

# Alexis Wright, “Relation” in *Carpentaria* as a Contribution to Thinking Decolonisation and Ecopoetics

Anthony Uhlmann

Western Sydney University

This paper develops a reading of Aboriginal Australian novelist Alexis Wright’s novel *Carpentaria* through the prism of the concept of “relation”. It draws on Wright’s interest in the Caribbean theorist Édouard Glissant’s concepts of “history” and “History”. Small “h” history, involves the overlapping, complex, and multi-temporal relations that actually compose the worlds we inhabit. History with a capital “H”, on the other hand, is an invention of colonisation and conquest a colonial discourse that seeks to limit an idea of place. In addition there is “non-history” and “non-History”. “Non-History” involves the effacement of real histories by an overarching storyline of a nation. “Non-history” for Glissant involves discontinuities in forms of argumentation, forms of storytelling. What is damaging is the idea that one kind of understanding (a Western “Non-History”) might seek to forcibly erase other kinds of understanding (including the many minor traditions that circulate within Western traditions). *Carpentaria* offers many examples of the hostility of one kind of understanding to others but also offers a way forward in demonstrating how stories might be developed that do just to the living cultures and lived experience of Indigenous peoples.

*Keywords:* Alexis Wright, Indigenous storytelling, Édouard Glissant, non-history, poetics of relation

This paper while not directly engaging with particular schools that consider questions of decolonisation and ecopoetics, will contribute to debates in these fields by examining the work of the Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright (of the Waanyi people) through the prism of the idea of “relation”. In her essay “On Writing *Carpentaria*” Wright cites the Caribbean writer and theorist Édouard Glissant and his work *Poetics of Relation* (1997).<sup>1</sup> Discussing his idea of “nonhistory” she argues, “through a writer’s relationship with the poetics of relation, which is a relationship with all of the senses of telling, listening, connection, and the parallel consciousness of self and surroundings, the key will be found to transforming mentalities and reshaping societies” (Wright, 2018, p. 150). Glissant’s concept of relation, as others have noted, aligns with the work of the French philosophers Gilbert Simondon and Deleuze and Guattari (which in turn align with understandings apparent in Spinoza and certain of the pre-Socratics), wherein being is thought in terms of relationships and becoming rather than in terms of fixed and clearly separated entities. This idea—that

relation is being, and that we are determined by the relations that comprise us and into which we enter—is also central to Aboriginal thinking, where identity, law, meaning and spiritual understanding are tied to relationships with country, people and the stories (or relations) that bind them together and renew them.<sup>2</sup> Wright’s epic story of Tracker Tilmouth, *Tracker* (2017), emerged from her ongoing project on “Indigenous Storytelling”, which seeks to underline how essential Aboriginal cultures are to the contemporary world by focusing on stories told to strengthen relationships that have become strained or fractured through colonial violence. This paper will offer readings of Wright’s work that attempt to shed light on the nature of relation itself and how it is *interconnectedness* and not the things (understood as discrete objects) thought to be connected that is essential to our capacity to thrive.

In *Poetics of Relation* Édouard Glissant distinguishes “history” with a small “h”, from “History” with a capital “H”. The first, small “h” history, involves the overlapping, complex, and multi-temporal relations that actually compose the worlds we inhabit: it involves the seemingly chaotic real relations

---

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Anthony Uhlmann, Writing and Society Research Centre, Western Sydney University at Locked Bag 1797 Penrith, NSW 2751. E-mail: a.uhlmann@westernsydney.edu.au

<sup>1</sup> Castro-Koshy discusses different elements of this work, focusing on the convergences between Wright’s work and French Caribbean thought and literature.

