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## Alexis Wright: Celebrating Storytelling and Interconnectedness. Introduction

Marilyne Brun and Estelle Castro-Koshy

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The close relationship Aboriginal people have  
with the land is a deep spiritual interconnected  
map in the mind.  
Alexis Wright, "A Self-Governing Literature"  
(2020)

- 1 The inclusion of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) in the core syllabus (*tronc commun*) of the 2022 *Agrégation* competitive exam – for both the “internal” and “external” examination<sup>1</sup> – is a cause for celebration. Before the inclusion of *Carpentaria*, Australian literature had featured only once in the national syllabus, in the literary option, with Patrick White's *Voss* (1957) in 1977 – 45 years ago – and writing that is not from the UK, Ireland, or the United States usually featured in the optional literary strand of the syllabus. The addition of a second work of Australian literature, but more importantly the inclusion, for the very first time in the history of the *Agrégation*, of a work of Aboriginal literature in the core syllabus of the competitive exam, has been the source of great joy amongst students in France and academics working in France and other countries. What an honour to be given this opportunity to focus intensely on *Carpentaria* and Aboriginal literature.
- 2 *Carpentaria* is a rich and complex novel defying categorisation. It is both an affirmation of Australian Indigenous cultures and epistemologies and a critique of settler colonial dynamics; the novel's political dimension is evident in its plot as well as in its epistemological approach and literary aesthetics. As Fiona McCann has argued, *Carpentaria* “represents a strong gesture in terms of decolonising a syllabus which has long been dominated by white male writers” (2021, 117). Studying it invites us to pay attention to “an apparent tension between the formal, perhaps even rigid,

requirements of the *Agrégation* and the decolonial poetics presented in Alexis Wright's novel" (McCann 2021, 117).

- 3 Here is the opportunity to warmly thank the *Agrégation* jury for responding positively to our invitation to include such an ambitious novel in the core syllabus of the *Agrégation*; what a wonderful opportunity for hundreds of students to discover Alexis Wright's work, and more generally Australian Aboriginal literature and Indigenous literatures in English.
- 4 Alexis Wright is a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria.<sup>2</sup> Renowned as the author of novels *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013), she has also published works of non-fiction, *Grog War* (1997), *Take Power* (1998), *Croire en l'incroyable* (2000), and *Tracker* (2017), and a collection of short stories, *Le Pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* (2002). A prolific writer of essays, she is also an activist for Aboriginal rights and the environment.
- 5 The presence of *Carpentaria* in the *Agrégation* syllabus owes much to the original risk-taking – or should we say visionary acumen – of Giramondo, an independent Australian literary publisher “established in December 1995 in order to publish innovative and adventurous literary work, that might not otherwise find publication because of its subtle commercial appeal” (“About Giramondo Publishing”). *Carpentaria* was rejected by all major publishing houses in Australia, and Ivor Indyk's decision to publish it has since led to considerable Australian and international recognition for the novel: it has won five major literary prizes in Australia, including the prestigious Miles Franklin Award in 2007,<sup>3</sup> and has been translated into French, Italian, Chinese and Polish.
- 6 For *Carpentaria* is an extraordinary novel. The Miles Franklin jury complimented the author on “the power of her prose, the richness of her imagination, and her risk-taking, stylistic ambitiousness” (quoted in Shoemaker 2008, 55). Adam Shoemaker praised the novel as “the greatest, most inventive and most mesmerising Indigenous epic ever produced in Australia” and “a landmark text in Australian literary history” (2008, 55). For Kathleen Birrell, *Carpentaria* presents “a radical depiction and evocation of the recuperative and transformative force of Indigenous Law” (2016, 214), and the end of the novel “inaugurat[es] the decolonisation of country” (221).
- 7 A long work (499 pages in the Constable edition) defying literary conventions and playfully mixing a variety of literary genres, *Carpentaria* can be addressed as a novel of connections and interconnectedness, two notions which are central to Aboriginal worldviews.<sup>4</sup> In her essay “The Ancient Library and a Self-Governing Literature,” Alexis Wright explains:
 

