

# “Disappearing Memory” and the Colonial Present in Recent Indigenous Women’s Writing

CAROLE FERRIER  
The University of Queensland

I did not want to write a historical novel even if Australia appears to be the land of disappearing memory . . . I have had to deal with history all of my life and I have seen so much happen in the contemporary indigenous world because of history, that all I wanted was to extract my total being from the colonising spider’s trap door. So, instead of picking my heart apart with all of the things crammed into my mind about a history which drags every Aboriginal person into the conquering grips of colonisation, I wanted to stare at difference right now, as it is happening, because I felt the urgency of its rule ticking in the heartbeat of the Gulf. (Wright, “On Writing *Carpentaria*” 90)

This paper will contextualise some significantly innovative women’s texts within the developing history of Indigenous women’s published writing since the 1960s, notably two novels—Vivienne Cleven’s *Her Sister’s Eye* (2002) and Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006).<sup>1</sup> It will do this by placing them within perspectives that other, mainly Indigenous, commentators have offered; by considering Indigenous people’s long negotiation with racialised and sexualised stereotypes of black women; by discussing what Indigenous people and others have suggested about postcoloniality and postcolonisation as a frame used for their situation; and by showing how these narratives emerge within, against and out of a past history of colonialist and paternalist intervention—currently returned with the Howard Federal government’s mid-2007 gesture towards the Indigenous population, focused on the Northern Territory—that involves little truth or reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as Uncle Bob Anderson said, quite some years ago now: “Whenever I hear the term reconciliation, it seems it just means that they think we’ve got to reconcile ourselves to the situation. There’s no justice at all” (Ferrier and Pelan 47). Wright said something similar when Kerry O’Brien raised the topic: “I think there’s great efforts on *our* side to try to reconcile the spirits . . . I think we need to think about where our hearts and minds have come from, and how they might live in this country” (Wright, “Interview with Kerry O’Brien” 219). The involvement of the army,

and some of the measures proposed, operate to reinstitute a colonial regime: an iron fist in a velvet glove.<sup>3</sup>

A paper such as this needs to acknowledge its positioning within the dominant and alternative structures of discursive power. Anne Brewster wrote in 2005:

If, in the 1980s, renovated ethnography and postcolonial studies foregrounded the anxiety and indignity of white theorists “speaking for” their others (perhaps most notable here is the work of Gayatri Spivak), new whiteness writing in the early twenty-first century develops out of an uncertainty around “speaking as” whites. (2)

Significant for many of us in past decades was Spivak’s injunction, in a 1986 interview with Sneja Gunew, to “develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced” (139). At one level, as the engagement with the problem of complicity in other papers at this conference has shown, non-Indigenous or non-black people cannot speak as anything else. They can, however, seek to inform and educate themselves, to help spaces open up for non-white voices to be heard, or heard more clearly, to advance what Spivak recently called “the uncoercive rearrangement of desires” (41).<sup>4</sup>

Since Monica Clare’s posthumously published *Karobran* in 1978, Indigenous women writers have recuperated a lost or silenced history in dozens of texts variously located by themselves and others within a range of genres, including life writing and memoir, autobiographical and biographical fiction, and novels.<sup>5</sup> Jennifer Jones suggests that *Karobran*:

aimed to publicise and help put an end to the removal of Aboriginal children from their families, a practice then still officially endorsed by the NSW government. Although the Aboriginal Protection Board had been abolished in 1969, and the infamous Cootamundra and Kinchela homes closed, Aboriginal children were still being institutionalised at Bomaderry near Nowra until 1980. (69)

