Questions of Genre, Refusal, and Cultural Adaptation in Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*

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As soon as the word “genre” is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind.


Pricklebush decided the uptown boundary might be a gammon one.


A discipline chants, but we know your genre already! Numerous of these denizens of uptown have already decided that your world’s text is one of boundaries and pathways. It is not only the line that divides the pathway from the dump that is gammon. It also is the line between stories. Here, my rather clumsy, reimagined adaptation of the opening sentences of Alexis Wright’s magnificent novel *Carpentaria* (2006) – partial as such a repurposing is – signals the way in which a hasty critical consensus about the genre of an Indigenous text – risks much. More particularly it risks reducing a novel like *Carpentaria* to the status of a genre that it refuses. From a perspective grounded in reception theory, genre can be a means of situating a text, of setting or even playing against expectations providing a horizon for resignified meanings (Willis 2017). But as my epigraph from Jacques Derrida’s suggestive essay “The Law of Genre” indicates, the category of genre can also be a mechanism for containing narratives which refuse to reduce to certain prescribed categories. As Wright’s narrator in my further epigraph suggests, speaking of the organisation of the town of Desperance though perhaps also
of her text itself, boundaries like this can be “gammon” – false, scheming or just plain bad!\(^1\)

Despite all this, a number of critics have attempted to position *Carpentaria* and, indeed, Wright’s subsequent novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), as belonging to specific genres such as magical realism in the case of *Carpentaria* and speculative fiction and its variants in the case of *The Swan Book*. Several critics situate the latter as speculative fiction or other genres augmenting this sense of a critical topos (Sefton-Rowston 2016).\(^2\) This orientation of *The Swan Book* to the speculative as a category is not surprising given its setting in a future Australia beset by the effects of climate change (Wright 2013). While I feel that the assignment of genre to either text is reductive, problematic, and obscures the texts’ specificity in either case, my focus in this article is on *Carpentaria*. I want to suggest that while *Carpentaria* enacts and explores elements of the representation of time and the sacred that are congruent to magical realism, it also refuses to be reduced to either magical realism or genre as such. In doing so, I emphasise the resistant potential given in Indigenous refusal (to be categorised or boxed in) drawing on the work of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson. This conjecture about the limitations of magical realism in particular (and genre classification more generally) as a critically applicable terminology for *Carpentaria* was partly confirmed at a recent conference held in France on the occasion of Wright’s inclusion in *Agrégation*, when Wright responded to the question of whether she recognises herself in the term magical realism. Wright responded:

Yeah, magical realism. Look, people ask me that all the time. Now I don’t have any great theory about all this, just like I said I try to do what I do for this country and who I am as a writer. And I also think that has relevance throughout the world. [...] You can call it whatever you like, but it’s not magic, it’s quite real and so what comes out of my mind comes from a whole lot of experience and knowing people and hearing people say things that are really important. You know, cause and effect: you do this and that will happen. [...] It might be a good way of seeing the world. (Wright 2021)

In this way, Wright refuses the othering connotation of the word magic about the beliefs and practices of her people. For Wright, the reality of Waanyi sacred practice is not only othered by the idea of “magic”; it is also about “cause and effect,” an alternative empiricism of its own, another valid way of seeing the world.

As I have suggested, then, magical realism is one genre that has overdetermined *Carpentaria*’s reception. Maria Takolander is perhaps the critic most committed to exploring the novels of both Wright and Noongar writer Kim Scott through the lens of magical realism (2014, 4). Ben Holgate’s work is also highly committed to viewing Indigenous Australian writing as magical realist as a whole and to its relevance to Wright in particular (Holgate 2015). He suggests, for instance, that, “Wright draws on indigenous culture, mythology, and traditional oral storytelling techniques from her own people in order to create a distinctive narrative style that in turn revitalizes magical realism” (635). Another crucial critic on this front is Frances Devlin-Glass, who also connects *Carpentaria* to magical realism, stating that