---

<sup>2</sup> In this essay the word “Aboriginal” will be used to refer to mainland First Nations people of Australia, and particularly those from the Gulf of Carpentaria, and “Indigenous” refers to First Nations peoples from around the world. Wright uses the second term in part because of the dialogue she sets up with Glissant and other non-Aboriginal thinkers who consider questions of place and relationships.

between others in both physical and spiritual terms, or genetic and cultural terms (this involves relations and confrontations between different cultural understandings and traditions but also concerns the different selves within any self) (Glissant, 1997, pp. 26–27). History with a capital “H”, on the other hand, is an invention of colonisation and conquest, most strongly associated with Western colonisation in the modern period. It involves the imposition of a single or at least coherent storyline, one that seeks to efface difference, overwriting the chaos of competing cultures with the seemingly contradictory ideas of fixed identity (the nation) and ongoing progress (a single line moving from the past to the future, with the future erasing the past as it emerges) (Glissant, 1997, p. 222).

The difference between “history” and “History” can be understood in a number of ways, but for Glissant they correspond to different understandings of the world, with the former tending to align with Indigenous worldviews, and the latter with colonial worldviews, though it must be stressed that small “h” history in real terms affects each and every person, just as capital “H” History has come to affect each and every person. At a fundamental level the difference concerns what kinds of relations are thought to be at stake. Glissant cites Tzvetan Todorov from *The Conquest of America* (1984), who affirms that, “There exist two great forms of communication, one between man and man, the other between man and the world, the [South-American] Indians cultivated the latter above all, the Spanish [Conquistadors] the former” (Todorov, 1984, as cited in Glissant, 1997, p. 213). Glissant follows Todorov in arguing that while the relation favoured by the Spanish was more effective in pragmatically leading to conquest of the Indigenous peoples, that “from the point of view of what I call here a worldwide Relation, [the Indigenous] system of reference was the most durable (the most profitable?) one there is.” (Glissant, 1997, p. 213). So capital “H” History prioritises power relations between human individual and human individual, while small “h” history prioritises the relations between humanity and the planet as a totality (which includes both natural and cultural relations of all kinds).

Another way in which Glissant understands the distinction involves two understandings of nomadism. Following and extending Deleuze and Guattari, Glissant argues that one kind of nomad engages in “circular” nomadism, moving between places within a territory in a circular manner, so as not to exhaust the resources of a given place, while a second kind involves a nomadism of conquest, as one people, the Mongol hordes, or the European explorers, engage in voyages over vast of space that involve the conquests of peoples. The first kind is associated with local understandings and small “h” history and practice, and the second with colonial logic and capital “H” History (Glissant,

1997, pp. 11–22).

In turn there are two kinds of nonhistory: “non-History” (with a capital “H”) and “non-history” (with a lower case “h”). These concern how stories are told, rather than being the histories themselves. As representations, however, they orient our understandings and in turn determine how we will respond to what has happened, thereby opening the potential to changing what will happen from now on. “Non-History” involves the effacement of real histories by an overarching storyline of a nation. Although she doesn’t make this precise point Betsy Wing in her introduction to *Poetics of Relation* underlines how “non-History” works: in school Glissant was taught stories of the Gauls in France who were supposedly “his” ancestors, with these stories of National heritage effacing the stories of Glissant’s own real genetic ancestors who came from Africa to the Caribbean as slaves caught up in lines of colonial conquest (Glissant, 1997). So too this “non-History” ignores its relations to the world and the environments on which we depend, exploiting the world and ignoring the consequences of the exploitation (Glissant, 1997, p. 150). It tells a single, coherent and authorised storyline.

On the other hand (although this takes us to a completely different mental space), “non-history” for Glissant involves discontinuities in forms of argumentation, forms of storytelling. These discontinuities or non-relations are present in oral traditions of storytelling. As Betsy Wing explains:

This oral tradition remains clearly present in the Creole proverbs and sayings that constitute the familiar wisdom of Martinique. These formulations exemplify continuity but in form are discontinuous. When this form is employed by a philosopher, it is referred to as “aphorism,” and, when the surroundings of these discontinuous statements are lost in history, we think of them as “fragments.” (Glissant, 1997, p. xix)

This background gives us some idea of the ambition of Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*. It confronts the violent relations between “History” and “history” in Australia. Furthermore, it seeks to develop nonrelational (fragmented or even experimental) forms that might do justice to the real complexity of the relations of small “h” history and confront the hegemony of capital “H” History.