Sally Morgan’s *My Place* (1987) achieved a huge publishing success (ambivalently viewed by some, especially Indigenous, commentators as offering white readers a picture that they wanted to see), but this had been prepared by a string of other narratives which were read as bringing out an invisible and suppressed history of Indigenous women in Australia—for which there was, due to the politicisation of the 1970s, a substantial and eager audience. This audience expected truth effects—to find out why and what “we” were not told—and this was one factor in keeping the earlier mode of writing predominantly realist in mode. Mudrooroo, in *Writing From the Fringe* in 1990, suggested that Indigenous women’s literary production, in what he

called “the battler genre”, was substantially trapped in “white dominance and either Aboriginal acceptance of this dominance, or a seeking to come to grips with, this dominance” (152–3).<sup>6</sup> Existing Indigenous women’s writing frequently dealt with the experience of domestic service in white homes, and with pressures to internalise white ideologies and seek cultural assimilation. One of these imposed ideologies is that of black servants as part of the (white, colonising) family.<sup>7</sup>

Doris Kartinyeri’s *Kick the Tin* (2000), a narrative of mission life, and Melissa Lucashenko’s story of a young woman’s apparent escape from a domestically violent life in Logan to West End and university, *Steam Pigs* (1997), continue to use a realist mode. Nugi Garimara/Doris Pilkington’s *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (2003) and Larissa Behrendt’s *Home* (2004) have large sections of historical discourse that cross into apparently fictionalised narration. *Home*, like Wright’s *Plains of Promise* (1997), is the history of three generations. Candice Brecht returns to the land of her grandmother to recover the history of her removal as a child in 1918; her daughter Garibooli (anglicised to Elizabeth) is raped as a servant, and her child is in turn taken. Going back to land to recover lost history is a central concern for these texts, as it is for Ruby Langford Ginibi. As “a mission-bred Koori”, she writes in *My Bundjalung People* (1994):

every time I pick up a pen to write I’m immediately taken back to my mission upbringing. Why, I keep asking myself? Is it the injustice that makes me go back in my past to try and find an answer, if that’s possible. I guess all of us have to go back to our roots because that’s where the truth lies, where those memories are still so clear and painful, even now.  
(41)

Penny Van Toorn reads Ginibi’s first work, *Don’t Take Your Love To Town* (1988), as focussing upon “the shadow-side of white-Australia’s shining deeds, the history of violence, dispossession, exploitation and the breaking up of Aboriginal families”. This may be the kind of picking one’s heart apart over the “clear and painful” historical memories that Wright suggests is for her no longer the most useful aesthetic direction for writing.

Much Aboriginal women’s narrative production has been written and read as autobiographical. Sidonie Smith suggests that the reader of autobiography is involved in a “tenacious effort to expect ‘truth’ of some kind. The nature of that truth is best understood as the struggle of a historical rather than a fictional person to come to terms with her own past” (46). Since *Don’t Take Your Love to Town*, Ginibi has insisted that her writing is not fiction but a documentation of her own life history: typical of, while in some ways

different from, that of tens of thousands of other Aboriginal women.<sup>8</sup> In a 1994 interview with Janine Little she asserted:

I'm not interested in fiction. Don't need to be, because I'm too busy with the truth about my people . . . Although the history of the whole of white Australia is one of the biggest fictions, aye? ("Talking with Ruby" 109, 102)

Garimara describes Ginibi as her favourite writer, but her own adopting of fiction as something that allowed different horizons to emerge for her:

My identity my own individuality was never allowed to be . . . But in a way I was struggling and fighting for that individuality, but that didn't manifest till I came down here to study for myself. I couldn't believe the freedom! I can express myself, I can go somewhere, I can do this, I can write what I like as a fiction writer. I tell them now, you are invading my fictional landscape. (36)

In this regard, the comments of Nawar Al-Hassan Golley are also helpful: "I believe that in each autobiographical text, the 'bio' (truth) and the 'graphy' (fiction) both contribute, to different degrees to the act of constructing the 'auto' or self . . . autobiographical writing depends on the reference to social relations which is not fiction" (60–62).

In so-called Multicultural writing, there has been something of a shift from the "committed fiction" of the 60s to 80s", preoccupied with the reconstruction of history, to more ambiguous modes, including that represented by Eva Sallis's notion of "research fiction". She suggests:

There is no way to be a writer and be comfortable. Seeking authenticity and authority for imaginative work is destructive and leads to writers lying about their names and antecedents and generates an even more authenticity conscious readership. Taken to a conclusion this trend is the death of fiction: we would only have life experiences, based on true stories and the illusion that people knew what they were talking about.

