

**Motifs**

ISSN : 2726-0399

6 | 2022

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*: "A self-governing literature that belongs to place"

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## Epic, Trauma, and Affective Practice in *Carpentaria*

Meera Atkinson

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🔗 <https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=866>

DOI : 10.56078/motifs.866

### Référence électronique

Meera Atkinson, « Epic, Trauma, and Affective Practice in *Carpentaria* », *Motifs* [En ligne], 6 | 2022, mis en ligne le 19 décembre 2022, consulté le 10 février 2023.

URL : <https://motifs.pergola-publications.fr/index.php?id=866>

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# Epic, Trauma, and Affective Practice in *Carpentaria*

Meera Atkinson

## PLAN

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## TEXTE

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- 1 Trauma is trending, but Indigenous researchers like Professor Chelsea Watego have critiqued the way intergenerational trauma is cited by some white scholars and commentators in ways that pity and pathologise Indigenous experience and communities while failing to acknowledge the actively traumatising violence of the settler-colonial nation-state. Watego tweeted from her public account: “really over intergenerational trauma discourse. It’s unrelenting colonial violence is what it is.” Dr Tess Ryan replied to Watego from her public account: “It seems to have become something many have hung their hat on. It paints mob into a corner and denies excellence<sup>1</sup>.”
- 2 *Carpentaria*<sup>2</sup> does the vital work of testifying to transgenerational trauma as colonial violence *and* asserting excellence. Wright does this by rejecting the common individualistic, apolitical casting of trauma to create a profoundly layered, experimental narrative that commemorates survival and culture while tracking the consequences of a multinational mining company setting up operations on sacred land.
- 3 *Carpentaria* depicts Aboriginal people and communities as more than traumatised; its characters are complex, eccentric, passionate, and funny. The humour in the book, I argue, does crucial work testifying to trauma by showing how challenges are met with moxie and ingenuity in many Aboriginal communities. In this way, humour plays a critical role in pushing back against racial trauma. The novel is fre-

quently referred to as incorporating mysticism or magic realism, but as Dr Jeanine Leane proposes, “Aboriginal realism” is a more apt description that emphasises decentring the Western worldview inherent to “magic realism”<sup>3</sup>. Aboriginal resistance has never ceased on land never ceded, and *Carpentaria* takes us into the heart of this struggle in a way that not only addresses “all times”<sup>4</sup>, as Wright puts it, but that also shows all realities. In other words, it asserts the realities of lived Aboriginal experience past and present in the context of a nation-state in which settler-colonial experience operates as the dominant narrative.

- 4 As I aim to show, while *Carpentaria* seems to be an anti-epic in its refusal of the idealised heroism and mono-nationalism of the classical epic, it can be more accurately described as an anti-colonial epic. The word epic originally referred to the cycle of an oral tradition and came from the ancient Greek word meaning word, story, poem. The epic was originally associated with mythical narrative poems such as Homer’s *the Iliad and the Odyssey*<sup>5</sup>, estimated to have been composed around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. The results of a Google search for “the first oral epic narrative” indicates that the first recognised epic is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*<sup>6</sup>, written c.2500-1300, before the Christian era, in an ancient region of Iraq. The ancient Indian *Mahabharata*<sup>7</sup> (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC-3<sup>rd</sup> century AD) is also given an honourable mention as an early example and the longest epic ever written. There is no mention of the rich Aboriginal oral tradition that gave rise to the Dreaming creation myths, epic in proportion if not in the traditional Western conception of the epic, yet these stories were on Wright’s mind during the writing of the book. In an interview with Kerry O’Brien, she said:

We come from a long history and association in this country, 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<sup>8</sup>.

- 5 I aim to show that Wright, draws on that tradition, fashioning a unique mode of epic that refuses the terms of the classic epic, constituted as “fictionalised versions of important past events” foregrounding “people who have become semi-legendary”<sup>9</sup>.

## Racial trauma, cyclical haunting, and posthuman trauma

- 6 Critical race theory (CRT) views race as a social construct, as a dominant discourse that significantly influences social organisation and has dire consequences for people of colour. CRT holds that racism is the norm; it is everywhere; a daily occurrence for many people of colour. It serves a purpose, and white people benefit materially from it. A central tenet is that there is no unitary black identity and intersectionality (the argument that other aspects of identity such as gender and class can compound and complicate racism), first explicated by Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>10</sup>, should be considered when assessing the impact of racism. Wright's fictional world-building reflects all this.
- 7 *Carpentaria* is rife with Indigenous in-fighting among the “poor old Pricklebush people” (p. 22) who have been living dispossessed for decades near a rubbish dump. Wright says, “people who had been getting on well, living side by side for decades, started to recall tribal battles from the ancient past” (p. 25), but some of the conflict and dysfunction stems less from the ancient past and more from stresses of racism and poverty. Racial trauma describes a chronic form of traumatic stress resulting from “individual, institutional, and cultural encounters with racism and racial discrimination” that negatively affect people's mental and physical health<sup>11</sup>. Wright depicts this playing out in destructive dynamics in the Pricklebush community, against the tenacious binding of cultural knowledge and familial and friendship love. For example, the women of the community frequently turn on Norm's wife, Angel Day, accusing her of selfishness in her dump shopping (p. 17) while at the same time viewing her as “magical” and diseased as a result of foraging among white people's garbage (p. 16). Racial trauma is distinguished from classic Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); it bears a closer resemblance to Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), a more pernicious traumatic injury related to chronic exposure to traumatic experience. Judith Herman, who coined the term<sup>12</sup>, asserts that shame and significant impairment of interpersonal skills is pronounced in CPTSD. While research on racial trauma is still emergent, it is reasonable to expect a similar