*Carpentaria* describes various lines of relation that affect both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds of Desperance and the Gulf country, and the country of the sea in the Gulf of Carpentaria itself, and the stars. Desperance is a fictional town, but it is closely based on the real town of Burketown (see Figures 1, 2, 3 and 4 below).



Figure 1. Burketown, Queensland.



Figure 2. Gulf of Carpentaria (MODIS).



Figure 3. Mangroves Along River Near Burketown.



Figure 4. Mudflats Near Burketown.

These lines of relation involve kinship or are familial, even where conflict is involved. Normal Phantom is, at the beginning of the narrative, married to Angel Day. His clan finds itself in conflict with another Aboriginal group, led by Joseph Midnight, and these two groups separate, moving to opposite sides of the fringes of Desperance. Norm professes contempt for Joseph Midnight, and for his own son Will Phantom, who is dedicated to resisting through sabotage and other methods the “History” being imposed on country by the mining company. Yet Will’s love and partner is Hope Midnight, Joseph’s daughter, and together they have a son, Bala, who Norm in the end cares for. Angel Day leaves Norm and begins a new relationship with a third Aboriginal leader, Mozzie Fishman, who lives beyond Desperance and has deep knowledge of the whole of the Gulf Country, and Mozzie is allied to Will Phantom in the resistance to the mine. The young children of Mozzie and Angel, Tristram and Luke Fishman, along with their friend Aaron Ho Kum are driven to suicide in jail by the abuse of the white leader of Desperance Bruiser and the neglect of the white policeman Truthful. Truthful in turn has a tentative sexual relationship with Norm’s and Angel’s daughter Girlie. Another white character, Elias, miraculously walks in from the sea, with no memory of his roots or the stories that brought him to Desperance. He becomes the closest friend to Norm and a close friend of Will’s. He is murdered out in the Gulf waters by representatives of the mining company as bait to lure Will out from his sanctuary among the Gulf country which hides him. Norm is drawn out to the Gulf waters to bury Elias in the sea country from which he emerged and is thereby led to connect with his grandson Bala. Even the mine and its murderous representatives play a role in connecting relationships, as, in attempting to murder her, mining representatives throw Hope from a helicopter, which miraculously reunites her with Norm and her son. So too, cyclones, which are represented as the voice of the troubled spirits of ancestors, destroy Desperance, expelling Will from the land and landing him on a new emergent space, a floating island of rubbish, which is composed of myriad relations between the detritus of the places among the Gulf coast, an island that drifts close to Hope, Norm and Bala, but which remains undiscovered, though at the story’s end Hope is setting out to find him.

The world of Desperance is at once fractured and connected, but even the most appalling fractures as seen as potentially serving in some way to create new connections, as the Aboriginal worldview seeks to heal and recover from its wounds. So Mozzie buries his tortured sons among the ancient ancestors of the Gulf along with the other boy to whom he is not related but adopts in death to offer him spiritual shelter. Yet some of these gestures of reconnection are incomplete: they have to be imagined still, they remain to be created outside the frame of the

story we are given. Will survives on the island of rubbish, but needs the salvation of Hope to bring him home outside the frame of the story we are told. So Mozzie and Will and their allies confront the might of the mine and the forces that seek to justify it, bringing into being new alliances, but it remains unclear as to whether their struggle will succeed. So Hope Will and Bala might bring together the two Aboriginal clans on either side of Desperance who are divided by mutual contempt and differing relations to the mine. Processes of creation inhabit spaces in which there is, through conflict, ongoing chaos and a blowing asunder of relations, which might, despite this, somehow knit themselves together again through stories of relation.