But Garimara also wants to anchor her fiction in actual historical experiences. The aftermath in 1940 of the barefoot journey of the three girls along the fence is detailed towards the end of *Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996). Her mother, in 1940,

was transported once again, under ministerial warrant to Moore River Native Settlement. Nine months later, Molly received a letter from home advising her of the deaths of members of her family at Jigalong. A niece had died of self inflicted wounds to the head, a customary action of the distressed and the anguished and a common expression of grief and despair. In this case the lacerations were inflicted when Molly and her children had departed months earlier. (131)

Another distinctive feature of Ginibi’s recounting of her own life within history is the refusal to adopt a pose of “morality”—and in this she differs from precursors such as Clare, or those writing at the same time such as Glenyse Ward, Morgan, or Garimara. Indigenous women encounter powerful pressures to adopt a stance of “respectability”, especially in relation to sexuality and to the family, because of the hegemonic, sexualised racist stereotyping of black women: they may even have tried to adopt this stance in an often vain attempt to combat the systematic removal of their children and the destruction of their family life. While Australian Indigenous women’s earlier autobiographical writing has been dominated by self-constructions as moral and respectable, Ginibi instead talks about her relationships with different black and white men, her difficulties in bringing up her children, and her periodic over-use of alcohol. A reminder that this was a risky literary persona was provided by a virulent review by Mary Rose Liverani in the *Australian* (6) that not only accused Ginibi of being a bad mother personally responsible for what had befallen her children, but also suggested that her writing lacked the substance and quality needed for a white writer to achieve publication. Ginibi replied to Liverani that knowledge was not necessarily measured by degrees (6), although La Trobe University would award her an honorary doctorate in 1998.

Tracey Bunda takes further the analysis of the historical positioning of Indigenous women in relation to their sexuality in her discussion of “the absence of and the namelessness within Australian literature of the black sovereign warrior woman”:

In the taking of your fork, metaphorically and literally, it is believed that your essence as a black woman has been subjugated to the authority of a greater knowing—an authority that is centrally located in the white patriarchal phallic fantasy of the black woman’s velvet; a knowing that arrogantly believes that the act of taking is emancipatory for the black woman who only has a *cudgee* but no intellect and no soul. The taking provides freedom from the responsibility to represent herself; given that the representations are limited to her fork to signify sexual object . . . (77)

Aboriginal authors, Ginibi told Chris Watson, remained in the situation of “walking into a white literary frame that’s always been there” (“Interview with Watson” 162), and this is true of issues of both form/aesthetics and content/ideology in Indigenous texts. Jennifer Jones suggests in relation to Clare that in *Karobran* she subverted this; that she “strategically adopted and adapted white political frames to suit Aboriginal political purposes, yet this aspect of the text was hardly noticed upon its public release” (70).

I will turn now to some women writers' comments about postcoloniality. Susan Sheridan writes,

From an Australian geopolitical position the terminology of postcolonial reorientation poses several problems. Where is the West . . . was not Australia as a settler colony also a colonising power in relation to the Aboriginal peoples (and is this not still the case)? (167)

Sheridan also refers to Ann Curthoys' argument: "Caught in that liminal, always undecided state between a colonial past and a possibly postcolonial future, 'Australia' is a land, a society, a history neither colonial nor postcolonial. The question that must be asked is, Are we postcolonial yet?" (Curthoys 166).