[...] the genre of magic realism, with its provocative blending of the sacred and the profane, and in this case its insistence that they are not in collision but in collusion – scientific observation in cahoots with Indigenous mythology – provides a powerful vehicle for analysis of coloniality and its misrepresentations of the Waanyi real. (2008, 395)
This posited connection to magical realism is not unfounded in so far as much of what has traditionally been said about the canonical magical realists (whom Wright has read) is concerned. In other words, Wright’s work sees a connection between Indigenous and contemporary Western worldviews. As is rightfully acknowledged in criticism on Wright’s work, her oeuvre draws on a marvellous range of influences and these situate her in relation to a wider world literary scene. As Russell West-Pavlov has observed, the criticism on this world literary scene rarely mentions either Indigenous Australian or Australian works of fiction more generally (2018). In her statements in interviews and essays, Wright herself draws connections between such worldly works she has read including (though far from exclusive to) several self-identified magical realist authors. One simply needs to consult almost any of Wright’s numerous paratexts – essays and interviews – to hear her conjure erudite impressions of writers from Alice Walker to Pablo Neruda with writers often associated with magical realism such as Gabriel García Márquez and Salman Rushdie also finding a place in the list of the texts she refers to. Usefully contextualising Wright in relation to the transnational, Lynda Ng observes that Wright’s mention of such a diverse range of authors “signals the breadth of Wright’s reading and her depth of knowledge of various literary traditions, but is in itself an assertion of power, a rejection of the status historically imposed on Aborigines as colonial objects” (2018, 8). Scholars drawing their analysis of magical realism from Wendy Faris frequently cite ideas of interconnected worlds, spiritual and material – which is no doubt also an aspect of Wright’s rendering of Waanyi cosmology and its conflict with Australian colonialism. Such critics tend to point to observations such as the following from Faris, that in magical realist texts: “[m]etamorphoses are a relatively common event (embodying) a collusion of two different worlds” (1995, 178).

But Faris also notes magical realism frequently turns on “an irreducible element of magic” constituted by “something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse” (2004, 8). Faris has it, then, that magical realism is structured around the irrational nature of what it calls “magic” – a claim that we saw, Wright explicitly refuses. One immediate question that is begged in Faris’s second definition is the mode by which this other order – this “irreducible element” – is distinct from such empirical discourse: in the public interview I cited, Wright certainly did not think it was. As Alison Ravenscroft similarly observes:

> In readings that produce *Carpentaria* as a magic realist text there is just this recuperation of the binary that associates Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality, and with consciousness, a wakeful state – despite these critics aiming at something else. (2010, 197)

The designation “magic” then becomes a way of othering a relation to non-European understandings of the sensible and knowable.

In this way, for numerous critics, magical realism is a node of worldwide relation, which Wright draws on and remakes. But I want also to ask what the pitfalls of labelling Wright a magical realist writer tout court are. In her generative essay “On Writing *Carpentaria*,” Wright herself articulates the parallels between Carlos Fuentes’s sense of time and that of the Dreaming in Aboriginal cosmology. As she recalls, Fuentes shows Mexico to be “a country of suspended times” (Wright 2018, 220). This analogy defines a project of writing. It does not situate *Carpentaria* within a single genre on the basis of such a comparison between contrasting and comparable conceptions of time, each of which differs from that of the Western sense of temporality and historicity. The fact
that Fuentes’s Mexican conception of temporality and Wright’s Waanyi one resonate with one another, and the fact that each differs from such Western historicity does not mean that they deal in magic. A nation does not know their whole story (or genre) already, no matter how loudly it chants.