Yet the forces that reknit are not just any forces: on one level they are natural and related to the natural forces of the country, on another they are spiritual and related to the depth of Aboriginal spiritual connection to the country. Lynda Ng and Peter Minter have written about the image of rubbish in *Carpentaria*: the story begins in the Aboriginal homes among the rubbish tip on the fringe of Desperance, and ends with the destruction of the town, engendering an island of rubbish on which Will lives, like a Black Robinson Crusoe. The rubbish in turn is made of relations between things, seemingly accidentally thrown together by the chaos of white settlement and the fury of ancestral spirits, among which one (if one is Aboriginal in this place) is obliged to make a home. (Minter, 2018; Ng, 2018)

Rather than being “magic realist” with magic being recounted “as if” it were true, *Carpentaria* insists on the reality of a spiritual mode of being. That is, it insists on the reality of a greater power, an organisational capacity, which is, in essence, composed of relations. These relations are understood differently, by different kinds of thought, and each kind of understanding brings with it particular capacities. Aboriginal understandings of country and story open up potential relations invisible to the relations of “Non-History”. For Wright, Indigenous storytelling brings with it a capacity to renew, to create, to bring into being by opening oneself to relations that exist in the earth sea and sky and the Aboriginal concept of Country that maps onto this and understands the relations of which it is composed. She underlines this in “On Writing *Carpentaria*”:

This is the condition of contemporary Indigenous storytelling that I believe is a consequence of our racial diaspora in Australia. The helix of divided strands is forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several tunes at once. These stories relate to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams. Where the characters are Indigenous people in this

novel, they might easily have been any scattered people from any part of the world who share a relationship with their spiritual ancestors and heritage, or for that matter, any Australian—old or new. (Wright, 2018, p. 143)

The idea of Aboriginal storylines or “songlines” is present throughout the book, but it relates both to stories that are known and understood, such as the stories Mozzie Fishman carries and protects that allow him to navigate every inch of the Gulf country, but they are also present in virtual form. For example, at the end of the novel we see how Hope is affected by and led by the songlines of her ancestors in attempting to find Will, but she does not consciously understand them; rather, they draw her along because she is open to them (and in this she is contrasted with Norm, who has replaced some of his Aboriginal knowledge with European knowledge which causes him to doubt, at least momentarily, the veracity of the real insights Hope experiences). Here the narrator intervenes, uncoupling the reader for a moment from our strong identification with Norm:

Alas! Norm, do not search your mind again, for however she had come to be alive at all comes to naught against your parallels. Stay blinded. She possessed a razor-sharp mind for others to see. (Wright, 2006, p. 507)

Yet Norm is redeemed in the end, in part through the recognition that there are things beyond his own understanding, dreamings other than his own. Hope leaves Norm to search for Will, and while the coldly logical, Europeanised side of his mind, which is also steeped in prejudice against other forms of knowledge, is contemptuous of her claim to be able to find Will in the wide sea, the Aboriginal side is dazzled by a half-understood intuition of the truth of her knowledge, which is a half-formed knowledge, still coming into being.

He wanted to call after her—demand she come back. Tell her she was stupid. He nearly let his temper fly. Every muscle in his body ordered him to go after her and drag her back. But each time he turned to go back, he was blinded by the sun. [...] Unable to see anything except a blinding darkness, he held Bala tightly on his shoulders and stumbled on away from the sea, until the moment passed, and he opened his eyes into a reddish haze. He knew he could not interfere in other people’s dreams. (Wright, 2006, p. 517)

Hope follows these dreams unaware that she is being led by a school of gropers who push her boat before her, leading the way, the same fish Norm himself had sought, knowing too the dreaming story they carried and their connection to deeper understandings when looking to bury Elias (Wright, 2006, p. 516).