Anita Heiss in *To Talk Straight* (2003) expresses a view widely articulated by Indigenous people: "Cathy Craigie, like myself, thinks it's hard to believe there is any such thing as post-colonial when you are the people who've been colonised . . ." (44). Ginibi asserts "we're still affected by the stuff that the colonists brought to this country today, all that shit" ("Talking with Ruby" 118). Arthur Corunna in Morgan's *My Place* offers the comment "the trouble is colonialism isn't over yet" (212). Aileen Moreton-Robinson moves this discussion on further with the mobilisation of the concept of postcolonising:

In Australia the colonials did not go home and "postcolonial" remains based on whiteness. This must be theorised in a way which allows for incommensurable difference between the situatedness of the Indigenous people in a colonising settler society such as Australia and those who have come here. Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are situated in relation to (post)colonisation in radically different ways—ways that cannot be made into sameness. There may well be spaces in Australia that could be described as postcolonial but these are not spaces inhabited by Indigenous people. It may be more useful, therefore, to conceptualise the current condition not as postcolonial but as *postcolonising* with the associations of ongoing process which that implies. (*Uprootings* 30)

Colonisation involves economic, political and military control, as well as cultural dominance. Culture along with ideology is mobilised in the operations of social control and, as Raymond Williams points out, the maintenance of hegemony depends: "Not only on its expression of the interests of a ruling class but also on its acceptance as 'normal reality'" (*Keywords* 145).<sup>9</sup> Marcia Langton draws attention to the difference of positionality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous commentators: "We write to understand, we read to understand, we carry out research to try to understand the terrible, inexplicable

past . . . while some of us Aborigines cannot find the words, there is an army of respectable, reliable, properly qualified wordsmiths who write about this corpse that is still lying in the middle of the room” (1).

Lucashenko’s comment at the 2005 Byron Bay writers’ festival also seems apposite:

Certainty—*sticking to your guns* in another telling phrase—is seen as a Good Thing. But in Aboriginal Australia certainty is usually regarded with scepticism and suspicion. The word for deafness in many Aboriginal languages is the same as the word for mental illness . . . Can’t hear. Won’t hear. And if any of you live with someone who is deaf and refuses to wear a hearing aid, you will have an inkling of what it has been like, historically, to be Aboriginal in Australia. (152)

I will move now to the recent situation. In mid-2007, the Howard Coalition government carried out a restaged invasion of Aboriginal communities, in this instance in the Northern Territory, some sixty including Mutitjulu, home of the traditional owners of Uluru, by white ideological state apparatuses of social workers and doctors escorted by police and the military, charged with a concerted suppression of child abuse, the drinking of alcohol and the “wasting” of welfare payments. Jenni Kemarre Martinello (an artist and poet, and a former Deputy chair of the ATSI Arts Board of the Australia Council) writes regarding this:

The Little Children Are Sacred Report does not advocate physically and psychologically invasive examination of Aboriginal children, which could only be carried out anally and vaginally. It does not recommend scrapping the permit system to enter Aboriginal lands, nor does it recommend taking over Aboriginal “towns” by enforced leases.

Martinello points out that the hegemonic discourse was operating to implicitly or explicitly single out Aboriginal men as “silenced scapegoats”, even though:

The findings specifically state that non-Aboriginal men, that is, white men, are a significant proportion of the offenders, who are black-marketeering in petrol and alcohol to gain access to Aboriginal children.

Recalling Paul Keating’s Redfern Report question—what if this were done to us?—Martinello refers to some of the measures proposed:

None of the national reports into mainstream domestic violence, alcohol and substance abuse . . . recommend compulsory sexual health tests for every Australian child under 16. Not one of them recommends that a viable solution is closing down youth and health programs . . . None recommends that the victims’ or the offenders’ communities

and homes should be surrendered to the Federal Government and put under compulsory lease agreements, and none advocate processes which would lead to either the victims or their abusers losing their rights to their property as means to control or remedy the occurrence of abuse.

Martinello's comments certainly appear to refer to what Moreton-Robinson categorises as a "postcolonising society":

The coloniser/colonised axis continues to be configured within this postcolonising society through power relations that are premised on our dispossession and resisted through our ontological relationship to land. Indigenous people's position within the nation state is not one where colonising power relations have been discontinued. (*Uprootings* 37)

I turn now to the two literary texts to which I promised to give some attention. Wright has suggested that one of her central concerns in writing *Carpentaria* was the question of: "How do you mend the broken line—the effect of colonisation?" (Brisbane Writers' Festival, 15 September 2006, launch of *Carpentaria*). Jacqui Katona, in launching the novel with Murradoo Yanner, said that she found it "fiction that redefines the political landscape" as well as being "a legacy for a younger generation for the struggle before them", and "a story that I hope will sustain my kids".