Nonetheless, Devlin-Glass’s contributions (even as they apply the term magical realism to *Carpentaria*) have been particularly rich precisely because of her personal connection to the Yanyuwa people who live in South West Gulf of Carpentaria. Indeed, within Devlin-Glass’s work, and, differently that of Takolander and of Holgate, one finds various caveats put forward by the critics themselves to the application of this single genre – magical realism – to such a complex novel as *Carpentaria*. These caveats frequently sit adjacent to claims for the definitively magical realist status of *Carpentaria*. Takolander shuttles between such definitive claims and situating magical realism as ironic. Holgate sees Wright’s specific condition of being situated in a settler colonial context to be a factor that enables her texts to rethink magical realism more generally. He reconfigures Stephen Slemon’s now classic categorisation of magical realism as a postcolonial discourse by rethinking the latter’s metaphor of battling worldviews for the settler colonial context (Slemon 1995). Holgate then suggests that

[w]hat distinguishes Wright’s magical realism from magical realist orientations elsewhere, however, is the way she uses the narrative mode to explore Australia’s specific circumstances as a settler nation, particularly to address its history in which the Indigenous population was dispossessed of their land and suffered from ongoing oppressive government policies of attempted cultural and racial annihilation. (2015, 635)

For Holgate, then, if Wright’s application of Waanyi cosmology (which he tends to call magic) to the real (for want of a better term) and to Western modernity fits, it exceeds and sublates other magical realisms through this knowledge. While he does not engage with Wright’s work, Christopher Warnes develops a distinction between a critically ironic form of magical realism which “sees magical realism as akin to a form of epistemological scepticism, a productive fictional mode of critique” and anthropologically-grounded forms of magical realism, one which “seeks to interpret the magic in magical realism culturally, as a particular belief system or way of seeing the world” (2009, 6, 11). As such, the genre of magical realism is both clearly related to *Carpentaria* even as the novel does not reduce to it. The novel is distinctly Waanyi, even as it relates itself to and transforms elements from outside it and from around the world, not unlike a statue of the Virgin Mary painted dark with fish ink by Angel Day (to cite a trope of cultural syncretism from the novel itself).

But it is Devlin-Glass who gives the most nuanced view of the critics I have mentioned of Wright’s novel in the context of Gulf Country knowledge and ontology. While also applying the generic label of magical realism to *Carpentaria*, she interestingly finds it necessary to contextualise the way the label is somehow ill-fitting. Drawing on early work by historian Patrick Wolfe, she suggests that “the terms ‘dreaming’ and ‘magic’ have been used by the scientific and pseudo-scientific communities to stigmatise Indigenous cultures as pre-scientific, and worse, as irrational and subreligious” (2008, 394). Writing of *Carpentaria* Devlin-Glass surmises that

whereas much magic realism “loosens the narrative’s connection to the ordinary world of sense perceptions” (Faris 63), what is remarkable about this text is the inventive, indeed transformative, ways in which it draws on Waanyi cosmology to insist that mythological meanings are embedded in the mundane and everyday real,
and that this process involves continual renegotiation within Indigenous communities (Povinelli, Labor’s Lot 33). (393)

7 For Takolander and Holgate, Wright’s novels are found to be definitive examples of magical realism. Yet somehow Holgate continues to see the ways that a reading of magical realism must be reconfigured for Carpentaria in order to fit, just as, for him, Carpentaria dialectically remakes the genre as a whole. Holgate’s species of argument, reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s canonical conception of literary novelty in the essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” is perhaps the way Western canonical logics of influence function: through dialectical sublation. But as Wright’s recent statement suggests, while she relates to and reads someone like García Márquez, this does not mean that magical realism (or her reduction to it) is the most crucial or even useful critical gesture. Carpentaria, after all, is vested not only in things that exceed the Western empirical but also in what Wright, earlier, called “cause and effect” and “reality” even if this reality seems to be out of harmony with Western worldviews. After all is said and done, though, in a crucial cross section of the academic literature on Carpentaria, it is as if those two words magical realist were adjectival – modifying the Indigenous novel with an aim to reduce it. And this reduction is not unlike Uptown’s attempt to draw stark borders for Aboriginal writers and texts – a practice which the Pricklebush people call gammon.