The implications are profound and do not only involve the Aboriginal characters. Rather, through the character of Elias, who is more of an image or idea than a fully realised character in the novel, there is a connection to a potential for those of European descent to recover or glimpse their own dreaming. In “On Writing *Carpentaria*” Wright suggests that:

In contrast to Indigenous spiritual beliefs, I also wanted to demonstrate in this novel that other people have strange ideas and belief systems about who and what they are. This is true whether they originated from British stock, or had come from any of the other races of people in multi-cultural Australia. I also carry in my heritage the remnants of a Chinese cultural background, and what I believe I have of an Irish ancestry, which makes me, I am told, the kind of person that might be mistaken as a native on most continents. When I read the fine Chinese writer Chi Zijian’s *Figments of the Supernatural*, I also see another side of the ancestral stories from my grandmother. Or, if I look at Michael Demes’ *Mythic Ireland*, I wonder what I might have learnt from my father’s family had I known them, and what of them I have inherited. I have often thought about how the spirits of other countries have followed their people to Australia and how these spirits might be reconciled with the ancestral spirits that belong here. I wonder if it is at this level of thinking that a lasting form of reconciliation between people might begin and if not, how our spirits will react. (Wright, 2018, p. 148)

Elsewhere Wright has spoken and written about the importance of the imagination, which opens lines of understanding, and that this imagination is crucial to our capacity to create new territories, a habitable Country that would accommodate Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a spirit of understanding. She has also spoken of how, in effect, the morass we find ourselves stuck in involves a failure of the imagination (Wright, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e).

Here the ideas of storytelling, imagination, and dreaming are powerfully related. In “On Writing *Carpentaria*” Wright cites an

article, “On ‘Tjukurrpa’, Painting Up, and Building Thought” by the non-Indigenous author Craig San Roque, on the idea of dreaming, indicating that his understanding of the concept is illuminating. Here San Roque offers three definitions of Dreaming, given by Aboriginal elders. The third of these touches upon the idea that dreaming itself is not a simple matter of recounting remembered facts or static storylines, but that rather, it involves processes of understanding how all of the elements of the world, including non-Indigenous elements, interrelate. Some of this knowledge is proper, not to Aboriginal people, but to those who have entered into relation with them: non-Indigenous Australians with their customs and ways of being, which often refuse to take into account how they relate, both to their own traditions and to the different Indigenous traditions they confront. San Roque quotes the Aboriginal painter Andrew Japaljarri Spencer in April 1990 who has painted a work related to alcohol, which is categorized in Arrernte culture with parma, the sugar ant or sweet substances.

Andrew says: “This painting is about parma, sugar, sugar ant. Different from honey ant. It is like a fly. We have the song for this, for parma and for strengthening parma. We haven’t got the song to send white man’s parma [sugar] away. We can’t get rid of this one. We can only strengthen the good parma. The songs for petrol and alcohol must come from the white man; or we must dream new ones. The children [meaning the innocent and uninitiated] can’t save the world. You, the white people, have lost your Dreaming. Maybe you don’t know the songs for alcohol and petrol. You have to learn [reconnect to] your songs, your whitefella Tjukurrpa. To turn to us, to me [i.e., to Aboriginal people] for the [alcohol and petrol dreaming] songs is too much.”

Later Andrew asks straight out: “Do Kardia [white people] have the Tjukurrpa for parma?” I exchange glances with Petchkovsky, my companion in this conversation. We nod to each other. I say, “Yes.” Andrew says: “Well, maybe you’d better go and get it. That’s your responsibility.” I nod, “All right, Japaljarri.” (San Roque, 2006, p. 153)

The challenge for non-Indigenous Australians, then, is to imagine how our own traditions interact with the Country and others that inhabit it alongside us. To build relations. This is glimpsed in *Carpentaria* through the story of Elias.

