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“This land is me”: Indigenous Australian story-telling and ecological knowledge

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A song in the 2001 film *One Night the Moon* by the Australian director Rachel Perkins neatly summarises the difference between the white Australian and the Indigenous Australian relationship to the land. White Australians see the land as something to be exploited for monetary gain, as the farmer says: “This land is *mine*.” The Indigenous Australians, on the other hand, see themselves as an extension of the land and the black tracker says: “This land is *me*.” The film is set in the 1930s but the “whitefella” idea of the land being there for man to exploit continues to be relevant today.

This is of course a somewhat simplistic vision and does not mean that all white Australians are indifferent to the natural world and that all Indigenous Australians respect it. Recent research suggests, for example, that it was the hunting practices of the first Aborigines, rather than climate change, which caused the extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna while Dr John Magee and Dr Michael Gagan from the Australian National University have even gone as far as to argue that it was Aboriginal burning of the landscape which “triggered the failure of the annual Australian monsoon over the interior by altering the flora enough to decrease the exchange of water vapour between the biosphere and atmosphere” (Morgan) thus creating the central Australian desert and transforming Lake Eyre from a freshwater lake into a huge salt flat. Nevertheless, the idea of exploiting the land for monetary gain was clearly something that arrived with the Europeans since traditional Aboriginal life was based around giving and communal sharing, not selling for individual profit.

Mining is a particularly good example of how the appetite for financial gain leads to the wanton destruction of the natural environment. The mining industry accounts for 35% of Australia’s exports, one of the highest rates in the world, and the mine owners have a huge lobbying power. The attempt to change the way the profits of mining industries are taxed by introducing a “Resource Super Profit Tax” of 40%, for example, was one of the reasons which led to Kevin Rudd being ousted as Prime Minister in 2010. And yet, mining has always been hugely destructive for the Australian environment; Wittenoom in Western

Australia, for example, was the site of an asbestos mine from 1943 to 1966 and contamination is such that in 2006 the State government took the rare decision to de-gazette the town, removing it from maps and closing all access roads to it. In Queensland, the acid run-off from gold and copper mines at Mount Morgan from 1882 to 1991 has left the Dee River a strange orange colour, totally devoid of fish and algae for a twenty kilometre stretch. In a country whose nickname is “The Dry Country,” this contamination of water ought to be particularly worrying but all too often, when faced with the huge lobbying powers of the mining companies, the government would rather invest in the uncertain technology of desalination plants than implement measures to avoid the initial pollution of the water table.

However, despite the apparent indifference of those in power, in these times of worry about climate change and global warming, an increasing number of White Australians are starting to believe that the Indigenous population possess useful knowledge about the management of natural resources. After all, for tens of thousands of years the Aborigines lived a stable existence in inhospitable environments where the first Europeans were unable to survive. A good example of the new ‘recognition’ of Indigenous knowledge can be found in The *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, 1999* (the EPBC Act). This Act is described on the Australian Government website as the “central piece of environmental legislation” which “provides a legal framework to protect and manage nationally and internationally important flora, fauna, ecological communities and heritage places.” There is nothing particularly remarkable about the act itself but what is worthy of note is that it is assisted by the *Indigenous Advisory Committee*, which was set up in order to “[take] into account the significance of Indigenous people’s knowledge of the management of land and the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.” Another example of ‘official’ recognition of traditional knowledge can be found in the 2011 edition of the journal *Ecology and Society* which included a special feature entitled, “Integrating Indigenous Ecological Knowledge and Science in Natural Resource Management: Perspectives from Australia,” while the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO), Australia’s national science agency, has several projects which confront “non-Indigenous ‘western’ science-based perspectives” with “Indigenous values and knowledge systems”, such as the “Aboriginal knowledge partnerships for water planning and assessment in the Wet Tropics region.”

This Indigenous knowledge of the land is embedded in the stories of the *Dreaming* which not only describe the creation of the world but also contain information about the nature of the landscape and the climate. For this reason the stories differ slightly from one region to another and Indigenous people are

reluctant to use the term mythology to describe them, feeling that the word carries with it "connotations of untruthfulness and delusion" and that it fails to take into account the on-going relevance of these stories for contemporary life (Devlin-Glass 393). For a long time, only anthropologists took any real interest in the stories of the *Dreaming*. The majority of White Australians denigrated the Aboriginal belief in the *Dreaming* as being little more than a primitive, pre-scientific pseudo-religion. If they knew about the stories at all, it was from children's books with endearing titles such as *How Koala lost his tail* (Adams). However, as Devlin-Glass has pointed out these stories are far more than children's tales and white Australian ignorance has "robbed the narratives of their grounded and cosmological functions and obscured the ways in which they operate as a total cultural practice, involving, for example, religion, law, morality, economics, maps, cooking manuals and kinship" (394).

The anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose describes *Dreaming* as "both a model for, and a celebration of life, as it is lived in the present" (44). For her, the fundamental rule of the *Dreaming* is balance; a balance in which all relationships and all parts are equal. Hunting for food, for example, is part of this healthy balance but wilful destruction of a whole species is not. Rose underlines the fact that, "a system cannot be life-enhancing if it is out of kilter" (44) and that "the potential is for a completely reflexive relationship: the person takes care of the country and the country takes care of the person [...] Damage to people is damage to country. [...] and] the reciprocal proposition is also true. Damage to country, and to Dreamings in particular, causes death or injury to people. Intention is not a factor" (107-8).

It is this inter-relationship of damage to country meaning damage to people that I would like to look at in Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006). It may at first sight seem rather incongruous to want to analyse actual ecological damage to the environment through a literary text but just as the stories of the *Dreaming* existed (and continue to exist) to teach people about the world, so too does both the fictional and autobiographical work of many contemporary indigenous writers. As Ruby Langford Ginibi said in an interview: "I write for myself and my people, but I also write for the white world, too, to educate them so they will know more about us and be less racist in their dealings with Aboriginal people" (Watson).

Alexis Wright is from the Waanyi people in North-West Queensland. She has for many years campaigned for Aboriginal rights; she was, for example, a co-ordinator for the Northern Territory Aboriginal Constitutional Convention in 1993 and in 2007 delivered a 10 000 word speech criticizing John Howard's intervention in the Northern Territory. She believes that: "Writing for the sake of writing has no particular purpose. The world's crying out for useful people to

do useful things” (Vernay), but she also believes that writing can be a powerful tool: “I want our people to have books, their own books, in their own communities, and written by our own people. I want the truth to be told, our truths, so, first and foremost, I hold my pen for the suffering in our communities. Let it not be mistaken: suffering is widespread in our communities. I do not write stories of ‘*getting on and getting by*.’” (1998)

Wright’s first short story was published in 1996, and a year later she published two full-length books: a novel *Plains of Promise*, which tells the story of three generations of Aboriginal women affected by the policies of child removal and a documentary, *Grog War*, about the Aboriginal community at Tennant Creek and their attempts to restrict the sale of alcohol to members of the Indigenous community, attempts which were continuously thwarted by the Whites who owned the local bars. Her third book, and second novel, *Carpentaria* deals with “the deterioration of relationships between people in the communities of the Gulf from the negotiations to develop the Century Mine” (2007 : 94). Initially it was suggested that she write a “history of conflict between Aboriginals and the mining industry” (Aitken 21) but, while exploring ideas for what was to be a work of non-fiction, she found herself trying “to come to some understanding of two principal questions: firstly, how to understand the idea of Indigenous people living with the stories of all the times of this country, and secondly, how to write from this perspective” (2007 : 81). In the end, since story-telling occupies such a central role in the Indigenous way of life, Wright decided that a “work of art” (2007 : 84), in other words, a work of fiction, would be the best way of giving a voice to her people.

Carpentaria is set in the aptly named fictional town of Desperance in the Gulf of Carpentaria, in far North-West Queensland. The novel attributes the origin of the town’s name to the fictitious middle name of the explorer Matthew Flinders but for the reader it is an ironic reminder of the town of Esperance in Western Australia. Esperance was supposedly named by French explorers who took shelter there during a storm in 1792 but in 2007 it was hit by a violent storm which caused significant flooding which destroyed hundreds of homes and washed away part of the highway linking it to Perth. The white population of Desperance, who live in what the Indigenous population pejoratively refer to as “Uptown,” exist in a kind of limbo, cutting themselves off from both the Indigenous population, whom they consider to be inferior, and from the rest of White Australia, whom they consider to be ignorant of what life is really like in rural Australia. Their total disregard for urban Australians can be seen when the State Government decides to rename the town “Masterton” in the mistaken belief that this will improve the town’s image. The local inhabitants, however, refuse to use the new name, and simply pull the new signs down.

