

Indigenous Transnationalism: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

Edited by Lynda Ng

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IT MUST HAVE BEEN DIFFICULT TO COLLECT ACADEMIC ESSAYS ON A NOVEL RECEIVED WITH SUCH A wide range of reactions as Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*. This applies to many books, but Wright's case is remarkable. It took a while for Australians and the global readership to warm up to a 500-plus-page story about the uneasy relations between Indigenous and white culture in Australia's Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Queensland. With sales and reprints pointing to the literary exceptionalism of Wright's second novel, one may be surprised that Australia's major publishing houses rejected the book; only for the small literary house of Giramondo to publish a milestone of Australian Literature in 2006. In their own ways, the invited contributions to *Indigenous Transnationalism* explain why that is.

Ng's introduction is concise and to the point. Working from the perspective of relevant key issues and concepts in transnationalism and transnational literary studies, she lays out how the critical essays are assembled to analyse *Carpentaria's* impact on the literary establishment from different national perspectives. This is motivated by current debates about the world's division into zones of coloniality with 'the civilized explorer who brings modernity to the locally bound objects of Western inquiry' (3), and decolonising forces speaking to charged questions of cultural oppression and race. Ng rightfully highlights the value of gathering a diverse group of voices from varied academic and cultural backgrounds. It resonates with the complexity of border-crossing themes and boundary-subverting Aboriginal experiences in the world of *Carpentaria*. Given the diversity of contributions and how extensively they engage the plot, a short summary of the key points in Wright's story would have been helpful for readers to follow along the path chartered by Ng's division of the chapters across three sections dealing with space, the crossing of borders and boundaries, and ecocriticism.

Section one, 'Localities and Limits of the Land', opens with Russel West-Pavlow's 'The Geo-Graphics of an Indigenous World Literature in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*'. As do the other two contributors to this section, West-Pavlow argues convincingly for a lens of space to read Indigenous fiction. It reveals the artistry Wright employs to interrogate dominant ways of reading books and ascribing world status to them. After all, the logic of literary criticism still turns on established nation-space-literature paradigms. While at times the clarity of this argument is lost in dense prose and anecdotal references, West-Pavlow offers useful examples to posit that national contexts for the reception of books like *Carpentaria* fail to grasp its achievement to create an alternative world-space-literature concept. He shows up the crisis of knowing Self and Other only through national knowledge traditions, drawing on British newspaper reviews of Wright's book right after its publication. West-Pavlow proposes that *Carpentaria*'s 'story pathways' (26) showcase the impressive feat of Indigenous literature to conceive of itself as World Literature. It rediscovers itself through Indigenous rituals combining meaning and space. For an efficient illustration of this, West-Pavlow cites the practice of chanting narratives through time, land, water, and creation mythology.

In Wright's book, as Nicholas Birns suggests in 'The Notions of Permanence: Autochthony, Indigeneity, Locality in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*', this is akin to dismantling traditional white borders which have constrained Australian Indigenous storytelling. Birns quotes T. S. Eliot's poem *East Coker* in an attempt to locate tropes of destructive land transformation and Indigenous people's attitudes for each other due to white intrusion in Wright's Australian story. Also included in the references, but not worked into the text itself more extensively, just as in West-Pavlow's chapter, the mention of Colin Thomas Johnson / Mudrooroo's work suggests that Birns sees political literary activism emerging from the local as a cornerstone for his discussion of Indigenous self-understanding in *Carpentaria*. To anchor the analysis in spatial theorems, he uses the concept of 'autochthony' as derived from the Greek and meaning 'of its own ground' (58). In doing so, Birns runs the gamut of meaning, from situating Wright's Indigenous characters as those whose identity comes from the *ground* (both land and sea) stolen from them to the political *ground* they gain from resisting white culture's dominance.

This connects Birns' argument about shifting power relationships in Wright's book between minority fringe and majority centre to Lars Jensen's 'Polarized Postcolonial Indigeneities: *Carpentaria* and *Heart of Light*'. In his chapter, Jensen contends that *Carpentaria* offers readers a formula for how to counter the neoliberal order through Wright's powerful figuration of land and locality. Jensen ends the section on space by comparing *Carpentaria* in a global Indigenous context to the Greenlandic film *Heart of Light*. According to Jensen, both cultural texts

inform audiences about a crisis of the local and how an external order was imposed on Indigenous communities in Australia and Greenland respectively. Despite the equation of book with film as text not being made quite clear, his method serves Jensen well to reflect on what stories like *Carpentaria* 'offer an audience outside Australia' (75), namely a critique of out-of-sight-out-of-mind mentalities for neoliberal profit and how Indigenous cultures can deal with colonial oppression in the present.