You got to believe what was true in the homes of

Desperanians. A folktale of ancient times elsewhere was stored in treasure chests in the minds of these people. A sea people such as themselves come from so far away to be lost, would forever have all seas in their sights. That was their story. [...] 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, p. 50)

For Alexis Wright, stories do not simply relate to some kind of fixed past, but to the present and the idea of the creation of the future. All of this is related to storytelling, the imagination, a secular dreaming which can at its best offer some kinds of connection with a spiritual plane, which composes, orders, creates. While the idea of songlines in Aboriginal culture, or storylines that criss-cross and relate the entire continent of Australia and the oceans and skies that surround it is well known, there is still a tendency to dismiss its power, even to disparage it, when in effect, its claims are more or less self-evident. Its claims are that our relations to the Countries in which we live involve not just ourselves but others, not just other humans but all of nature, and that these connections are not accidental: they are real in the deepest sense, we simply do not exist as we are now without the complex sets of intimate interrelations between others and the environments we share and this is an idea that can be readily backed up by molecular physics and biology. Another word for this deepest sense is the spiritual sense, or feeling of understanding, which is involved in belonging in place.

In an interview on the 7.30 Report in June 2007 Kerry O'Brien suggested to Wright that people disparage Aboriginal knowledge as merely "oral history" as opposed to the authority of white documentation (O'Brien, 2007). A position such as this firstly neglects the power of oral transmission, which carried both deep pragmatic and spiritual Aboriginal knowledge for millennia and has also underwritten literary traditions in all cultures before the emergence of written technologies. Homer's works, and *Beowulf*, epics in Africa, Mongolia and across the world for example, circulated as oral literature for hundreds of years before being copied into writing, and scholarship has demonstrated that sacred Aboriginal songs carry archaic forms of language that indicate an ancient provenance (Strehlow, 1971), and that Aboriginal stories tell of ancient events such as the sudden rise of sea levels over 7,000 years ago, that are confirmed by geological research (Nunn & Reid, 2016). Secondly, it neglects the ongoing importance of stories to orienting oneself in the world, through aligning oneself with knowledge and belief systems. Wright contends that what differs

from Western traditions in the context of Aboriginal Australia (though it has this in common with other Indigenous cultures) is how the stories told mix ancient stories with the less distant and immediate pasts along with contemporary stories, as a way of understanding that mixes temporalities. She summarises this for O'Brien:

We come from a long history and association in this country, we have got ancient epical stories that tell about how the land has been created, and that is still very important to Aboriginal people whether they live in urban areas of the country or remote areas.

And the way people tell stories; they will bring all the stories of the past, from ancient times and to the stories of the last 200 years (that have also created enormous stories for Indigenous people), and also stories happening now. It is hard to understand, but all times are important. (O'Brien, 2007, p. 216)

What is damaging is the idea that one kind of understanding (a Western "Non-History") might seek to forcibly erase other kinds of understanding (including the many minor traditions that circulate within Western traditions). *Carpentaria* offers many examples of the hostility of one kind of understanding to others. This is apparent not just in the struggles between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal understandings (the "Non-History" that seeks to establish the mine by erasing or destroying millennia of Aboriginal culture) but also within Aboriginal culture, where Norm disparages the knowledge carried by Hope, and between versions of Western culture in Australia, for example when the Irish priest Father Danny driving his car across the desert is confronted by representatives of the mine in their helicopter, who seek to forbid him from travelling across plains about to be flooded (Wright, 2006, pp. 183-194). Here the priest, through intimate contact with the land and the people who live there, has a much deeper understanding of it, which he traverses as a bush mechanic in his car, than the Fly In Fly Out (FIFO) mine workers who barely touch the land except where they come to rest to mine it. Such difference can be understood in terms of different levels of relation: Mozzie Fishman knows the Country, both above and underground in ancient caves, like the back of his hand and so is able to disappear among it. This intimate understanding of relations to the place give him a greater right to the place, just as the priest has a greater right than the miners.