finding in relation to Race-Based Traumatic Stress. In this sense, racist abuse and exploitation and traumatic shame are socially situated and structured and perpetuated by historical and continuing social inequities. Allegory and metaphors showing this in play abound in *Carpentaria*, such as in the above example of Angel's scavenging and communal attitudes toward it.

- 8 I previously introduced the term cyclical haunting in *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*<sup>13</sup> to describe the feed-back loop between individual, familial, and collective trauma transmissions. My conception is based on Jacques Derrida's thinking on hauntology, which he posits as some aspect of public life that is "neither living nor dead, present or absent",<sup>14</sup> marking the "site of vacillating certainty and possibility"<sup>15</sup>. Wright's statement that she could "find no reason to write history, in the sense of drawing on historical incident, when all times are important and unresolved"<sup>16</sup> is pointedly resonant with Derrida's notion of hauntology.
- 9 I argued that a cyclically haunted poetics of transgenerational trauma serves as political account rather than a mere tale of trauma or fictional narrative<sup>17</sup>. Wright's embodied racial trauma informs *Carpentaria*. Wright shows how old cultural knowledge and ancient Aboriginal cultural practices come up against what Aileen Moreton-Robinson calls the "possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty"<sup>18</sup>. This is most evident in the way the Pricklebush community are affected by the business of the mine.
- 10 Cyclical haunting is fuelled by traumatic affect, which I understand to be psychic trauma bound to embodied affect circulating "in and between assemblages"<sup>19</sup>, in and between individuals and collectives. Michael Richardson and I have also defined traumatic affect as "the mode, substance, and dynamics of relation through which trauma is experienced, transmitted, conveyed, and represented"<sup>20</sup>. It is palpable when Wright writes that "old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here" (p. 11), and of "those whose fractured spirit cried of rape, murder and the pillage of their traditional lands" (p. 26) and the "up-to-no-good Mission-bred kids" who "accidentally hanged Cry-baby Sally" (p. 2).

- 11 Talking to Kerry O'Brien, Wright disclosed a painful event in her family history. Her great-grandmother and another girl were stolen by an infamous pastoralist linked to the massacres of Indigenous people that might have included members of her own family. In gesturing towards such deep wounds and wrongs in the fictionalised *Desperance*, Wright demands an ethical reckoning, challenging what Professor Colin Tatz refers to as the "wilful amnesia" of non-Indigenous Australians<sup>21</sup>. *Carpentaria* speaks to the Aboriginal community and invites non-Indigenous people to step out of ignorance, be more curious, open, educated, and humbler. It confronts white readers with the limitations and damage of the white-centred national ideal forged and forced by settler-ancestors, revealing a timeless rootedness in country we could, were we collectively willing, learn and prosper from. Wright suggests as much when she opens Chapter 2 with the following lines:

ONE EVENING IN THE DRIEST GRASSES IN THE WORLD, A CHILD WHO WAS NO STRANGER TO HER PEOPLE, ASKED IF ANYONE COULD FIND HOPE. THE PEOPLE OF PARABLE AND PROPHECY PONDERED WHAT WAS HOPELESS AND FINALLY DECLARED THAT THEY NO LONGER KNEW WHAT HOPE WAS. THE CLOCKS, TICK-A-TY TOCK, LOOKED AS THOUGH THEY MIGHT RUN OUT OF TIME. LUCKILY, THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK WERE LISTENING AND SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN. (p. 12, capital letters in original)

- 12 Gabriele Schwab maintains that stories have heightened potential to "carry" transgenerational trauma<sup>22</sup> stating that "writing from within the core of trauma is a constant struggle between the colonizing power of words and the revolt of what is being rejected, silenced<sup>23</sup>". Wright's novel confirms this, but it also resists what Diane Molloy refers to as the framing of a "history of dispossession and marginalisation that so often defines Aboriginal people as silent and passive victims<sup>24</sup>". Challenging the humanism of most literary trauma testimony, Wright shows nonhuman individuals and communities devastated by human activity and the suffering of the land. At the end of the novel, when Norm and Bala return to *Desperance* after the cyclone, they find it destroyed and desolate. The only living beings they encounter are "bony, hollow-ribbed, abandoned dogs" dogs so traumatised they are "speechless, dumbfounded, unable to crack a bark. Un-

able to emit a sound out of their wide-opened mouths” (p. 498). And in Chapter 8, Wright depicts ruthless capitalist brutality in a gut-wrenching scene in which white fishermen chop chunks of flesh off a live groper winched onto the sand (p. 238). Wright contests what intersectionality scholar Patricia Hill Collins<sup>25</sup> refers to as socially constructed hierarchies that discriminate based on gender, race, species, etc. She witnesses to these hierarchies and the process of their naturalisation by showing how colonialism disposed Aboriginal people and how the settler-colonial state continues to do so. In doing so, she depicts both racial trauma and Aboriginal resistance and self-determination. Such witnessing is a necessary step to transforming society into one of equity, justice, compassion, and sustainability.