8 Therefore, I want to suggest that this too ready labelling of Carpentaria as magical realism within my examples from the literature relies on an othering sense of Indigenous worlding as “magic.” Category errors that overemphasise Indigenous writing’s relation to a genre as though to subsume them within it can, as Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice suggests, be overemphasized and even instrumentally made to be dangerous for Indigenous writing and writers. As Justice puts it,

Given that so much of what people think about Indigeneity is self-serving colonial fantasy that justifies and rationalises the continuing theft of Indigenous lands, violence against Indigenous bodies and relations, marginalization of Indigenous lives and displacement of Indigenous being, there is a deep and urgent need for more accurate representations. And given the cultural capital of literature in this age, literary representations are some of the most powerful for pushing back against the colonial imaginary. It’s no wonder, then, that the relationship between the “real” and the “fantastical” is a fraught one. [...] Even the category of “magical realism” fails to fully meet this challenge, given its basic assumptions about the ultimate artificiality of the “magic” part of the definition. (2018, 141–42)

In this way, the act of assigning a genre to Wright’s novels requires some caution. What if precisely the point of Wright’s relation to these (no doubt related) genres and contexts is a resistance to too ready generic categorisation? Elsewhere I have suggested, drawing on the work of Kahnawà:ke Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson (2007), that this might be seen as a kind of refusal (of, in this case, genre). And, in a confessional mode, I should say, I myself used the term magical realism in an unthinking moment over ten years ago, with reference to Kim Scott’s novel Benang: From the Heart (1999). Yet even my own early claim has seemed to me more and more ill-fitting as I have had the opportunity to work more directly with Indigenous colleagues, scholars and authors. These friends often express that they feel the imposition of Western genres in a totalising way on their work – to say nothing of how they feel about broader cultural impositions. I have so far worked in this essay to emphasise how Wright and indeed Carpentaria refuse to be reduced to a genre and how the novel instead relates to, adapts and adopts generic markers on its own terms.
It is, I hope, not overly dramatic to suggest that overdetermining an Aboriginal text with reference to an imposed genre risks a kind of assimilation. This is perhaps why Justice is so adamant to tie the consequences of trivialising the spiritual world views of Indigenous peoples to the “continuing theft of Indigenous lands.” And indeed it is rarely the Indigenous authors and texts that solicit this view at all. Rather this tendency toward the exotic emerges from non-Indigenous (white, settler, and even transnational) forms of reception and literary interpretation that risk either assimilation or tamed exoticism. The critic must be wary of their complicity in this space. Rendering Waanyi beliefs as simply other to western empiricism, the category of “magic” can potentially have direct consequences, including contributing to the reduction of Aboriginal forms of inscription and, inversely, the undermining of Aboriginal cultural products. If genres can be assimilative, then it bears perhaps remembering the relation between many Indigenous people and the European cultures that would assimilate them: as a worldview that could be adopted and adapted (to) but whose reality Indigenous people almost invariably resist. It is with some irony, then, that I turn to an anthropological take on Indigenous adaptation in Australia. I do so not to provide an ethnographic reduction. This would be essentialist or, following Elizabeth Povinelli, artifactual (2002, 109). Artifactuality in white interpretations names the forced conformity of Indigenous texts to an ethnographic past – an essentialist reduction. But here, I add, artifactual comparisons between the present and the settler past can allow us to sublate even the logics that followed from the latter’s dominant legacy.

W.E.H. Stanner at the height of assimilation in Australia pointed out that this project wasn’t just problematic (though he showed that it was terribly so) but also that it was likely to fail not the least due to Aboriginal agency and resilience. He said in a 1958 address the following, which (apart, it must be said, from a tone of professional paternalism and some linguistic anachronism), seems quite apt:

> None of the many hundreds of Aborigines I have studied at first hand impress me as already or as likely to be “incorporated,” or “absorbed,” or “assimilated” into the surrounding system of Europeanism. The very contrary is true. Various European things – our authority, our customs, our ideas and goods – are data, facts of life, which the Aborigines take into account in working out their altered system. (1979, 42)