The difference can be further understood, however, through the power of stories: the affects they carry and the effects they have. Glissant states:

Relation to the earth is too immediate or too plundering to be linked with any preoccupation with identity—this claim to or consciousness of lineage inscribed in a territory. Identity will be achieved when communities attempt to legitimate their right to possession of a territory through myth or the revealed word. (Glissant, 1997, p. 13)

Glissant contrasts the world view that bases legitimacy on “community within territory” (Glissant, 1997) with ideas that first appeared with Plato that based legitimacy on the “City in the rationality of its laws” (p. 13). Yet he underlines how Plato too relies on myth, with the *Dialogues* taking over “the function of the Myth” (p. 13) by establishing the “City’s justice based on the revelation of a superior reason” (p. 13). Gilbert Simondon, whose philosophy of relations was a major influence on Deleuze and Guattari who in turn are important to Glissant, also underlines the importance of myth to Plato.

Simondon argues there are three kinds of relation that characterise our being: a perceptive relation which he connects with consciousness, an active relation which he connects with the unconscious physical capacities of our bodies, and, between these two, an affective relation which he connects to the subconscious feeling of being we have as we experience the world. (Simondon, 2020, pp. 272–277) As with Spinoza, our feelings or affects and emotions move between joy and sadness as we are affected by things which increase our power (joy) or things that decrease our power (sadness). For Simondon this subconscious level of affect and emotion constitutes “the center of individuality” (Simondon, 2020, p. 273): more than our conscious perceptions or physical actions it is what makes us who we are and he turns to brain science and the strong connection between emotional affective centres in the brain and our feelings of identity to underline this point. For Simondon this sense of self or feeling of being is forcefully connected with the emergence of spirituality, which is in turn characterised as a feeling of connection to existence itself. He underlines this before returning us to Plato and myth:

The study carried out by Franz Cumont in *Lux Perpetua* concerning the beliefs of the beyond is not just an analysis of eschatological mythology but a veritable study of the collective or individual subconscious; myth takes on a profound meaning here, because it is not merely a representation that is useful for action or a facile mode of action; myth can be accounted for neither through representation nor through action, because myth isn’t just an uncertain representation or a procedure for acting; the

source of myth is affectivo-emotivity, and the myth is a bundle of feelings relative to the becoming of being; these feelings convey representative elements and active movements, but these realities are secondary and not essential to myth. Plato understood this value of myth, and every time the becoming of being was called into question, he made use of myth as an adequate mode for the discovery of becoming. (Simondon, 2020, p. 276)

Myth, then, carries and conveys a felt understanding intimately connected with being.

There are two miracles with which *Carpentaria* begins and ends. Near the beginning Elias emerges from the sea and walks across the mud flats to Desperance, at the end of the book Hope falls from the sky into the sea and survives. In *Carpentaria* the sea is a place of spirits: the spirits gather from the sea to devastate Desperance with a cyclone. It is a place of formation and reformation, which strikes at the seeming permanence of the land. Allegorically, as others have noted, Elias’s emergence from the sea replays the process of colonisation: he walks out from the sea having forgotten where he came from, what his roots are, and his connection to place. He also lacks understanding of how he came to survive, who he is, and has to create a new identity in the new place. As we have seen in “On Writing *Carpentaria*” Wright notes that she would have loved to have been told Celtic myths from her Irish forebears, Chinese myths from her Chinese forebears, so that she could connect this knowledge of place with the Aboriginal stories from her Waanyi people, yet these non-Aboriginal stories somehow became disconnected when the other peoples arrived.

Hope falls from the sky. As we know (but Norm doesn’t know this and as Hope has lost her memory of it), she has been thrown from a helicopter. What is missing here is not only what is not remembered but an understanding of precisely how she survives both the devastating impact of the fall as well as the devastating impact of exclusionary stories, “Non-History” that has sought to erase her, but she does survive, and unlike Elias she retains a deep understanding of who she is. If Elias offers a partial allegory of the experience of others coming to Australia from elsewhere, Hope’s fall and survival offers a partial allegory of Aboriginal Australians who persist as Aboriginal Australians despite the disruptions and violence enacted upon them. She can still feel the stories; even if all the knowledge of relations has been disrupted, they remain inherent in the land and the sea that surrounds it and they can be accessed via dreams. We see this at the end of the novel when she turns from Norm to find Will. Whereas Norm makes his way back to Desperance following the stars, but following them in the manner of European mariners,

using Western understandings and Western names for the stars (though he knows both Western and Aboriginal traditions), Hope follows her intuition, which in turn is fed by the feelings of the place, which manifest in the groopers who lead her out to sea.