## Anti-colonial epic trauma

- 13 Sneharika Roy<sup>26</sup> lauds the epic’s “rich potential to articulate post-imperial concerns with nation and migration across the Global North/South Divide” (n.p.). I shy away from terms like “subaltern”, the “Global South”, and even the term “postcolonial” when discussing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander literature for reasons I will explain later. As Wright says:

While writers are storytellers who work in the world of mythmaking, so too are the academics who study our works [...] I am not sure if those people who are meant to be placed in one classification or another in a planetary divide have simply been classified for the benefit of the classifiers<sup>27</sup>.

- 14 Roy acknowledges the seeming incredulity of the postcolonial epic proposition when she states:

On the one hand the epic is perhaps *too compatible* with postcolonial literature: the genre’s specific preoccupation with history, territory and identity are themes that are so ubiquitous in postcolonial studies as to make epic form almost redundant. Yet, paradoxically, the epic tends to be regarded “as the genre of imperial authority *par excellence*, [and] is viewed as *inherently incompatible* with the postcolonial agenda of critically reappraising colonialism and its aftermath” (emphasis in original)<sup>28</sup>.

- 15 Thus, Roy confines her use of the term epic “to those manifestations with an explicitly political scope dealing with a historical, mythical or, most often, euhemeristic past (myth cast as history)<sup>29</sup>”.

[This] enables Roy to operate within a complex world of paradoxical relations; this subgenre offers a space for articulating histories and counter-histories, nations and counter-nations—all of which provide the basis for the postcolonial epic<sup>30</sup>.

- 16 Roy cites Bakhtin’s materialist, somewhat Marxist engagement with language as the basis for his claim that the contemporary novel is “a subversive, many-voiced ‘dialogic’ form of the ever-becoming present in negative opposition to the [classical] ‘monological epic.’” The traditional epic is set in a fixed, inaccessible past and driven by a “conservative vocation” to “reinforce political authority<sup>31</sup>”.

- 17 Roy makes a case for three modes of postcolonial epic novel: epic imagery, genealogy, and ekphrasis; in my view, the first two modes combine in *Carpentaria* to testify to epic trauma. It is my sense that reading Wright for epic imagery in terms of metaphor is, at least for a non-Indigenous scholar, a dangerous and problematic enterprise since our understanding of Aboriginal realism is limited by insufficient cultural knowledge. In other words, it is sometimes difficult for a scholar like me to identify what is and what is not metaphor in Wright’s work. As Innes notes:

the epic developed out of a communal impetus to cultural memory before it became a written form. The verbal and performative elements play off against the literary in different ways for different cultures, and therefore historical precision needs to be applied to individual epic texts in order to avoid generalisation<sup>32</sup>.

- 18 It would be a misstep to automatically read nonhuman animals in Wright’s work as metaphor, which a Western scholar coming from a traditional literary criticism foundation would tend to do by, for example, assuming the black swans in *The Swan Book*<sup>33</sup> are a metaphor for Aboriginal people. But to the degree that Wright does employ simile, metaphor, allegory etc., *Carpentaria* destabilises “hegemonic systems of signification and problematise the differential, fragmented ‘realities’ of historical experience across divides of power, culture,



space and time<sup>34</sup> through the use of Aboriginal English and Aboriginal realism, such as in the surreal scene in Chapter 8, “Norm’s Responsibility”, in which Norm goes out to sea in inclement weather (pp. 219-263).

- 19 Roy’s insistence that “postcolonial epic shifts our attention from physical violence to a double-edged rhetorical violence that serves to both elevate its subaltern characters to the proportions of epic and expose the fault lines of the postcolonial project of nationalist identity-construction<sup>35</sup>” rings bells of recognition. Roy speaks of writing that collapses the boundary between the magical and the real via a depiction of the supernatural as “matter-of-fact”. She states that Amitav Ghosh neglects “the form of magical realism” while retaining its core function “to juxtapose the incommensurable ‘realities’ of the colonisers and the colonised so that the (Eurocentric) terms on which reality is defined is called into question<sup>36</sup>”. Wright does similar work, not by retaining the core function of magic realism, but by writing Aboriginal realism. As Roy puts it, “postcolonial tropes periodically supplant the diegetic reality of the text, calling into question the Eurocentric or nationalist criteria according to which a normative version of ‘reality’ was established in the first place<sup>37</sup>”. This is, I want to suggest, not merely a postcolonial move in the case of Wright, but an anti-colonial one in terms of proclaiming intellectual sovereignty. Observe the opening lines:

A NATION CHANTS, BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY.  
THE BELLS PEAL EVERYWHERE.  
CHURCH BELLS CALLING THE FAITHFUL TO THE TABERNACLE WHERE THE GATES OF  
HEAVEN WILL OPEN, BUT NOT FOR THE WICKED. CALLING INNOCENT LITTLE BLACK  
GIRLS FROM A DISTANT COMMUNITY WHERE THE WHITE DOVE BEARING AN OLIVE  
BRANCH NEVER LANDS. LITTLE GIRLS WHO COME BACK HOME AFTER CHURCH ON  
SUNDAY, WHO LOOK AROUND THEMSELVES AT THE HUMAN FALLOUT AND ANNOUNCE  
MATTER-OF-FACTLY, ARMAGEDDON BEGINS HERE. (p. 1)

- 20 This is the magic Wright weaves with her mashing of words and concepts and knowledges born in different, and seemingly irreconcilable realities: the postcolonial trope of Christian worship, the little black girls ghosted by the failing white dove metaphor, the italics that trouble and undermine the colonial project.

- 21 I prefaced my monograph analysis of *Carpentaria* with an acknowledgment that

[The term] “postcolonialism’ is most often understood as a field of study in which the legacies of imperialism and colonialism are analyzed in literature or other cultural productions” while the “postcolonial era” describes a period following “formal colonialism in which its effects are still being felt and/or enacted”<sup>38</sup>.

- 22 I define *Carpentaria* as an anti-colonial epic rather than postcolonial epic for several reasons. The term postcolonialism has always been fraught and contested. As Paul Brains says, “some critics argue that the term misleadingly implies that colonialism is over when in fact most of the nations involved are still culturally and economically subordinated to the rich industrial states through various forms of neo-colonialism”<sup>39</sup>. Brains also notes that “this way of defining a whole era is Eurocentric, that it singles out the colonial experience as the most important fact about the countries involved”<sup>40</sup>. Chelsea Watego side-eyes the term postcolonialism in the Australian context when she says that “we have yet to reach our postcolonial moment in this country”<sup>41</sup>.
- 23 The term “anticolonialism” broadly refers to a commitment to the revolutionary “struggle against imperial rule in colonized countries”<sup>42</sup>. It has been historically linked to nationalist independent movements, which is not applicable to Wright’s work on the face of it, but I suggest that the term “anti-colonial” might be more fitting than “postcolonial” for literary works like *Carpentaria* emerging from within a vibrant field of contemporary Aboriginal activism and a long history of resistance. While Wright does not suggest she imagines an overthrow of the neocolonial nation-state government as a realistic objective, she does proclaim Aboriginal sovereignty and stage an argument for land rights. The figure of Will Phantom, the activist son of patriarch and lovable, maladjusted Norm, tries to protect sacred land from the imperial domination of multi-national corporate expansion. He embodies the “genuine anti-racist praxis” Chelsea Watego champions as foregrounding “Black power via Indigenous sovereignty in embodying the ideologies of the ‘burn it down’ and ‘I am not the problem’ kind articulated by Tarneen Onus-Williams and Aunty Rosalie Kunoth-Monks”<sup>43</sup>. At the same time Wright makes clear the limits and nu-

ances of such a position in the context of settler-colonialism by casting Will off on an island of refuse, unable to claim his sovereign land, in the end. *Carpentaria* is also anti-colonial in that it “Black writing has interrupted the unquestioned privilege of whites to represent non-whites in Australia<sup>44</sup>”. And it is anti-colonial in the sense that, as Cornelis Marten Renes argues, it stages a cross-cultural intervention “across Indigenous and European genres and epistemologies” that calls for “the deconstruction of colonial discourse, for an invigorating Indigenous inscription into country, and for intellectual sovereignty as the condition *sine-qua-non* for the Indigenous community to move forward<sup>45</sup>”.

24 Wright’s anti-colonialism is less aligned with the traditional independence movement and more aligned with the forsaking of hope in favour of what Watego refers to as “a trading in truth-telling that is foundational to our survival.” She goes on to assert that “accepting the truth of the limitations of this place offers us far more promise than hope ever has<sup>46</sup>”. Accepting the truth of “Australia” means acknowledging its traumatic roots. As I have previously argued, Australia is a crime scene in which the “colonised national ideal” routinely elevates Anglo settlers and their descendants over First Nations peoples and other people of colour “via social and institutional structuring and circulations of attitudes, affects, and discourses that promote Australia’s national identity as a white Western nation<sup>47</sup>”. This is foundational racism that repeatedly reinscribes the erasure of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Watego, speaking of another anti-colonial literary and scholarly giant, says that “Fanon describes the effects of colonial violence upon the colonised as a kind of breathlessness, a breathing that is overserved, occupied, in what he calls ‘combat breathing<sup>48</sup>’”. Angel’s scavenging has this breathless quality. Caught in a storm out at sea, Norm wakes “startled by a breathless sensation of drowning in his dreams” (p. 257) and Will’s struggle to survive the cyclone has this quality. This life-threatening breathlessness is racial trauma, and Wright’s anti-colonial epic testimony to it can, therefore, be understood as the writing of epic trauma.