In section two, 'Transnational Flows', Anne Heith discusses *Carpentaria* alongside a lyrical Indigenous Sámi text in 'Indigeneity and Whiteness: Reading *Carpentaria* and *The Sun, My Father* in the Context of Globalization'. The motivation for this being both authors' Indigenous descent, Heith explains further that Sámi writer Nils-Aslak Valkeapää and Wright both face the issue of not fitting into established minority and majority paradigms of a World Literature market dominated by the English language and Whiteness. While she illustrates this with fitting examples of Sámi linguistics in Valkeapää's text, the discussion of Wright's first nation Waanyi background and Indigenous language remains underdeveloped. Nevertheless, using Sámi cultural practices such as joik chanting and shamanism as mirror images of *Carpentaria*'s Indigeneity allows Heith to place Wright elegantly in a wider and desperately needed coordinate system of Indigenous authorship.

Estelle Castro-Koshy's 'The Poetics of Relation in *Carpentaria*' develops an argument similar to Heith's in favour of literary decolonisation by relating Indigenous stories to each other. This—and here Castro-Koshy follows Edouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*—involves the overstepping of boundaries, including a text's language and historical contextuality to unite readers across nations into a 'global audience' (118)—the latter being usually profoundly problematic to accomplish due to the coloniser's interference in an Indigenous community's external perception. Although dominated by the France-Paris axiom, Castro-Koshy's account of Wright's reception in French newspapers and blogs is helpful to apply her theoretical claims to actual reality. She offers a brief history of Francophone interest in Australian Indigenous authors and how Wright is being discovered by French editors before moving on to the role of storytelling and memory. The thrust of the argument about relating identity through literature places oral cultural tradition and language in the centre of Castro-Koshy's focus on Indigenous renewal and how Wright manages to destabilise yet anchor in a local setting an Aboriginal story of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

Sei Kosugi's 'Survival, Environment and Creativity in a Global Age: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*' concludes the second section with a detailed case study on relatability. The chapter could have been placed in section three for its discussion of how Wright strikes a precarious balance between detailing Australian locality and advocating for a 'pan-Indigenous and planetary' (138) ecocriticism. Yet, it is

easy to see how a profound investigation of *Carpentaria*'s qualities as a locus of global themes like the aesthetics of survival and environmental recovery contributes to the understanding of transnational flows between an Indigenous Australian text and Japanese readers. Kosgui's generous excerpts from Wright's novel are aptly chosen and placed well. Their use helps her explain why the trope of nuclear materials mining in Australia at the cost of Indigenous land rights and cultural heritage resonates with Japan's long history of ecological dystopia and disaster recovery fictions. In this context, Kosgui's analysis is perhaps one of the book's most accessible contributions, grounded in a discourse of survival as displayed by a resilience study of Wright's characters.

Section three, 'Waste, Pollution and Regeneration', takes up the issue of ecocriticism through the prism of Indigenous identities and a colonial culture of disposable waste. It is a timely approach, so much so that one could call Lynda Ng's 'An Abundance of Waste: *Carpentaria*'s Re-Evaluation of Excess' a contemporary study of ecocritical transnationalism in a country priding itself on scenic landscapes and settler society stories about pristine wilderness. Ng uses Wright's fictional town of Desperance's spatial design to show how this is Australia's long-held myth, as majority society discards Indigenous culture and moves it outside of its domain like trash going to the landfill. White governance of life in *Carpentaria*, Ng argues justifiably, is binary and oppositional. In contrast, Wright's Indigenous characters see material objects as many-lived things with functions so varied that they never really are useless or should be discarded in a culture of excess.

Peter Minter extends Ng's reflections on waste communities and cultural contamination in 'Rubbish Palaces, Islands of Junk: On the Function of Tropes of Pollution in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*'. The Island of Junk in Wright's book is central to his argument. As white characters discard items, Indigenous characters collect them from the waste site, bringing new life to what was never without value. The discarded things just had to be re-thought, composted to grow a multitude of new life from old. This intriguing approach to *Carpentaria* undoes the idea that purity equals vitality and that the discarded, blamed as harmful pollutant, may never be reabsorbed into the body of social. And while the chapter's combination of academic writing and poetic prose at times seems as 'alchemical' (196) as the core of Minter's study, its strong sense of productive '*naturphilosophie*' (193) prevails. It reveals Wright's objects as real, narrated, and imbued with lyrical meaning and philosophical afterlife by the collective of users in a culture of the imagined and the real. Where those two poles intersect, Minter indicates, an interface between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginality forms.

Ultimately, the eight main chapters gathered in *Indigenous Transnationalism* open up complex questions about how Wright's epic narrative functions and what its colourful cast of Indigenous and white Australian characters represent. The extent

to which they succeed in framing Wright's creation of a literary place for the oral tradition of storytelling in Aboriginal Australia is indicative of the research already done and the work needed in future to articulate interpretations of Indigeneity through transnational frameworks. The editorial note by Ng, the afterword by Wiradjuri writer and academic Jeanine Leane, and a republished piece by Wright herself add helpful guideposts along the way. Together, all these parts can be read as an exciting foray into the meaning of *Carpentaria*: for scholars, for general readers, and for the place of Indigenous writers in the cultural apparatus that is World Literature.

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