## References

- Castro-Koshy, E. (2018). The poetics of relation in *Carpentaria*. In L. Ng (Ed.), *Indigenous transnationalism: Essays on Carpentaria* (pp. 79–90). Sydney: Giramondo.
- Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of relation* (B. Wing, Trans.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Minter, P. (2018). Rubbish places, islands of junk: On the function of tropes of pollution in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. In L. Ng (Ed.), *Indigenous Transnationalism: Essays on Carpentaria* (pp. 121–134). Sydney: Giramondo.
- Ng, L. (2018). An abundance of waste: *Carpentaria's* revaluation of excess. In L. Ng (Ed.), *Indigenous transnationalism: Essays on Carpentaria* (pp. 108–120). Sydney: Giramondo.
- Nunn, P. D. & Reid N. J. (2016). Aboriginal memories of in-undation of the Australian coast dating from more than 7000 years ago. *Australian Geographer*, 47(1), 11–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2015.1077539>
- O'Brien, K. (2007). Alexis Wright interview. *Hecate*, 33(1), 215–219. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/ielapa.200710737>
- San Roque, C. (2006). On “Tjukurrpa”, painting up, and bu-ildin g thought. *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, 50(2), 148–172. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.590522792919029>
- Simondon, G. (2020). *Individuation in light of notions of form and information, Vol. 1* (T. Adkins, Trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Strehlow, T. G. H. (1971). *Songs of central Australia*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson.
- Wright, A. (2006). *Carpentaria*. Sydney: Giramondo.
- Wright, A. (2017). *Tracker*. Sydney: Giramondo.
- Wright, A. (2018). On writing *Carpentaria*. In L. Ng (Ed.), *Indigenous transnationalism: Essays on Carpentaria* (pp. 140–150). Sydney: Giramondo.
- Wright, A. (2021a). Broken sense of place. In N. Jose, & B. Madden (Eds.), *Antipodean China*. Sydney: Giramondo. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=wF4kEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT244&dq=Antipodean+China&hl=zh-CN&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiM0IDE9e34AhVIKkQIHd4iDLQQ6AF6BAgJEA#v=onepage&q=Antipodean%20China&f=false>
- Wright, A. (2021b). “Like the thunder”. In N. Jose, & B. Madden (Eds.), *Antipodean China*. Sydney: Giramondo. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=wF4kEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT244&dq=Antipodean+China&hl=zh-CN&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiM0IDE9e34AhVIKkQIHd4iDLQQ6AF6BAgJEA#v=onepage&q=Antipodean%20China&f=false>
- Wright, A. (2021c). Rewriting to reclaim ourselves. In N. Jose, & B. Madden (Eds.), *Antipodean China*. Sydney: Giramondo. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=wF4kEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT244&dq=Antipodean+China&hl=zh-CN&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiM0IDE9e34AhVIKkQIHd4iDLQQ6AF6BAgJEA#v=onepage&q=Antipodean%20China&f=false>
- Wright, A. (2021d). Sovereignty of mind. In N. Jose, & B. Madden (Eds.), *Antipodean China*. Sydney: Giramondo. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=wF4kEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT244&dq=Antipodean+China&hl=zh-CN&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiM0IDE9e34AhVIKkQIHd4iDLQQ6AF6BAgJEA#v=onepage&q=Antipodean%20China&f=false>
- Wright, A. (2021e). The power of story. In N. Jose, & B. Madden (Eds.), *Antipodean China*. Sydney: Giramondo. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com/books?id=wF4kEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT244&dq=Antipodean+China&hl=zh-CN&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiM0IDE9e34AhVIKkQIHd4iDLQQ6AF6BAgJEA#v=onepage&q=Antipodean%20China&f=false>