25 The epic trauma in the book is not limited to a focus on the invasion and its ongoing legacy. Wright also testifies to the trauma of ecological crises. As Nonie Sharp identified in a review, Wright weaves “an

epic on several planes that knits together meanings” to create “a powerful allegory for our times: the Earth’s retaliation in Gaia-like fashion, responding to the deep tramping marks of our footprints on the climate, on the places of both land and water<sup>49</sup>”. Wright confirmed this in an interview when she referred to the novel as “an old saga” that mines “the everyday Indigenous story world”, which she describes as “epic” in that it draws on “the laws, customs and values of our culture” as well as “epic stories of historical events<sup>50</sup>”. As Renes insightfully notes, in sum, this “works toward closing the hierarchical Eurocentric gap between the oral and written, tradition and modernity, nature and human, fact and fiction, past and present, story and history”, and it does this through “inscription in a holistic cycle of destruction/renewal and life/death” and “strategic employment of Dreamtime tropes as well as Western ones<sup>51</sup>”.

- 26 Roy contends that genealogy, as a convention of the postcolonial epic, involves digressions that structure narrative temporality<sup>52</sup> and that this non-linear treatment of time refuses “forms of imperial or social determinisms” and advances “post-imperial programmes of political and cultural change<sup>53</sup>”. Postcolonial epic, Roy insists, features a “transnational political vision through hybrid intertextual genealogies that draw on indigenous and European cultural traditions<sup>54</sup>”. Wright speaks of her deep engagement with international literature—Irish, Mexican, Palestinian, and more—as well as her Chinese and Waanyi ancestry in connection with other language groups across the continent. She references Carlos Fuentes’s assertion that in Mexico “all times are important, and no time has ever been resolved<sup>55</sup>”. Wright is not only attending to the hauntology of an Indigenous “before” and an imperialist invasion “after” in the novel; she calls forth other erased times, people, and realities, such as when she writes about the “new Australians” and “dark-skinned foreigners” (p. 5) who lived around Pricklebush way in “the time before the motor car, when goods and chattels came up by camel train until Abdul and Abdullah, the old Afghan brothers” who mysteriously disappeared “along the track called the ‘lifeline’, connecting north to south” (p. 4). One of the great strengths of the writing is the use of free indirect discourse, a strategy that brings collective attitude to life so vividly in a third-person narrative voice. For example, when the camels turn up in the dead of night with no sign of Abdul and Abdullah, the towns

folk wake up with a start as the “ghosts with an Afghan smell, true God, just came straight in, levitating, taking over, helping themselves, walking around people’s home with no *mind youse*, not one shred of good manners whatsoever” (p. 5). The reference to “youse” is Australian slang and “true God” is commonly used in Aboriginal English.

- 27 The serial lack of clear resolutions in the novel, e.g., mysterious disappearances and unexplainable events, suggests the presence of trauma, which by its very nature is unresolved; what distinguishes traumatic experience from non-traumatic stress or distress is that it marks an event or events that occur so quickly, violently or threateningly as to overwhelm the nervous system and elude psychic registration. Thus, though it involves profound impact it is unavailable for processing in the usual ways experience is processed. Despite its tendency to occlusion and delayed symptomology, trauma tends to wreak havoc subjectively and collectively. Eminent trauma theorists like Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub have argued that trauma nevertheless demands witnessing and testimony and that “this narrative that *could not be articulated*” (italics in original) must be heard<sup>56</sup>. Wright’s experimental methodology is one way to bring traumatic inarticulation forth into the communicative realm. Her attention to evoking “all times” depicts hauntology, as a social legacy and, by extension, pre- as well as post-invasion cyclical haunting. Wright gestures throughout the novel to lingering traumas from times well before 1788:

The war of the dump burst apart the little world of the Phantoms and their related families. Everyone in the Pricklebush from elder to child, Eastsider to Westsider, injured and uninjured, started bringing up their faded memories of the ancient wars. (p. 30)

- 28 The epic trauma testimony of the novel is, therefore, not confined to witnessing to colonisation and the injustices of the settler-nation it created, but stretches further back to the traumatic reverberations of distant ancestors, highlighting the probability that history across all times and culture is bound to trauma.

## Humour and Affective Practice

- 29 Roy questions Bakhtin's assertion that "the epic and the comic are incompatible<sup>57</sup>", maintaining that: "It is precisely because laughter foregrounds 'inconsistency and tension'" in the representation of humanity "that it is crucial to postcolonial epic and serves its ambivalent purposes so well<sup>58</sup>". Humour is, then, key in Wright's anti-colonial epic trauma testimony and its expression of grief.
- 30 Wright identifies her overarching project as establishing a self-governing literature, noting the writing of *Carpentaria* was the result of "the deep sadness I felt about how we were left gutted from the huge fight undertaken by our people against the development of a massive mine on our country, and our concerns about the environmental destruction to some of its important living parts – non-human, the all-spiritual of our pristine country<sup>59</sup>". Her aim was to "try to achieve the highest standard in the art form of literary fiction, the practice of imagining" and that the "process of creating epic stories feels as though I am working in a form of alchemy<sup>60</sup>". Affect is crucial to Wright's project, as I aim to show in this section, and while deep sadness motivated the writing of the book, humour also plays a central role. Humour is not as unlikely a feature of trauma testimony as it may seem. Marjolein 't Hart states that "humorologists stress the role of jokes as a peculiar kind of communication strategy, peculiar due to the ambiguity of humour<sup>61</sup>". While Wright is not in the business of telling jokes as such, the humour in the book, whether overt or more subtle, can be viewed as a communication strategy that does specific work in the anti-colonial writing of epic and trauma.
- 31 Affect is the link between humour and trauma. Margaret Wetherell describes affective practice as focusing "on the emotional as it appears in social life" in a way that highlights "what participants do<sup>62</sup>". Or, in Fanny Gravel-Patry's terms, "affective practice is the way emotions appear in social life in their messy, eclectic and relational forms. Affect is not only grounded in material lives through bodily reactions, it is embodied meaning-making<sup>63</sup>". I aim to show how affect, manifesting as textual humour as well as traumatic grief, operates as embodied meaning-making in *Carpentaria*, and how this is crucial to Wright's epic trauma testimony (as well as her celebration of the long