Stanner’s lecture was a rhetorical performance of critique addressed to the white settler nation of the late 1950s with assimilation still the dominant policy used in relation to Aboriginal people. *Carpentaria* refuses a parallel form of assimilation: one emerging from genre. So far I’ve suggested that genres such as magical realism can be reductive and even at times assimilative. Stanner’s intervention allows us to see the way Wright’s novel can relate to world literature without reducing to it and the genres generated elsewhere. Wright’s novels are programmatic in their relation to genre in the way Stanner represents Aboriginal culture to be in relation to European things. Wright’s texts reflect on their relation to the genres which they engage with as external “data” and “facts of life” – a logic that facilitates agency, autonomy and selection. Against readings that emphasise the location of the text as magical realist in an explicit or clear way, I suggest that the text itself programmatically resists the trope of the salience of magic by at times connecting it to the othering of Indigenous knowledge.
The factions of Desperance within *Carpentaria* take positive or resistant attitudes to certain forms of belief and practice. For instance, when Angel Day is introduced, we are told that the elders of the Westside Aboriginal community recognise her powers but do not see their uses: “the old Pricklebush people said what Angel Day had was purely magical, it was true, but sorry to say, of no benefit to anyone” (Wright 2006, 16). Here, “magical” gifts are sometimes parodically marked as lacking a key purpose when viewed through the values of the community. And indeed, the Pricklebush people shortly become explicit that these are powers that suggest some kind of becoming-white, an adaptation perhaps, or otherwise simply an assimilation. Either way, they resist Uptown’s interpretation such that the passage concludes: “It was of no benefit to anyone if she had magical powers to make her more like the white people” (16). Of course, there are moments when adjectives derived from “magic” are used reverently in the novel, for instance at the outset of chapter 9 when spirits of the sea as they come into conflict with Gardajala the “land woman” spirit are described as involving “magic big time” (276). Note, I insist, that these do not reduce the novel to the genre magical realism, of course. As often as not, “magic” is not a word to describe the power of the land and the dreaming but rather either the misapprehension of Waanyi belief mislabelled “magic” or the effect of neocolonialism on Waanyi spirits. Arguably, even the contact and conflict between Gardajala and the sea woman are legible as the consequence of the mine’s changes to the Gulf Country, like much of what Norm Phantom observes in the lead-up to this moment while at sea. And even in relation to this, Alexis Wright has said speaking of colonialism’s dystopian transformation of Australia: “That’s not magic realism, that’s reality. Reality is for the country and all the things that happen are quite mad. It might look like magic, but it’s real!” (2021). There may be some such magic from outside, but “magical powers” are “useless,” and even associated with the effects of neocolonialism and mining on the Gulf Country, with changes that these outside forces have made to the dreaming; whatever the case, for the Pricklebush, as a way to read these changes, magic(al realism) is gammon.

Yet, Norm, Angel, and the Pricklebush people do not necessarily find all things that come from European culture to be in themselves useless or gammon. With some adaptation to an Aboriginal way of being and thinking, these elements can be positive, even valued. One stark trope that emerges within the Angel Day chapter is the statue of the Virgin Mary Angel finds on the dump. At first, this bemuses the Pricklebush and Uptown (signifying the white wealthy part of Desperance) with their “religious posturing” alike (Wright 2006, 39). Angel is able to fit the statue to suit her needs in an adept practice of cultural adaptation. She takes “the statue of Mary, which she had now repainted in the colour of her own likeness” using techniques of “[i]mprovisation with Norm’s fish colours” and transforming this icon from a Christian religious symbol to “a brightly coloured statue of an Aboriginal woman who lived by the sea” and in so doing defies the delegation that had arrived to try and move her off the dump by making the statue her own. (38). This act syncretises Normal’s Pricklebush practice of mobilising fish knowledge with Angel’s own agency to efface the overdetermination of her identity by Christianity and replace it with “her own likeness” (38).

*Carpentaria*, ventures West-Pavlov, “suggests that Indigenous culture has from the outset mastered the art of adaptation, re-tooling traditional, received narratives for successive historical situations” (2018, 27). He goes on to connect this to the trope of memory initially connected to Elias Smith – the mysterious mariner who appears early...
in the novel, who is almost always without speech until, paradoxically after he is killed by unknown figures from the Gururrurritt mine (after which his corpse and spirit converses frequently with Will Phantom). Contextually, this evokes the struggle by the Carpentaria Land Council against Century Zinc’s attempt to build a mine in the Gulf, a struggle that went to the High Court of Australia in 1996–1997 (Devlin-Glass 2008, 398).