I was educated by my family, our people and communities to understand the seamless interconnectedness of all things in our culture, which is the opposite to Western thinking in mainstream Australia about how the world operates by keeping things separate from each other: *ecology, cosmology, theology, social morality, art, time* and so on. (2019)

 She emphasises Indigenous “interconnectivity and our understanding of our inter-relativeness to all things in our world” as well as the need, in her literary work, “to explore the collectivity and inter-connectivity of all times in our cultural world and thinking, where everything has a story” (2019).
- 8 *Carpentaria* provides numerous instances of connectedness, from its complex structure and interweaving narratives that can be visualised as “a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories” (Wright 2018, 222) to the connections that exist within country,<sup>5</sup> and

between country, characters and times. The novel's narrative complexity involves a wide variety of focalisations and voices, with the centrality of country and *story* rather than characters' adventures serving as the guiding thread in the narrative. As Brenda Machosky argues,

the story is not about any one person, and we must flow with the narration from one key character to another, focusing not on an individual's development or psychology, but on the way in which story manifests in that character. (2021, 219)

- 9 *Carpentaria* also explores the complex relations brought by colonialism. Pilot, one of the characters of Wright's first novel *Plains of Promise*, explains his impending death in a mysterious way to Noah: "Draw no simple conclusion, my friend. All are implicated" (1997, 140; emphasis in the text). In *Carpentaria*, many Uptowners refuse to be implicated in the lives of Aboriginal people and wish to live separately from them, relegating them to the margins of Uptown, geographically as well as socially and politically, while they continue to occupy the land taken "in the hectic heyday of colonial vigour" (Wright 2009, 3); however, as the novel makes clear, all are implicated in colonial dynamics – even those that choose not to be involved: avoiding is taking positions. As Patrick Wolfe has compellingly put it, "invasion is a structure not an event" (2006, 388): settler colonial societies are structurally defined by violence and the desire to control and eliminate Indigenous populations. Aboriginal characters in *Carpentaria* are victims of trauma, both from identified individual perpetrators (Bruiser, Truthful, the white-hooded men) and from a more structural, sometimes diffuse, form of violence that is at the heart of colonisation. But they are also heroes with indomitable agency living on their land, who refuse to give importance to settlers' logic (Norm), and defy brutality, colonisation and globalisation in multiple ways, ranging from resilience and fighting back on an individual scale (Angel), bold activism (Will), to continuing "ceremonies and sacred practices which recognize that the ancestral beings are alive in the country" (Mozzie) (Wright 2021). As Jeanine Leane argues, echoing Daniel Heath Justice:

*we are not just the products of colonialism: it is not what determines our being.* It can't be, because if it is, we don't continue. If we're nothing but trauma, there's no future. We can experience trauma, and not be made of it. There is much in late twentieth and twenty-first century First Nations writing that speaks to the strength that we are made of, and to our continuance as the nation's first storytellers. (2021, 31)

*Carpentaria* both acknowledges settler colonial dynamics and goes beyond them: the hegemony of settler colonial categories is playfully evoked, deconstructed and finally dismissed, and readers are encouraged to follow an Aboriginal narrative voice that sets aside Western worldviews and recontextualises them as culturally-specific and therefore necessarily limited systems of knowledge. As Wright has argued, her concern in the novel is "to affirm our existence on our own terms," to celebrate Aboriginal heroes and to establish "an Indigenous sovereignty of the imagination" (2018, 224, 231, 232).