heritage sustaining life in present-day Aboriginal communities). Affective practice is, Wetherell claims, a dynamic process in which “thinking and feeling are, in fact, social acts taking place through the manifold public and communal sources of language<sup>64</sup>”. Affect and feeling are bodily, but it is also representational and discursive. This has significant implications for a writer from the Waanji nation with Chinese heritage and a white cattleman father and for a book that foregrounds Aboriginal English as it examines “competing stories of nation”, in Demelza Hall’s words<sup>65</sup>.

32 Affect is generally understood as both a hardwired, biological, embodied experience *and* an operation that exceeds bodies, often referred to as virtual. In its hardwired, biological form, it is universal in that all human beings fundamentally experience the same range of biological manifestations, though the ways in which they are expressed, interpreted, and circulated vary depending on cultural and historical contexts (nonhuman beings also have hardwired, biological systems, albeit different kinds). The “trans” in my reference to transgenerational trauma encompasses, in Greg Seigworth’s words, “the virtual traversing of affective capacities and incapacities between bodies” and “the thoroughly ordinary way that feelings often come to adhere, getting handed down (and up and over), living on in matter and atmospheres, always more and other-than-human<sup>66</sup>”.

33 O’Brien asked Wright what she meant by a previous comment that she had inherited all the words left unsaid in her family, to which Wright replied:

It’s very hurtful for our family sometimes to talk about that history. And I think it gets passed down to the next generation through the following generations of not wanting to bring up hurtful things, hurtful things that happen to us even now, and the family will just say, ‘Let it go, don’t say anything’<sup>67</sup>.

34 Such intergenerational and embodied traumatic affect transmits between bodies, gets handed down, lives on in matter and atmosphere, gesturing toward what is unspeakable and outside language.

35 As Stephen Ahern says, though “the contours of affective phenomena are particularly difficult to discern” they “always encompass the virtual as well as the real”, expressing “potentiality in the process of be-

coming, even when actualized in a singular instance of body or art, flesh or fiction<sup>68</sup>. Both “real” and “virtual” affective contours are operative in the scene in which Norm buries Elias at sea. Attended by the “sea lady” (p. 253), an “industrious guardian angel of good sense” (p. 261) and “the devil woman Gardajala singing out from the bush” (p. 262), the line between sleep and wakefulness, surrealism, and meaning-making, past and present, human and nonhuman, body and environment, the deathliness of trauma and the presence of ancestry and tradition blurs. Affect has also been associated with the subaltern. For example, Stephen Morton cites Gayatri Spivak’s suggestion that the “European enlightenment concepts of reason, and the civilising rhetoric of imperialism, which draws on these concepts” forecloses affect<sup>69</sup>. And Kelly Oliver crucially argues that “affects move between bodies; colonization and oppression operate through depositing the unwanted affects of the dominant group onto those othered by that group in order to sustain its privileged position<sup>70</sup>”. All of this is tangibly at work in the novel.

- 36 Ankhi Mukherjee states that Western conceptions of trauma and the methods for addressing it “do not sufficiently declare self-interest or their entanglements in specific histories, geographies, or what David Scott terms ‘the conscripts of modernity<sup>71</sup>’. This harks back to Wat-ego’s point about the suspect way intergenerational trauma in Aboriginal communities is frequently cited by white commentators. Mukherjee goes on to say that the “designation of victimhood to the trauma sufferer forecloses the empowering potential of trauma<sup>72</sup>”. *Carpentaria* refuses this designation, painting a portrait of a people so much more than traumatised or resilient and a country in desperate need of reckoning and healing, while artistically enacting and realising the empowering potential of trauma. Though humour and laughter are not generally considered to be emotions, they are undoubtedly bound to affect, and not necessarily to the affect they are most associated with—joy. But Maggie Hennefeld has recently declared that laughter itself is a radical “affect that bridges the gap between feminist comedy studies and feminist affect theory<sup>73</sup>”. This is notable since feminist theory has traditionally focused on the so-called negative emotions—fear, shame, anger, sadness etc. —that jam “the wheels of the grinding feedback loop between bodily matter and structural power<sup>74</sup>”.