Earlier I noted that Warnes sees magical realism as defined by the distinction between an ironic distancing (in some texts) and an anthropological explanation of culture (in others). Carpentaria does both (without reducing to magical realism only) and, in doing so, thwarts attempts to read the novel as a culturally touristic window into Waanyi culture or Indigenous culture more generally. Will Phantom begins the novel absent from Norm and his siblings’ home since he has been compelled to undertake a life of itinerant activism alongside Mozzie Fishman (with whom he also has conflict) and is constantly on the move because of the need to hide from the mining company. When Will returns with Elias Smith’s body, Kevin Phantom is confused in a way that thwarts either anthropological and explanatory readings of the text or exoticising magical realist ones. We are told that “Kevin had grown up believing that Will was dead because no one would mention his name in the house” (Wright 2006, 220). As was made known to anthropologists in the 1930s and has been well known in wider Australian and international culture since Eric Michaels’s (1993) work with Warlipiri media in the 1980s, there is a taboo in most Indigenous Australian cultures on speaking the name of the dead. Kevin’s confusion, some readers will therefore recognise, refers to this taboo. But it also involves a more general hesitancy to mention Will’s absence to a son (Kevin) who has been traumatised by both working in the mine and by his educational experience with “Tim Winton.” Finally, it also invokes the clear sense that Will is estranged from Norm and that it is because of this that few will say his name. These mutually sustained explanations for the paucity around naming Will in the Phantom home and their effect on Kevin code a sense of the cultural confusion that Kevin is repeatedly shown to be experiencing, further evidencing his trauma (Atkinson 2017, 145–88). This, however, is not necessarily a case of not speaking Will’s name because he is dead. Rather it bespeaks Kevin’s traumatised unawareness of Will’s remaining alive precisely as a consequence of the intersection between the taboo on speaking the name of the dead and the conflicts in the Phantom household many of which can be seen to be a result directly of differences of attitude to the mine and to protection of and caring for country. Wright’s text here lays out a moment of traditional culture (to which the text is committed, no doubt) while, in this same act of enunciation, revealing a complex series of articulations that ground any reading of culture also in a recognition of the effects of neocolonial intervention on Indigenous land: namely, mining. One further effect of this is the division of the community on the basis of the mine’s intervention. For instance we are told: “Everyone in the Pricklebush from elder to child, Eastsider to Westsider, injured and uninjured started bringing up their faded memories of the ancient wars, to be renewed with vigour and the hard evidence of all facts” (Wright 2006, 25). Further, the text also understands some of these conflicts to be precolonial (emphasising the way cultural conflict does not always reduce to British colonialism).

This condition of trauma that Kevin experiences renders him silent – not radically so as is the case for Oblivia Ethylene in The Swan Book – but nonetheless, shortly after the
narrator reveals that Kevin does not speak Will's name, we are told, “[c]onversation remained elusive for Kevin” (Wright 2006, 220). The passage continues:

He could not choose to tell them, because it might have been a dream, or they might think he was seeing things, because he did see ghosts and the snake spirit, and other spirits of the ancestors, and spirits of the dead people who said his father had killed them. They all came to tell him the future but nobody believed him. (220)

If Kevin sees the spirit of the ancestral snake and other important ancestors, why do his family keep him restrained? The sense of psychological anguish at being pathologised for believing and accessing Kevin’s culture suggests that the family have him “strapped up” ostensibly to care for him, to protect him from himself but also because of the social dysfunction that has caused Kevin to even be abused within his own family. Yet this also codes the imposition of Western psychological models of care and sometimes internalisation of them by Indigenous people. And, to reiterate an obvious point, the ability of a reader to acknowledge the palpable realism of the dreaming, the acceptance that in a Waanyi context the serpent always has been, always was and always will be the Gulf of Carpentaria, relies on cultural knowledge as it informs a way of reading. Magical realism as a genre and the insistence on it risks homogenising the culture it represents as it obscures the possibility of this acknowledgement and recognition.

