Having referred to Patrick White’s *The Eye of the Storm* earlier in the paper, the other four works that we will explore are Helen Weston’s *The Prelude*, Vance Palmer’s *Cyclone*, Thea Astley’s *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, and Susan Hawthorne’s poetry cycle *Earth’s Breath*<sup>34</sup>. I consider these works the most significant in this group because in each, as in *Carpentaria*, the cyclone trope appears not just as catastrophe but as apocalypse, as both destroyer and creator, as the will of nature and as an instrument of divine will, as both fate and destiny. Thus these literary works also speak in their own way to our relationship to place and our journey through it, about our resilience and our search for hope and meaning in times of chaos and change.

25 In Kate Helen Weston’s 1914 novel *The Prelude*, the earliest known Australian novel to use the cyclone trope, she also uses the tropical cyclone as an instrument of punishment, but this is a novel of a different era and culture in which the trope exists purely as a plot device. In this tragically romantic, Edwardian era narrative of sexual longing and unconsummated love set predominantly in sugar cane country near Townsville, Weston flagrantly uses the cyclone to return her heroine, Nora Glayde, to the feminist path in order for her to become a fully independent woman. Weston’s writing is clearly concerned with the position of women in society and the right of women

to emotional and physical independence, and although she demonstrates a close affinity with Queensland place, it is really only secondary to her theme. While married to misogynistic and possessive Dr Malcolm McCarron, Nora Glayde meets the younger, politically active David Blencowe, who encourages her to become more independent. After she meets Blencowe again on a voyage to Townsville, they are left behind on Magnetic Island when their ship leaves without them. Attempting to sail to shore in a small boat, they are blown out to sea in a storm and eventually cast onto the shore of another island where they spend ten happy but chaste days together. When they are rescued, McCarron refuses to believe his wife remained faithful, at which point she leaves him, buys a local town newspaper, and becomes an independent, successful businesswoman. When McCarron dies suddenly, she is at last free to marry Blencowe but the couple are caught out in the open when a cyclone ravages his sugar cane plantation, and he is struck by flying debris and killed. Nevertheless, Glayde as the ultimate survivor rises above yet another tragedy to successfully manage both the plantation and the newspaper. Here, the cyclone punishes both characters for infringing moral codes: Blencowe for tempting the married Nora and Nora for being willing to be tempted from the feminist path by sexual desire and another marriage.

- 26 Vance Palmer's 1947 novel *Cyclone*, based on the 1934 Cape Tribulation cyclone event, is a far less contrived exploration of the ebb and flow of interchange between place and people, exploring relationships between society, weather, the environment, myth and spirituality. Palmer maintained that good stories “come from something in the author's experience” that was not external but that they had thought about until it became “an integral part” of their inner life. What the author was striving to do, in Palmer's opinion, was to give that experience a “shape and significance” that would enable the reader to understand it<sup>35</sup>. Palmer and his wife Nettie had been living on Green Island, offshore from Cairns, prior to that cyclone and had not long returned to Melbourne before that cyclone devastated Cairns, killing some sixty people including good friends. Basing his novel on real people and events, Palmer seeks to explore the deeper elements and relationships between people, nature, and place. His characters are motivated by a search for meaning that is deeply connected to their tropical place and to their lives there.

- 27 Palmer, too, was aware of the epic, legendary nature of humanity's encounters with weather. “Literature”, proposes literary critic and theorist Northrop Frye, “is conscious mythology”: as society develops, its mythical stories become structural principles of storytelling, and in the literature of *Cyclone*, Palmer is developing his own conscious mythology of the tropical storm as he uses the great serpent monster Leviathan as a trope for the cyclone and the dangers and fears of the unknown associated with it<sup>36</sup>. Here, the shape of the natural event becomes that of the misshapen unnatural. As the cyclone rages around her home and around her husband out at sea, the character Fay Donolly envisions it as the enormous, wounded, sea-monster Leviathan, thrashing and destroying in anger, seeking to destroy and lay waste. In the end, the monster is defeated when Fay refuses to surrender to doubt and terror: her husband returns alive, her home remains intact, and the town's faith in itself is restored as it rebuilds. Before the cyclone arrived, the people of Palmer's port town were in conflict with each other and with themselves but, in the aftermath, having experienced the terror and the mystery of the apocalyptic cyclone event, Palmer's characters realize that they have transcended their fears and inadequacies, and this epiphany enables them to recreate new lives and new worlds. In writing *Cyclone*, Palmer sought in his imagination to understand and cope with the challenges of Far North Queensland place that includes catastrophe and chaos as well as paradise and peace. He wrote of a search to restore balance in time of disruption, of a search for meaning. He wrote of revelation.
- 28 Author Thea Astley also perceived an intimate relationship between the personal and the elemental: the cyclone as within us as well as without. She believed that many of her characters were “always touching on the edges of cyclones”, and that just being alive was like living on that cyclonic edge<sup>37</sup>, and her characters in *A Boat Load of Home Folk* duly discover that while they are trapped on a tropical island by a cyclone, storms rage within them as well as without. For Astley, the elemental force that is the cyclone symbolized the danger that can emerge out of the emptiness of loneliness. To survive it, she proposes we need the strength gained from social connectivity and community. As her characters attempt to cope with their internal as well as external violent weather, their perceptions of themselves, of each other, and of their environment change. Some are touched by