- 10 Other connections and forms of connectedness established in the novel exist beyond national boundaries, through the wide variety of intertextual references and writers who inspired Alexis Wright, including Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* (1992) and Seamus Heaney's poetry, which is quoted in the epigraph of the novel. Both global and fundamentally local, *Carpentaria* speaks to the Gulf country, Australia, and the whole world. Its connections do not stop at artificial frontiers.
- 11 This journal issue similarly refuses artificial frontiers: while it mostly consists in academic articles, it also includes creative art by Judy Watson, poetry by Romaine

Moreton and Jeanine Leane, Li Yao's personal reflections on translating *Carpentaria* into Chinese, a reprint of a review of *Carpentaria* by Cathie Koa Dunsford, and some of Alexis Wright's photographs of the Gulf Country. We hope that this mixture of genres will allow readers to draw connections across creative productions.

- 12 This special issue starts with two mesmerising and thought-provoking works from Judy Watson's 2019 "bodies of water" exhibition, which resonate with some of *Carpentaria*'s central themes. They are followed by two powerful poems, "Walingera (Old Woman)" by Romaine Moreton and "Wiradjuri Dictionary" by Jeanine Leane. Both poems speak to the life-giving connections across generations, and honour Aboriginal women and Indigenous languages. The gratitude Romaine Moreton expresses in "Walingera (Old Woman)" towards the old women in her life is a poignant tribute to the older generation and their love and wise vision for young people. Jeanine Leane's "Wiradjuri Dictionary" is permeated not just by her nostalgia for her linguistic heritage but also by the loved Wiradjuri words that seed the page of the poem.
- 13 Although a wealth of articles, chapters and edited volumes have been published on *Carpentaria*, its richness and complexity are such that much remains to be studied; this special issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* seeks to contribute to and extend existing research on Alexis Wright's writing by addressing a variety of aspects and themes in Wright's oeuvre.
- 14 A crucial contribution to the field, Eugenia Flynn's article demonstrates the ways in which *Carpentaria* can be read as Indigenous epistemology, notably through its use of a "grand narrative voice," the stories told about cultural maintenance, and the embedded elements of Indigenous law within the novel. By applying an Indigenous-centred approach to reading *Carpentaria*, Flynn both develops and advocates for new ways of engaging with Indigenous writing that are "aimed at shifting power imbalances" within the field of Australian literature and the literary sector.
- 15 Angus Fletcher brings his perspective as a story scientist to his study of *Carpentaria*'s narrative creativity. Brilliantly analysing how the novel can be joyful, liberating, and yet "deal bluntly with so much trauma," Fletcher suggests that "part of the answer" is that "*Carpentaria* offers an alternative to how we usually read." His sophisticated and close reading foregrounds Wright's feat of re-creating, in textual form, an experience of oral storytelling by allowing, in particular, the storyteller and listener/reader to be co-creators of the story. Fletcher also demonstrates how Wright's ingenious use of "multiple plotlines" and "beginning-agains" continually invites readers to imagine and re-imagine – "what came before," the "vaster narrative," and the "story's hopeful possibilities."
- 16 Adam Shoemaker – well known as the first author to have published a full-length monograph on Aboriginal literature (Shoemaker 1989) – analyses the concept of story in the novel by focusing on story-making, story-telling, story-keeping, and story-receiving. Drawing a fruitful comparison between Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Alexis Wright, his article elegantly foregrounds the transformative power of *Carpentaria*, and highlights how the novel "open[s] up a whole universe of possibilities: possibilities for race relations, for equity and justice, and for a reimagined Australia."
- 17 Françoise Palleau-Papin and Richard Carr both focus on topics that are often evoked about *Carpentaria* but very rarely analysed in detail, thereby filling a void in the existing scholarship. Françoise Palleau-Papin proposes precise and illuminating analyses of Wright's writing, bringing to the fore the combination of words, rhythms and sounds