- 37 Humour is a complex operation, and it is, I argue, critical to Wright's epic trauma testimony in that it recognises the productive, positive, and empowering aspects of trauma and refuses the neocolonial casting of Aboriginal people as disempowered, one-dimensional victims. Jana Ščigulinská, citing Bakhtin's exaltation of laughter as that which liberates the laughter from a hopeless, burdensome situation, notes irony and humour as characteristic of postcolonial literature<sup>75</sup>, but this is not particularly useful in that it positions Wright's multifaceted work within a homogenous category. Ščigulinská's claim that the novel's humour amounts to "tears behind the laughter"<sup>76</sup> is simplistic; Wright does not write with the tears of a clown so much as a trauma survivor writer-warrior of resistance.
- 38 In a PhD thesis titled "The Role of Aboriginal Humour in Cultural Survival and Resistance," Pearl Duncan compellingly argues that "Irony, satire and parody have been strategies of resistance in a colonised and a postcolonising Australia" and that the humour in *Carpentaria* is "cathartic" (p. 114).<sup>77</sup> Duncan is a self-identified "Aboriginal researcher" using an ethnographic methodology that draws on lived experience "of how humour works in practice as well as in theory"<sup>78</sup>. She states that Wright "lampoons"<sup>79</sup> the police through the character of Truthful, the non-Indigenous cop. She goes on to discuss the violence many Aboriginal people, including Duncan's own family, experience at the hands of the police, showing how, in Anne Brewster's words, Wright "destabilizes whiteness"<sup>80</sup> through the humorous depiction of Truthful being blocked by a community who band together refusing to do each other in, regardless of internal conflict. If the claim to destabilizing whiteness in this instance is fuzzy, perhaps an assertion that the scene enacts the destabilizing of white authority is more convincing. Duncan also confirms Carole Ferrier's positing of burlesque humour in relation to many character names, including Truthful<sup>81</sup>. Humour can manifest hidden transcripts<sup>82</sup>. Jacqueline Bussie defines "tragic laughter" as laughter born of trauma that "interrupts the system and state of oppression, and creatively attests to hope, resistance, and protest in the face of the shattering of language and traditional frameworks of thought and belief" and a "mode of social critique"<sup>83</sup>. This describes the humour in the novel more accurately than Ščigulinská's conception of "gentle"<sup>84</sup> humour that merely masks sadness and pain (which risks falling into the victim-trap Wat-

ego rails against). Far from wishy-washy gentle, Wright's humour is clever, dark, biting, and bawdy by turns. Leaning into Bakhtin's vision of carnivalesque laughter with its "creative potential to upset the status quo" and "empower the disempowered"<sup>85</sup> as well as other theorists of humour, and discussing Toni Morrison's *Beloved*<sup>86</sup>, Bussie speaks of traumatic humour as a way of forging and enacting consciousness outside of the ideology of colonial oppression<sup>87</sup>.

39 Angel Day, as a character, is an interesting study on this front. Angel is a Medusa figure, diabolical and badly behaved in the eyes of many. She dares to think of herself as having worth in a world that would deny it. Her tenaciousness and determination to stay on the site she chose for a home "on top of the nest of a snake spirit" (p. 13), where she bore and raised children, sets the scene for her comedic marital mismatch with long-suffering Norm. Her fondness for the rubbish dump across the road, where she finds many a trash-treasure, is, of course, ironic, but it is also a literal testament to the resilience, fortitude, and resourcefulness of people criminally subjugated by a settler-colonial nation-state. Angel Day's palace has become so symbolic of this that the Brisbane Writers' Festival erected a homage to it in 2017, where a live performance based on the novel has been staged (the structure was re-erected, and the performance re-staged during the 2019 Brisbane Writers' Festival). Angel could be read as the "unruly woman" Hennefeld (after Kathleen Karlyn) identifies as representing the collective laughter of feminist comedy studies, her "merry antics" routinely upsetting people<sup>88</sup>, but at the risk of minimising her sometimes dangerously reckless behaviour. Hennefeld notes Brian Massumi's observation that laughter is powerful because of its tendency to interrupt situations that are ill-fitting<sup>89</sup>. Angel is a black woman in a settler-colonial state, and the world that state has built up around her does not fit.

40 Humorous free indirect discourse is foregrounded throughout Chapter 2, simply titled "Angel Day," with Angel's mocking derision in the face of various judgements and disapprovals and accentuated by single word exasperated exclamations such as "Well!", "Oh!", and "Goodness!" But this humour is underpinned by trauma suggested by lines such as:

This led them [the old Pricklebush people] to say privately that she had acquired a disease from making her life out of living in other people's rubbish. Who knew what kind of lurgies lurked in white trash? (p. 16)

- 41 and “the crease in between her eyebrows was deepening with the thought of her chaotic life” (p. 19). The chronic racial trauma all the Aboriginal characters in the novel experience is, for Angel and other women characters, complicated by gendered trauma. This plays out at several points but is perhaps most obvious toward the end of the novel when Angel, having been a passenger in a car travelling a highway littered with racist abuse such as “Kill all coons” (p. 432), is left to her fate and sits for a time alone in the abandoned car:

She considered the prospect of walking into town by herself. Walk into a town she did not know? Impossible, she answered herself. What an absurd thought. How could she walk into town? White people would stare at her. Who would help her? (pp. 434-435).