the cyclone while others are consumed, but no-one escapes the encounter. *A Boat Load of Home Folk* is a profound novel of the human experience, a moral fable in Astley uses the elemental apocalypse of the cyclone as a trope of an apocalypse that is both destructive and revelatory. Weighed in moral balances by the gods of whirling air, some of Astley’s home folk are found wanting, yet in the aftermath others experience revelations of understanding and enlightenment.

29 Unlike the previous authors, Susan Hawthorne wrote her poetry cycle *Earth’s Breath* having survived an actual cyclone: Tropical Cyclone Larry in North Queensland in March 2006. In the aftermath of that event, Hawthorne felt that the cyclone had infiltrated and revealed her innermost self. However, she also realized that her personal experience was part of the trans-national storm experience, that we are all caught up together in storms of one type or another and so, while we need to develop personal resilience, we also need to empathize with the broader global community and recognize that we are all living with the chaos of Nature. In this work, Hawthorne also searches for reason and meaning in the relationship between person and place when both have been subject to the seemingly random chaos of the violent cyclonic storm. In the course of her poem cycle, Hawthorne’s interaction with the cyclone becomes intimate and ultimately complete. By the final stanza, the cyclone is *inside* her. It has become an integral part of her; it is constantly with her and even invasively *through* her. She feels caught up in the cyclone’s intimate embrace: “I am in with through the cyclone/ which is inside with through me<sup>38</sup>”. In the last section of her poem cycle, the arms of Hawthorne’s spiralling storm broaden and extend as her point of view moves from the personal and local to the world cyclone. Because “the wind has entered/ some inner part of me/ and I cannot wrench it out”, she feels part of the universal meteorology<sup>39</sup>. An event that she once saw only as isolating her from the world is now revealing to her that she is part of that world. She realizes she will never be the same person she was before her epiphany in the cyclone, and that is important for her to understand the changes wrought within her by her cyclone experience, that she and the wind are now part of the same living system.

30 As the cyclone is experienced across literary and literal Country, a regional consciousness is engendered by this common circulation of

elements. Alexis Wright suggests the power and purpose of Australian literature is that as it draws from the stories “of our two-and-something centuries”, it is “growing with a lot more truth and telling, reimagining and rewriting history<sup>40</sup>”. She considers “it is exciting to think about how we might draw strength from our combined heritages to grow stronger and more creatively”, and that “we need more literature that shows we are at home with all the realities of our region<sup>41</sup>”. At home, that is, with our place. According to James Houston, “Place implies belonging. It establishes identity<sup>42</sup>”. Place, in other words, is part of self, of who we are. One is “essential to the being of the other,” argues Edward Casey. “In effect, there is no place without self and no self without place<sup>43</sup>”. Place is thus more than a matter of geography: whether actual or imagined as literary place, it is constitutive of one’s sense of self. Seamus Heaney proposed that it is in the imagination, in what he termed “the country of the mind”, where the tension between the literate and conscious and the lived and unconscious ways in which place is known and cherished becomes resolved in a “feeling, assenting, equable marriage” that constitutes our sensing of place “in its richest possible manifestations<sup>44</sup>”. In reading stories of our cyclone place, we experience that place in our country of the mind, resolving the tension between what we unconsciously understand of place and that which we consciously learn and appreciate through literary sensibility. In this way, people and place become mapped into the texture and structure of the narrative of place. “Every narrative [...] plays a critical role in making place”, argue Potteiger and Purinton. “It is through narrative that we interpret the processes and events of place. We come to know a place because we know its stories<sup>45</sup>”.

- 31 Stories are not only about what we say about ourselves, then, but about how we see the world, how we perceive and interpret the environment around us and our relation to it. As Alexis Wright suggests, we write and read stories in order to find an explanation of our world, to reach an understanding of it with which we can live<sup>46</sup>. So, in the stories we have explored in this paper about tropical cyclone place, we can see Wright and other Australian authors, Kate Weston, Vance Palmer, Thea Astley, Patrick White, and Susan Hawthorne, striving through their stories of the cyclone to reach, as a group of authors from different Australian eras and differing cultural heritage,

that understanding of their experience. Invariably, it is not a comfortable experience: the tropical cyclone as trope may at times be an epiphany and a revelation, but it is at the same time a destructive, violent, hazardous, soul-searching, and even potentially fatal experience for literary characters, as it is in reality.