In many ways, the mine is the structural counterpoint to the great serpent – a massive force that affects Country (but is, in this case, imposed from outside). The mine is connected to Elias through his death and resurrection. On Elias’s first arrival, the factions surrounding Desperance posit competing narratives for the origin of the unspeaking mariner. While the Uptowners associate him with the originlessness they themselves claim as white settlers, the people of the Pricklebush suggest that Elias is associated with the dreaming:

You could tell this man [Elias] might be equated with the Dreamtime world because when his memory was stolen, the mighty ancestral body of black clouds and gale-force winds had spun away, over and done with, in a matter of a flash. (Wright 2006, 50; emphasis added)

While these lines could be mistaken as articulating a sense that Aboriginal people are misrecognising the mariner as an ancestor, note the self-aware, conditional nature of the prose. Elias is “equated” with the dreaming; this is both attributed to Pricklebush mob and given in passive voices suggesting a syncretism between this outsider and the dreamings of the Gulf: a novel adaptation. Elias – an outsider not unlike an outside genre – is very much accepted by someone like Normal, who recalls fishing and travelling on the seas with him. Finally and most importantly in this passage, Elias’s “memory was stolen.” The theft of Elias’s memory accounts for his paucity of speech (until his death when his animated speech guides Will Phantom some of the way on his journey to challenge the mine). Indeed, at that time, a relationship of reciprocity binds Will and Elias, since “[Will’s] best memory of Elias was the coastal man forever staring at the sea lost from his memory”(164–65). Here not only is memory doubled as a signifier but it also produces multiple implications: that Elias has lost his memory to the sea and that he has forgotten it in turn (it is literally, “lost to his memory”).

Westside Pricklebush have a more nuanced understanding than either of these “equat[jons]” of Elias with a syncretic interpretation of Indigenous belief around the dreaming. A page or so after Elias is introduced, the heterodiegetic narrator reveals “their memory revisions” which come to be associated with the rearticulation of
Aboriginal society to novel things from across the seas (such as Elias). The full passage describes how the elders of Pricklebush go about this process, saying:

They always watched the goings-on of Uptown with restrained interest, and shortly afterwards, began their memory revisions. This was a daily task, a memory tribunal, undertaken with relish by the old people for everyone’s matter of concern – talking oral history about the sequestrators who owned Uptown. (Wright 2006, 51)

As West-Pavlov rightly suggests, memory’s pliability is not only a question of Aboriginal adaptation of custom (though it is) but it also articulates the degree to which the model of memory employed by white Australia in its local instantiation (Uptown) is much more given to revisionist history than Aboriginal knowledge is. In this way, the capacity to remember is coded in the susceptibility to “memory revisions.” This notion is extended when Will realises later that the mine has a memory of its own and that he will need to draw on his own memory of the sites and spaces of the Gulf and its dreamings in order to challenge it. As the text tells us: “[Will] decided to be on the safe side he would assume the company had a memory as big as his of their battles fought over mining in the Gulf” (175). This combative dichotomy of the mine’s mind and Will’s suggests artifactuality. The suggestion that the mine has a memory indicates that it is distributed through the technological nodes of transnational capital and the precedent underlying settler Australian law. On the other hand, Will has learned his knowledge about kin and Waanyi country from Norm Phantom, Mozzie Fishman, Angel Day, Elias Smith and numerous other knowing figures in the Gulf and, while he has antagonist relationships with each of them (with the possible exception of Elias), he must adapt the knowledge they have bequeathed to him to challenge the neocolonial imposition of mining on Indigenous land.