On the other hand, although the "Uptown" whites think they know the land better than the "Southerners," right from the beginning of the novel, the narrator underlines the inability of the white population to 'read' the landscape and the climate. Desperance was built on the banks of a river and was "intended to serve as a port for the shipping trade for the hinterland of Northern Australia" (3) but, "during a Wet season in the last century, the town lost its harbour waters when the river simply decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometres. Just like that. Now, the waterless port survives with more or less nothing to do" (3). Similarly, at the end of the novel, Will recognises the cyclone bird flying overhead and knows instantly that the sound of its song "was the sound which all species on earth must flee from when they hear it" (458). Not only do the white population not hear the bird, but they also fail to see the visual signs; the narrator comments that: "It was incongruous that with a clear view of the enormous clouds swinging across the coast, which ought to have been enough warning for anyone on earth that a cyclone was heading their way" (465) the residents should carry on chopping down trees in an attempt to get rid of the bats which roost in them. It is only when "The Bureau of Meteorology has called and translated the message from the ancestral spirits" (466) that the white population suddenly realise that they need to evacuate the town immediately.

Although white people's relationship with the land is clearly a troubled one, the Indigenous characters do not all identify with the land in the same way and the novel thus reflects the complexity of the mining issue for Indigenous people. As Marcia Langton pointed out in her 2012 Boyer lecture:

Most mining projects are located in remote and rural Australia; 60 per cent of them are located near Aboriginal communities. It is Aboriginal people who have borne the brunt of the impacts of mining, and tamed the industry with a range of campaigns and strategies during the past half-century.

However, while many of these communities opposed the mines and the way they destroyed the land, Langton argues that for some Aboriginal people the mines, with their permanent jobs and regular salaries have had a positive effect as they have provided a way out of poverty and the indignity of welfare-dependent life in the Aboriginal reserves. She cites in particular the The Rio Tinto Alcan agreement, or Gove Mining Agreement, signed on 13 May 2011, which gives the Yolngu people in Arnhem land an economic stake in the bauxite mine on their land.

In *Carpentaria* the white Uptown thus separates two rival indigenous groups; Norm Phantom's "Pricklebush" mob, who live on the Westside of the town beside the tip, and the Eastside mob with their leader Joseph Midnight, who live

on the other side of the town. Norm Phantom is a man of the water rather than the land: "His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river from before time began" (6) and he is equally at home on the river and out at sea. He is not really interested in other people and spends most of his time either fishing or turning other people's prize catches into works of art. Joseph Midnight's group, on the other hand are neither land, nor river people but recent arrivals who have come from "all over the place" (52), lured to Desperance by "the hint of big bickies to be had from big mining" (52) as a result of the Native Title Laws. To be able to claim the money, Midnight's mob tell everyone they are the "real traditional landowners" (52) but their tribal name, Wangabiya, is a made up one and they have no more respect for the land than the white people. The town's cane toad plague, for example, is the result of Midnight deliberately bringing cane toads into the area in order to claim the government's 50c bounty payment for catching them.

A third indigenous group is also present in the novel. This last group are not permanent residents at Desperance but the modern equivalent of the nomadic Aboriginal people. Mozzie Fishman is convinced of the importance of continuing to sing the land in order to maintain life, and travels from place to place, following ancestral traditions. However, he has no qualms about modernising the ceremony and he and his group travel the traditional songlines in a "thirty-car procession" of "second-hand Falcon sedans and Holden station wagons of 1980s vintage" (119). Thus "the pilgrims drove the roads knowing they had one aim in life. They were totally responsible for keeping the one Law strong by performing this one ceremony from thousands of creation stories for the guardians of Gondwanaland" (124). There is, however, one slight problem: "It was hard for spirits to keep up when vehicles travelled faster than a person could run" (365), an ironic comment on the way in which, despite all their efforts, Indigenous people are gradually losing touch with their traditional ways.

Shortly before the novel starts, Desperance has been "saved" from its slow decline by the arrival of an American-run mining company: "Gurrfurritt" (a deformation of "go for it"), which provides employment for both the white and black inhabitants. The mine is there thanks to Midnight, who saw it is a means of making money and who has no interest in protecting Country.

This was what he got for agreeing to the mine. The government gave him a lot of money, a thousand dollars, and said, Go out there and shoot [...] all the feral pigs. [...] He was supposed to exterminate them from the entire Gulf of Carpentaria once and for all but he never did that. He let his useless relatives take all the little baby piglets home for pets and they bred up ten piglets each. (52-3)

While two of Norm's sons accept employment at the mine, another son Will, sets out to sabotage it. The ease with which he is able to do so, highlights the fragility of the white man's exploitation of the land and, although the brutality of the mine's reaction leaves no doubt about how important material wealth is to white society, it also illustrates how wrong these values are. Murandoo Yanner, one of the leaders of the ultimately unsuccessful campaign against the construction of the Century-Zinc mine (the second biggest zinc mine in the world) in the Gulf country, and to whom Wright dedicated the novel, commented to a journalist:

'What's alive in this room?,' he asks, sitting in a Brisbane coffee lounge. 'These tables are dead, the carpets are dead, even the air outside is dead. You sit in the bush for a second, even the sticks have life, go crack crack crack when you stand on them. A bird swoops, leaves fall, ants come out and take them to their holes. The sun, the shade, the trees, everything has life. Chief Seattle said, when the last tree has been felled, the last fish caught, only then will they realise they can't eat money.' (Button)

For Wright, one of the challenges was how to convey the Indigenous sense of time as a continuum rather than a linear process, something which is important as a way of showing that humans have always and will always be linked to the land. From the very first page of the novel, the narrator situates the story firmly in the *Dreaming*. The first chapter, which is entitled "From Time Immemorial" begins:

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. [...] It came down those billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Picture the creative serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of the mud flats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys. (1)

The Rainbow Serpent lies at the heart of the novel's ecological knowledge. The snake's movements account for the reshaping of the landscape, for the monsoon-type rains, floods and tidal waves. However, "invisible things in nature made no sense to Uptown because of their *savoir-faire* in being Australians" (77). The tenuous nature of their "*savoir faire*" is illustrated by the fact that white memory relies on documents rather than people: "No living soul remembered what the port had looked like before. No picture could be put on display in a showcase at the museum of scarce memorabilia because no one at the time of the heyday thought it was worthwhile to take a photo" (8). Indigenous knowledge, on the other hand, persists because it is oral knowledge. When

Will needs to go into hiding from the police and the mine security guards he seeks the help of Joseph Midnight. Somewhat surprisingly, since Midnight has never seemed particularly interested in the traditional Aboriginal way of life: "The old man gave him the directions to the safe place in his far-off country – a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place had never seen. [...] a ceremony [he] had never performed in his life before, and now, to his utter astonishment he passed it on to Will" (375). This sudden, remembrance of ancestral knowledge emphasises the strength of the Indigenous relationship to the land; it may not be at the forefront of their preoccupations but it is never forgotten.

Thus, like all other white attempts to modify the landscape, destructive as it is for the environment, the mine is also fragile. Will's first sabotage attempts are simple but surprisingly effective and leave the mine owners' and technicians puzzled about what went wrong with their technical plans. It is white rubbish which allows the fire to take hold properly: "the old Pizza Hut box someone had left on top of one of those bowsers that added that little bit of extra fuel" (411), but it is the spirit of the land which protects the Indigenous men who have come to rescue Will, from the force of the fire: "they were thrown down for shelter behind the boulders, in the fold of the ancestral spirit who governed the land" (407). The fire thus destroys the mine but importantly the Aboriginal characters recognise it not just as the end of the mine but as the start of a "new beginning" for fire in Australia is life-giving – certain plants, such as banksias, will only germinate after their seeds have been burnt in a bushfire and heated to temperatures above 400°C.

After escaping from the mine, Will takes to the sea in search of his wife and child and ends up on an island formed from the detritus of the cyclone. The birds are the first to "accept the drifting structure as a new land" (495); their droppings fertilise it allowing plants to take root, the seeds either blown in by the wind, or washed up by the sea. The arrival of bees and an earthworm "in a single rotting tomato" (495) ensure that the plants flourish and the island provides Will with everything he needs: food, shelter and water. Will's arrival on the island can be read as a symbolic parallel of the arrival of the whites in Australia but unlike the whites, who immediately tried to exploit the land, Will is initially interested in maintaining the balance on the island and every night he stays awake "to sing the Fishman's ceremonial song cycles" (496). Eventually, however, solitude weighs on his mind and he longs for rescue, wondering "would the discoverers call the sole inhabitant on his sinking oasis: a native" (502)?

By the end of the novel, the town of Desperance has been flattened and the white inhabitants have fled, leaving only their "bony, hollow-ribbed" dogs be-

hind. These dogs have been so shocked by the cyclone that they have become "speechless, dumbfounded, unable to crack a bark" (518), although Norm shoos them off, and it is possible to read them as symbols of their white owners who have also been left "speechless" by the violence of the cyclone, it can also be read more optimistically as the first stage of the dogs' adaptation to the Australian landscape, since dingoes do not bark but howl, and if the dogs are capable of adapting then, the novel seems to suggest, perhaps white Australians are too. Moreover, although the town no longer physically exists, Norm Phantom, guided by gropers, knows he has come back to the "right" place and that he has come "home":