- 32 The metaphors and aesthetics of tropical cyclones permeate the literature of Northern Australian place. The cyclonic storm reverberates through that literature with contexts of theme and setting, of plot and place, of tropes and tropics that encompass the complicated and symbiotic relations between society, nature, landscape, place, and space. The cyclonic storm is a literary trope of both personal and collective awareness, of revelation within the stillness and spirituality of the cyclone’s eye that enables the individual to emerge from the experience transformed. To transcend the tropical cyclone experience, one needs to be open to the epiphany of revelation as these violent storms strip away the historic cultural over-growth, clearing space to re-build and for new imaginative ideas to grow. Such stories can challenge previous human experience, providing opportunity to move forward, opportunity for the emergence of the new.

## NOTES

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- 1 Alexis Wright, “A Journey in Writing Place,” *Meanjin*, vol. 78, n° 2, 2019, pp. 44-53, p. 52.
- 2 Wade Davis, *The Wayfinders*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2009, p. 148, p. 159.
- 3 Alexis Wright, “Deep Weather,” *Meanjin*, vol. 70, n° 2, 2011, pp. 70-82, p. 75.
- 4 Alexis Wright, “A Journey in Writing Place”, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
- 5 Alexis Wright, “Deep Weather”, *op. cit.*, p. 76.
- 6 Lucy Rowland, “Indigenous Temporality and Climate Change in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006)”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 55, n° 4, 2019, pp. 541-554.
- 7 Alexis Wright, “A Journey in Writing Place”, *op. cit.*, p. 47.
- 8 Alexis Wright, “The Power and Purpose of Literature”, *Meanjin*, vol. 77 n° 4, 2018, pp. 209-218, p. 213.

- 9 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, London, Faber & Faber, 1964, p. 131.
- 10 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *HEAT*, n° 13, 2007, pp. 79-95, p. 84.
- 11 Alexis Wright, "Deep Weather", *op. cit.*, p. 70.
- 12 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Artarmon, NSW, Giramondo, 2007, and *Carpentaria*, London, Constable, 2009, p. 2. Hereafter references to the Constable edition of the novel will appear between brackets in the body of the text.
- 13 Alexis Wright, "Deep Weather", *op. cit.*, p. 80.
- 14 James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post Apocalypse*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. 5.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 411.
- 16 Lucy Rowland, "Indigenous Temporality and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006)", *op. cit.*, p. 550.
- 17 Alexis Wright, "A Journey in Writing Place," p. 47. James Joyce, *Stephen Hero: Part of the first draft of 'Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man'*, (Theodore Spencer, Ed.), London, Jonathan Cape, 1960, p. 216.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 217. Epiphanies are also pivotal moments throughout Joyce's *Dubliner* stories, as well.
- 19 See: W B Yeats, "The Second Coming", in W. B. Yeats, *Selected Poetry* [ed. A. Norman Jeffares], London, Macmillan, 1971, p. 99. Also, see: T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton", in *Four Quartets*, London, Faber & Faber, 1966, pp. 15-16.
- 20 Patrick White, *The Eye of the Storm*, Ringwood, Victoria, Penguin, 1977, pp. 408-411.
- 21 Alexis Wright, "Politics of Writing", *Southerly*, vol. 62, n° 2, 2002, pp. 10-20, p. 13.
- 22 Veronica Strang, *Uncommon Ground: Cultural Landscapes and Environmental Values*, Oxford, Berg, 1997, pp. 247-248.
- 23 Linda Daley, "Alexis Wright's Fiction as World-making", *Contemporary Women's Writing*, vol. 10, n° 1, 2016, pp. 8-23, p. 9.
- 24 Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*", *op. cit.*, p. 84.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 84.

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 87.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 94.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 236-7.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 153. Cyclone's son and Hope's father was Joseph Midnight. Cyclone was said to have brought to life from story the murderous, giant sow Abilene who then carried a grudge against his family and subsequently killed one of them. Nevertheless, Cyclone, with Midnight, had Norm arrested for the murder, understandably adding to Norm's hostility.

30 *Ibid.*, pp. 481-2, 485, 487.

31 Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, *The Speaking Land: Myth and Story in Aboriginal Australia*, Ringwood, Penguin Books Australia, 1989, p. 426.