- that make Wright's unique creative style. She demonstrates that Wright "writes a new collective epic in prose that calls for the power of verse to set the story in memorable and glorious terms, incorporating the vernacular and orality in her multivocal diction."
- 18 Richard Carr focuses on humour and the variety of ways in which it is deployed in the novel – the naming of characters and places, comparatives, colloquialism, irony, and the role of the chorus. Convincingly demonstrating that "humour abounds in *Carpentaria*," Carr emphasises Wright's great achievement: her "lively, witty, engaged Aboriginal narrator," "by turns acerbic, ironic, expansive, and colloquial" who "draws an Aboriginal audience and non-Indigenous readers into a set of stories."
- 19 Michael Griffiths carefully navigates a much-discussed topic – magical realism – by deftly discussing the novel's refusal of genres. Cautioning that non-Indigenous generic classification can act as "a kind of assimilation," Griffiths invites scholars and critics to be aware of their biases and wary of forms of complicity in a space where Indigenous perspectives and scholarship are still rare.
- 20 Salhia Ben-Messahel addresses the construction of place in the novel. Analysing Desperance as a "multi-layered" space, she offers original interpretations of the ways in which the characters – such as Norm and Angel – relate differently to place. She compellingly reads the land and the ocean as "active agents" that "disrupt[t] the ideal of the egalitarian and postcolonial (multicultural) nation" in the novel.
- 21 In the last article that focuses exclusively on *Carpentaria* in this issue, Li Yao's moving contribution retraces his personal journey in translating *Carpentaria* into Chinese and the numerous networks and connections that this translation work has allowed him to establish. A translator of many Australian writers into Chinese, including Indigenous authors, Li Yao also reflects on the reasons for the great success of his translation of *Carpentaria*.
- 22 Temiti Lehartel shifts the focus to Wright's third novel, *The Swan Book*, carefully demonstrating how the novel "revitalises" readers' perception and apprehension of place, the world, and the non-human world. In this article that begins in poetic verses drawing a connection between her Indigenous heritage and concerns for the environment and Wright's work, Lehartel shows how *The Swan Book* "ensure[s] the possibility for readers to imagine political and climate deterioration running its full course," and yet "upholds ancestral love for Country." She argues that the novel's complex narrative, including overlapping stories and polyphonic voices, challenges and resists readers' ways of reading and perceiving at the same time as it resists colonial and extractive practices.
- 23 Cornelis Martin Renes draws insightful and much-needed connections between Wright's three novels – *Plains of Promise*, *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*. His article also points out the challenges faced by non-Indigenous readers when engaging with Indigenous epistemologies and what, he argues, is Wright's strategy "to protect her community and focus the scrutinizing gaze back on its non-Indigenous beholder." Renes's analysis of Wright's fiction also eloquently sheds light on Wright's perceptive approach to major Australian social changes and reckonings (the *Bringing Them Home* report on the Stolen Generations was published the same year as *Plains of Promise* in 1997) and her engagement with global challenges such as climate change.
- 24 This collection of articles closes with a far-ranging article by Lynda Ng, the editor of the first full-length academic study of *Carpentaria* (Ng 2018), who proposes to explore the

“vision splendid” developed in Wright’s oeuvre. Drawing from the work of Nancy Fraser and James Lovelock, Ng connects what she sees as the Gaian dimension of Wright’s work with her anti-colonial poetics. The scholar argues that Wright’s oeuvre presents us with “a world that recognises both human and non-human elements” and “with a Gaian world literature, a literary perspective that dares to imagine a future beyond the exploitative cycle of the colonial project.”

- 25 The final contribution that we have included is an insightful review of *Carpentaria* by Maori fiction writer, poet and editor Cathie Koa Dunsford originally published in 2007; a difficult document to access today, Dunsford’s comments on *Carpentaria* and the connections she establishes with literature from Aotearoa-New Zealand and the Pacific remain precious.
- 26 We feel extremely honoured to have the permission to publish some of Alexis Wright’s beautiful photographs of the Gulf Country taken by Toly Sawenko at the end of this introduction.
- 27 *Carpentaria* was originally published in 2006 in Australia by Giramondo, and was later published by other publishing houses in the United States and Europe. The contributors to this issue come from and work all over the world, and have used different editions of the novel. To help readers locate quotations, the following table might be of help.