- 42 She then sets out on foot, walking “in her high heels” until she is offered a ride by truckers who “arrived out of hell” (p. 435), whereafter Angel “lived unhappily in a devilish place” (p. 436).
- 43 At that point, Angel's old community come to appreciate her feisty attempt to refuse the traumatic shame she had inherited and that the white world affirmed daily, coming to see her as “a sensation who dreamt far above the heads of other people” (p. 436). Through Angel and other characterisations, Wright demonstrates affective practice in that she shows how, to cite Wetherell, “Thinking and feeling are, in fact, social acts taking place through the manifold public and communal sources of language<sup>90</sup>”. The thinking and feeling expressed in the interactions between these characters and the scenes in which their lives play out are rooted both in trauma and in resilience, cultural rootedness, and resistance to the dark forces of colonisation and racism, and Wright's communication of humour does crucial work in communicating this tension.

## Conclusion

- 44 In my monograph, I argued that traumatic affect is how cyclical haunting proceeds, both in society and in writing, defining it as “affect that bears the characteristics of trauma comprising both these forms of intensity, more or less distinctly or entwined on a circular, or feeding back and forth, continuum<sup>91</sup>”. I presented cyclical haunting as essentially timeless because it marks the inability of experience to settle into the past, to be resolved.
- 45 In this article, I have discussed affect and humour as both an expression of this and of resistance and resilience. *Carpentaria* does not simply testify to colonial trauma; it testifies to pre- and post-invasion cyclical haunting, which involves a scope of epic proportions. It is also an anti-colonial epic in the postcolonial sense of the form that Roy attends to, one that enacts affective practice in its production and that reveals the affective practices of a fictional Aboriginal community that survives and often thrives in the face of systemic injustice and racial trauma.
- 46 I have previously spoken of literature that testifies to transgenerational trauma and cyclical haunting as the writing of “micro-macro traumatic memory,” “multigenerational political-ethical account” and a “political act, as covert, yet formidable political activism<sup>92</sup>”. It is clear from the text itself and from Wright’s commentary that this was, in part, the impetus of the project, which, fully realised, has earned its place as a contemporary classic by manifesting an anti-colonial epic that, drawing on Aboriginal knowledge and experience and literary innovation, departs radically from the classical epic.

## NOTES

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## RÉSUMÉS

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## English

This article draws on my concept of “cyclical haunting,” which describes the autonomous force of structural trauma in which traumatic transmissions feed into and out of individual and collective experience. I propose a new, related concept of “epic trauma” as the mode through which *Carpentaria* witnesses and testifies to historical trauma and its intergenerational transmissions. I argue that the spooked relationship between familial, community, and cultural-historical contexts in Wright’s masterpiece explicates pre-invasion relations circulating over time and across generations complicated by ingrained injustices, racist attitudes, and unethical Western practices and that Wright’s employment of the literary device of the (anti-colonial) epic is central to that project.

I also consider *Carpentaria* through a traumatic-affective practice lens, focussing on the role of humour in sustaining an essentially tragic epic narrative. Margaret Wetherell describes affective practice as “the emotional as it appears in social life” (*Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications, 2012, p. 4). Viewing the text in terms of affective practice and considering humour enables a more nuanced understanding of how Wright crafts her blend of trauma testimony, affective agency, spirited resistance, and sophisticated homage to Aboriginal cultural life, both traditional and contemporary.

## Français

Cet article s'inspire de mon concept de « hantise cyclique », qui décrit la force autonome du traumatisme structurel dans lequel les transmissions traumatiques à la fois alimentent et sont produites par l'expérience individuelle et collective. Je propose un nouveau concept connexe, celui de « traumatisme épique », comme le mode par lequel *Carpentaria* témoigne du traumatisme historique et de ses transmissions intergénérationnelles. Les rapports effrayants entre les contextes familiaux, communautaires et historico-culturels dans le chef-d'œuvre de Wright s'expliquent par le fait que les relations pré-coloniales qui circulent dans le temps et entre les générations sont compliquées par les injustices systémiques, les attitudes racistes et des pratiques occidentales contraires à l'éthique. L'utilisation par Wright du dispositif littéraire de l'épopée (anticoloniale) est donc au cœur du projet narratif.

Je considère également *Carpentaria* dans une optique de pratique affective traumatique, en me concentrant sur le rôle de l'humour dans l'élaboration d'un récit épique essentiellement tragique. Margaret Wetherell décrit la pratique affective comme « l'émotionnel tel qu'il apparaît dans la vie sociale » (*Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*, Los Angeles, SAGE Publications, 2012, p. 4). Envisager le texte en termes de pratique affective et considérer l'humour permet une compréhension plus nuancée de la façon dont Wright élabore son mélange de témoignage de traumatisme, d'agentivité des affects, de résistance fougueuse et d'hommage à la vie culturelle aborigène, à la fois traditionnelle et contemporaine.

## INDEX

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### **Mots-clés**

trauma, affect, trauma cyclique, trauma épique

### **Keywords**

trauma, affect, cyclical trauma, epic trauma

## AUTEUR

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**Meera Atkinson**

University of Sydney