32 W. E. H. Stanner. *After The Dreaming*, Crows Nest, Sydney, ABC Enterprises, 1991, p. 27.

33 Alexis Wright, "A Journey in Writing Place", *op. cit.*, p. 49.

34 See: Kate Helen Weston, *The Prelude*, London, Holden & Hardingham, 1914; Vance Palmer, *Cyclone*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1947; Patrick White, *Eye of the Storm*, Sydney, Penguin, 1977; Thea Astley, *A Boat Load of Home Folk*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1968; Susan Hawthorne, *Earth's Breath*, North Melbourne, Spinifex Press, 2009.

35 Vance Palmer, *The Rainbow Bird, and other stories*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1957, p. 123.

36 Northrop Frye, *The Stubborn Structure: Essays on Criticism and Society*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1970, p. 295.

37 Thea Astley, *The Acolyte*, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1985, p. 119; Ray Willbanks, "Thea Astley Interview", in Susan Sheridan and Paul Genomi (eds.), *Thea Astley's Fictional Worlds*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 21-35, p. 84.

38 Susan Hawthorne, "From Wind Mind", *Earth's Breath*, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

40 Alexis Wright, "The Power and Purpose of Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 211.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 212.

42 James Houston, "The Concepts of 'Place' and 'Land' in the Judeo-Christian Tradition", in David Ley and Marvyn Samples (eds.), *Humanistic Geography: Prospects and Problems*, London, Croom Helm, 1978, p. 226.

43 Edward Casey, *Getting back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 684

44 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations*, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

45 Matthew Potteiger and Jamie Purinton, *Landscape Narratives: Design practices for telling stories*, New York, Wiley, 1998, p. 6.

46 Alexis Wright, "The Power and Purpose of Literature", *op. cit.*, p. 216.

## RÉSUMÉS

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### English

Australian Aboriginal author Alexis Wright contends that place is not separate and isolated unto itself but is instead part of a whole environment. While *Carpentaria* Country is a place of both end and beginning, then, where character and reader can find hope in the underlying bond between story, person, and place, it can also be explored as part of the national, extended literary place. Structurally bracketed by cyclones, *Carpentaria* is a story about hope in a land of the imagination in which a prophet emerges from a cyclone to warn of a town's hypocrisy and to offer a chance for cultures to come together. When he is rejected, scapegoated, exiled, and murdered, a second cyclone catastrophically destroys the town, presenting in the true sense of apocalypse an opportunity for change and renewal of people and place. With this use of the apocalyptic cyclone trope, Wright's novel situates within a national literary context: the sub-genre of Australian climate literature in which the apocalyptic cyclone as a trope of destruction, epiphany, and renewal plays a major role in relationships between Australian society, place, and community. As one of a group of Australian literary works within the context of that sub-genre, *Carpentaria* can be seen not only as a powerfully individual work of literature but also as one in which the spiritual as well as the physical experience of the Australian literary cyclone can bring together the conscious with the unconscious in the landscape of the mind as we seek to understand through story our extended relationships with place.

### Français

L'autrice aborigène australienne Alexis Wright soutient que le lieu n'est pas séparé et isolé en soi, mais qu'il fait au contraire partie d'un environnement global. Si le pays de *Carpentaria* est à la fois un lieu de fin et de début, où le personnage et le lecteur peuvent trouver de l'espoir dans le lien sous-jacent entre l'histoire, la personne et le lieu, il peut également être exploré comme faisant partie d'un lieu littéraire national et étendu. Structurée par des cyclones, *Carpentaria* est une histoire d'espoir dans un pays imaginaire dans lequel un prophète émerge d'un cyclone pour mettre en garde contre l'hypocrisie d'une ville, et offrir une chance aux différents groupes socio-

culturels de s'unir. Lorsqu'il est rejeté, désigné comme bouc émissaire, exilé et assassiné, un second cyclone détruit la ville, offrant, au sens propre de l'apocalypse, une occasion de changement et de renouvellement des personnes et des lieux. Avec cette utilisation du trope du cyclone apocalyptique, le roman de Wright se situe dans un contexte littéraire national, celui du sous-genre de la littérature climatique australienne. En tant que trope de destruction, d'épiphanie et de renouveau, le cyclone apocalyptique y joue un rôle majeur dans les relations entre la société, le lieu et la communauté australienne. Au sein d'un groupe d'œuvres littéraires australiennes appartenant à ce sous-genre, *Carpentaria* peut être considéré non seulement comme une œuvre littéraire individuelle puissante, mais aussi comme une œuvre dans laquelle l'expérience spirituelle et physique du cyclone littéraire australien peut réunir le conscient et l'inconscient dans le paysage de l'esprit, alors que nous cherchons à comprendre par le biais de l'histoire nos relations étendues avec le lieu.

## INDEX

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### **Mots-clés**

Wright (Alexis), apocalypse, aborigènes australiens, littérature australienne, Carpentaria, cyclone, épiphanie, écolittérature

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