Of course, Carpentaria explicitly records a refusal of settler Australian tropes and genres. Kevin Phantom becomes near traumatised at the Australian education system’s imperative to read “Tim Winton,” whose name, in turn, becomes a sign for the representation of a particularly settler experience (and perhaps genre). The experience of the cultural domination of such settler Australian narratives is shown to be an anxious experience for young people like Kevin who are exposed to and tested against it as much as they are exposed to and tested against capitalist industrial vocations (like mining which Kevin signs on to get involved in, before his accident and subsequent traumatised madness (kicks in)) (108–13). By contrast, García Márquez and Fuentes, for Wright, are figures with whom relation can be made and developed (Glissant 1997). It is in this sense that while Wright refuses Australian literature (particularly at its most nationalist) unequivocally, her attitude to transnational literary connections (including magical realism) is one of relation even as this relation includes a kind of tactical differentiation from them. As Wright outlines about writing Carpentaria:

The struggle I had was how to come to terms with the fact that this fictional work could not be contained in a capsule that was either time or incident specific. 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. (Wright 2018, 217–34)

Wright’s novels adopt aspects of genres and adapt them to narrative (including magical realism and also Waanyi storytelling, Joycean linguistic experimentation and much besides and beyond the scope of this short essay).

Carpentaria is vested in Waanyi storytelling and syncretism (even as this has sometimes been taken for magical realism). Similarly, as Jeanine Leane (2015) makes manifest, a
better term than magical realism for this unique project would be Waanyi realism. As Leane characterises it: “Wright reconfigures conventional meanings of time and timeless in a story of Aboriginal realism. More specifically, it is Waanyi realism as the story is born of Waanyi times and place and the Gulf of Carpentaria is a place for all times and memory – not just the last 225 years” (161). In this sense, Leane emphasises the particularity of Aboriginal and especially Waanyi conceptions of time that distinguish life in the Gulf from the colonial history that too often narrates it. As Estelle Castro-Koshy has suggested, Wright’s project has much in common with Kareva Mateata-Allain’s Indigenous Tahitian or, Ma’ohi concept of ancestral realism (2018, 126–27). Transindigenous relations (as Chadwick Allen calls them) between distinct but resonant ideas of the seen and unseen within the cosmology of a particular time and space/place are preferable to blanket terms that subsume rather than emphasise difference (even in comparison).

The novel of course meaningfully exhibits a relation to external cultural influences as one which facilitates agency, autonomy, and selection. Geoff Rodoreda suggests in detail that such forms of autonomy be read as a post-Mabo tendency toward sovereignty in Aboriginal writing (Rodoreda 2017). While sovereignty is a stark and important aspect of this text, the strategies I am discussing seem likely to have predated the 1992 Mabo decision. Indeed, it may be the case that sovereignty cannot be exclusively periodised through reference to post-Mabo. It is in this way not merely a formal strategy extraneous to the narrative content; rather Wright’s text, I suggest, reflexively foregrounds its own formal process, its refusal of generic classifiability. And it does so in such a way that takes the attitude of the Waanyi characters to Indigenous and European (or Latin American) narratives as analogous to the novel’s own relation to the genres it adopts but does not reduce to. Carpentaria takes in the form and style of numerous world genres and does so by identifying a line of flight from settler Australian literary legacies. It recodes and refuses any equivalence with the world genres that it cites.

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NOTES

1. Gammon is a word in Aboriginal English which is used to mean false, deceiving or bad.
2. See also Lucy Neave (2021) who suggests the genre “crisis fiction” is apt for The Swan Book.
3. For readings centred on the mine, see Mead 2013 ("Indigenous Literature and Extractive Industries") and Nolan 2020 ("Shifting Timescapes and the Significance of the Mine in Alexis Wright's Carpentaria").
4. See also Anne Brewster (2010) for an illuminating reading of sovereignty in Carpentaria.

ABSTRACTS

A number of critics have deployed the generic category of magical realism in reading Alexis Wright’s novel, Carpentaria. While accepting that the novel has something in common with this generic classification and a relation to texts and writers associated with it, this essay seeks to show the limitations inherent in reducing Carpentaria to this (or other) generic classifications. While Carpentaria enacts and explores elements of the representation of time and the sacred that
are congruent to magical realism, it also refuses to be reduced to either magical realism or genre as such.

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Keywords: Alexis Wright, Carpentaria, genre, Indigenous literature, Aboriginal literature, magical realism

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