Beginning of...	Giramondo (2006)	Little Brown / Constable (2008, 2009)	Constable & Robinson (2008)
Chapter 1: “From Time Immemorial”	1	1	1
Chapter 2: “Angel Day”	12	12	11
Chapter 3: “Elias Smith Comes... and Goes”	43	42	37
Chapter 4: “Number One House”	92	89	78
Chapter 5: “Mozzie Fishman”	119	114	100
Chapter 6: “Knowing Fish”	159	152	134
Chapter 7: “Something about the Phantom Family”	205	196	173
Chapter 8: “Norm’s Responsibility”	229	219	193
Chapter 9: “Bala, the Child of Hope”	276	264	233
Chapter 10: “The Giant in the Cloak”	308	295	260
Chapter 11: “The Mine”	365	350	308

Chapter 12: “About Sending Letters”	418	402	353
Chapter 13: “The Wash”	457	440	386
Chapter 14: “Coming Back”	503	484	425
Final page of the novel: “... Westside, to home.”	519	499	438

- 28 Just as *Carpentaria* fundamentally changed the literary landscape in Australia, we hope its trailblazing selection in the *Agrégation* will be followed by the continued selection of many more diverse voices from the English-speaking world in the core programme of its syllabus. We also hope it encourages students and English teachers to continue to study Alexis Wright’s oeuvre and venture further into reading and studying other First Nations writers from Australia. As French scholars of Australian and postcolonial studies (Marilyne) and Australian and French Polynesian Indigenous literatures and cultural studies (Estelle), who, like many, undertook training in classic and canonical literature and English studies, our dream is to see our colleagues in France and around the world, in universities as in high schools, include works by Australian First Nations writers and other Indigenous writers in their syllabi.<sup>6</sup> In the rich and fast expanding body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature, we have much to choose from: as of February 2022, Australian First Nations literature includes over 140 novels, 1530 children’s books, 200 collections of poetry, 375 plays, and 316 life stories and autobiographies.<sup>7</sup>
- 29 We hope this issue will help people better understand why the novel delights and discombobulates readers, touches their hearts and changes their perspectives, creates indignation at the treatment of Indigenous people in Australia, and sparks their imagination. For now, we are pleased that – alongside Yuendumu<sup>8</sup> – the Gulf of Carpentaria has become, for many, an important centre in the world since April 2021.
- 30 We would like to give our special thanks to all of our contributors and reviewers for working with our short deadlines, to Jeanine Leane, Romaine Moreton and Judy Watson for their poetic and artistic gifts to this issue, and to Alexis Wright for her support, time and generosity. Our heartfelt thanks also go to associate editor Kathie Birat and *Commonwealth Essays and Studies* chief editor Christine Lorre-Johnston for their dedication to this issue, and to the SEPC and its president Fiona McCann for supporting our proposal to include *Carpentaria* in the *Agrégation* syllabus. To all the scholars who published articles or books on *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright’s work, and Aboriginal literature over the years, please know that you played a part in this historic moment. Finally, we would like to acknowledge the significance of the work of historian Patrick Wolfe (1949–2016); he introduced the two authors of this introduction across continents fourteen years ago, and our work would not be the same without his insights, generosity, and crucial, far-reaching research.