With the boat secured on the wet land, Norm stared ahead, trying to survey the landscape for familiar landmarks. In every direction he looked he could not discover one familiar feature of Desperance. [...] Could he be wrong? No! No! This is right. I was right.' He mumbled, still confident that he had navigated correctly. They were home. [...] In his heart, Norm knew he had no more journeys to make. [...] He continued walking ahead, down his memory of the main street of Desperance [...] sizing up the landscape, already planning the home he would rebuild on the same piece of land where his old house had been, among the spirits in the remains of the ghost town, where the snake slept underneath. (516-9)

The novel thus ends optimistically. The snake brings destruction in the form of the cyclone but it also brings renewal. The cyclone is merely a repetition of the original *Dreaming* story with which the novel opened. There is nothing either unexpected or alarming about the cyclone – if anything for the Indigenous population it is even beneficial since it rids them of the white town. As Joseph Midnight says "The country looked dirty from mining, shipping, barges spilling ore and waste. Something had to run a rake across the lot" (401) and this is precisely what the cyclone has done; levelled the land to start afresh. This is also in keeping with the Indigenous belief that White Australia is ultimately insignificant – a mere two hundred years in tens of thousands of years of existence and, while white actions have had disastrous consequences for many individuals, they are ultimately unable to damage the land itself. Wright explicitly refers to this in an interview she gave on the writing of the novel:

A friend once said to me while we were looking at the Gregory River... that the white man had destroyed our country. He pointed out the weeds growing profusely over the banks—burrs, prickles and other noxious introduced plants grew everywhere. It would take decades to eradicate the past decades of harm . . . What he said was true, but what I saw was the mighty flow of an ancestral river rushing through the weeds, which were only weeds fruitlessly reaching down into the purity of this flowing water . . . The river was flowing with so much force I felt

it would never stop, and it would keep on flowing, just as it had flowed by generations of my ancestors, just as its waters would slip by here forever. (2007 : 79)

However, as Paul Sharrad has pointed out, this creates a possible double-bind problem; without a vision of hope, readers may find the book too depressing but if we accept that the Indigenous view of the world is correct, and that the country will survive no matter what, then the problems which the novel highlights need not be taken too seriously after all. It would thus seem that there is some justification to Tony Hughes d'Aeth's claim that although Australian writers have always been interested in the environment, the emergence of literary eco-criticism has been much slower to emerge than in North America. And in many ways, Wright's novel is an important First. Not only does it "[revision] the Dreamtime mythology as an alternative form of scientific discourse, ethno-biology/geography/climatology based in the observation of forces of nature over many thousands of years" (Devlin Glass 393) but it does so in a form that is attractive to white readers, in other words to those with the power to change things. As one of those white readers commented when reviewing the book: "Why does this book move me deeply? Because it stirs up feeling on how one might live in tune with the ecology of place, the cycles of the cosmos? A parable about how, if we *don't* live in this way, nature and her beings – 'the elements' – make retribution?" (Sharp).

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Abstract : A song in the film *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001), summarises the differences between the white Australian and the Indigenous Australian relationship to the land. White Australians see the land as something to be exploited for monetary gain ("This land is mine") while Indigenous Australians see themselves as an extension of the land ("This land is me"). This paper focuses on Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006) whose structure is inspired by the traditional Indigenous Australian *Dreaming* stories. These stories were a way of handing down knowledge about the environment from one generation to the next and *Carpentaria* has a similar educational aim. By destabilising what White Australians think they know about Indigenous Australian culture and the Australian environment, the novel shows that Aboriginal mythology has both a political and an ecological relevance in today's society.

Key words: Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Indigenous Australians, Environment, Storytelling

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the writing of all those who exist on the margins of the dominant society, including white women in the colonial period and Indigenous people in contemporary Australia. She has published widely in both French and English-language journals.

Résumé : Une chanson dans le film *One Night the Moon* (Rachel Perkins, 2001) résume la différence entre l'attitude des Australiens blancs et de la population indigène envers la terre. Les Australiens blancs voient la terre comme quelque chose qu'ils peuvent exploiter afin de s'enrichir personnellement (« Cette terre est à moi ») alors que les Aborigènes estiment qu'ils ne sont qu'un prolongement de la terre (« Cette terre est moi »). Cet article étudie *Carpentaria* (2006) d'Alexis Wright, un roman dont la structure est inspirée par les contes indigènes traditionnels du *Dreaming*. Ces contes étaient une façon de transmettre d'une génération à l'autre des connaissances de l'environnement dans lequel ils vivaient. *Carpentaria* a le même but éducatif ; en cherchant à déstabiliser l'image qu'ont les Australiens blancs de la culture aborigène le roman montre que la mythologie indigène a une pertinence à la fois politique et écologique dans la société contemporaine.

Mots-clefs: Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, Australiens indigènes, environnement, *storytelling*.

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