Figure 1



Toly Sawenko

Figure 2



Toly Sawenko

Figure 3



Toly Sawenko

Figure 4



Toly Sawenko

Figure 5



Toly Sawenko

Figure 6



Toly Sawenko

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## NOTES

1. All EU students who have a masters' degree can sit for "external" *Agrégation*; only civil servants who have five years of teaching experience may take *Agrégation interne*.
2. For a brief biography of the author, see Barrett and Castro-Koshy 2021.
3. The Miles Franklin literary award is Australia's most prestigious literary prize; it is "awarded each year to a novel which is of the highest literary merit and presents Australian life in any of its phases" ("Miles Franklin Literary Award"). Alexis Wright was the first Aboriginal author to win the prize individually (Kim Scott had won it jointly for his novel *Benang* with Thea Astley for *Drylands* in 2000); since then, three Australian Indigenous writers have won the prize: Kim Scott (*That Deadman Dance*, 2011), Melissa Lucashenko (*Too Much Lip*, 2019) and Tara June Winch (*The Yield*, 2020). The four other major literary prizes won by *Carpentaria* are the 2007 Australian Literature Society (ALS) Gold Medal, 2007 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards (Vance Palmer Prize for Fiction), 2007 Queensland Premier's Literary Awards (Best Fiction Book) and 2007 Australian Book Industry Awards (ABIA) (Australian Literary Fiction Book of the Year). *Carpentaria* also won the 2010 Vision Australia Braille Book of the Year Award.
4. On the notion of "interconnection" / "interconnectedness," also termed "interrelatedness," that is central to Aboriginal philosophy and worldviews, see for example Grieve-Williams (2021) and Glowczewski and Campbell (2021).
5. Country, sometimes written with a capital C is, simply put, a term used in Australia to refer to Aboriginal people's ancestral lands, and can include sea country. Marcia Langton offers the following definition: "This is a Kriol term (Kriol is a modern, post-contact Aboriginal language)

that has been universally adopted by Aboriginal people. It refers to their traditional land estates inherited from their forebears as a matter of custom and according to traditional land tenure laws of each people or society” (2018, 72).

6. Some *Agrégation interne* students who are already teachers of English in secondary education in France have done so this year, and taught (about) *Carpentaria* and other Australian Indigenous writers in very imaginative ways, including selecting passages of the novel, inviting students to perform the parts, and/or writing letters to Alexis Wright.

7. Many thanks to Catriona Mills, Brendan Jeon and Jonathan Hadwen from AustLit for providing these most up-to-date numbers. AustLit is an extremely rich online database (requiring a subscription to access its whole content) about Australian literature and storytelling, including biblio/biographical information, which can be used by colleagues working with a variety of audiences. On the history and great diversity of Australian First Nations literature, see the chapters by Flynn (2021) and Leane (2021), the BlackWords section of AustLit, and the full-length works edited by Heiss and Minter (2008), Wheeler (2013), and Brewster (2015).

8. In a humorous prologue to *Tracker*, “The Warlpiri Invasion of Europe,” Tracker Tilmouth recounts his many trips to the United Nations in Geneva, in particular the times he went there with a Warlpiri delegation (Wright 2017, 26). A witty comment concludes the prologue: “*Where is that Geneva? / Over here. / That’s not far. Other side.* It is very, very hard to teach Aboriginal people about geography, especially when Yuendumu is the centre of the world as we know it. Anyway that is enough. That is the joking side.”

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, narrative creativity, Indigenous epistemologies, storytelling, interconnectedness

## AUTHORS

### MARILYNE BRUN

Université de Lorraine

Marilyne Brun is a senior lecturer in Australian and postcolonial studies at the University of Lorraine in France. Her research interests include Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian literature, processes of racialisation in Australia and postcolonial Anglophone contexts, and the history of academic fields and disciplines. She has published articles on critical race theory and Australian literature and culture.

### ESTELLE CASTRO-KOSHY

James Cook University

Estelle Castro-Koshy is a scholar of literary and cultural studies who has worked with Australian Indigenous writers and performers since 2003 and French Polynesian Indigenous writers and artists since 2006. Her recent publications include *Alexis Wright, Carpentaria* (Ellipses, 2021) co-edited with Temiti Lehartel, *Alexis Wright, Carpentaria: The Law of the Land* (Belin/CNED, 2021) with Susan Barrett and Laura Singeot, and a special issue for *eTropic* on “Environmental Artistic

Practices and Indigeneity” co-edited with Géraldine Le Roux (<https://journals.jcu.edu.au/tropic/issue/view/195>). An Adjunct Principal Research Fellow at James Cook University, she is also an editor and translator.