These comments raise issues of readership. The primary buying public for published Indigenous writing has generally been white. Ginibi sees herself as writing for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers. For Ginibi, the lack of knowledge and understanding is the result of the process of colonisation which she defines as "the power and dominance of one culture and society over another". In an interview, she says: "I write for myself and my people, but I also write for the white world, too, to educate them so they will know more about us and be less racist in their dealings with Aboriginal people" ("Interview with Watson" 156–7).

Wright says of *Carpentaria*: "I hoped that the style would engage more Indigenous readers, especially people from remote locations, to be readers of this book either now, or in the future, or perhaps at least, to be able to listen to a reading of the book". While she had determined to write the novel "as though some old Aboriginal person was telling the story", what she "feared most was that this kind of voice and style of telling would be flatly rejected in Australia" (Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*" 80, 89).

Vivienne Cleven says: "I write for many reasons: I write out of passion, I write to explore and I write to make sense of the world. Finally, I write to



my way of understanding” (*Writing Queensland* 6). *Her Sister’s Eye* had much less impact than might have been expected, given that it is, as Sonia Kurtzer suggested, “unique in terms of Australian fictional writing” (324). Kurtzer’s review (in *Australian Feminist Studies*) was one of only a few of any substance, along with one by Janine Little in the *Australian Women’s Book Review*.<sup>10</sup> Both commented upon the text’s affinities with the writing and, indeed, the power of Toni Morrison, in its recalling of a history of brutality, interracial violence, and the harming of black children. The influence of African-American thought has been profound in Australia, both for Aboriginal people’s activism (largely through the Black Power movement) and through their political and literary writing. Morrison lamented as late as 1989, in “The Pain of Being Black”, that African-American writing was habitually read “as sociology, as tolerance, not as a serious, rigorous art form” (61). This has considerable resonance, for both Cleven and Wright write with a complexity and sophistication that demands to be recognised as serious art, but can be both “unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful” (Morrison in Evans 345) at the same time, in the practice to which Morrison said she aspired in 1983.

The focus of disappearing memory in Australia, described by Heiss in 2003 as “a country where we do not figure on the national identity radar” (in Day 83) was, in much earlier Indigenous women’s fiction, on the secret of sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white men, for which the former were treated as somehow responsible. This was the central theme of Morgan’s *My Place*. Trauma, memory and silence are key themes in Cleven’s second novel, *Her Sister’s Eye*, and the text follows the traces of past events to reconstruct them. Archie Corella returns to Mundra, “a town without any black fellas” (4), in which many spaces are forbidden—the whites control not only their individual spaces, bought from those who originally took the Aboriginal land, but the public spaces of the town as well. Archie was once, along with his mother Lillian and his sister Belle, an outsider beyond the marginalised status of the Indigenous community who lived on the margins of the town—at “the old dump way there. Back then, most of us fellahs camped there in tents and humpies” (139), as Vida Derrick, Nana Vida, recalls. Archie has repressed his memory of what happened in the past of how he came to be scarred—and how his sister was shot in front of him as retribution for his mother seeking to cross the colour line and mix with whites in the town. When the white landowning patriarch, Edward Drysdale, shot dead his sister Belle, he tried to shoot him but missed and, after a flogging with the rifle butt, lost his identity, and even his memory of it, as Raymond Gee. The novel ends with Nana Vida revealing to Doris the story of how the Drysdale patriarchs “were a group of men dedicated to keeping black fellahs out of town” (224) and formed a vigilante group to do it, and how four white men

threatened Archie's mother with gang rape in front of her children on a lonely country road.

Donald Drysdale, Reginald's son, "the big man of the scary house", forbids Archie to go near the garden shed in which he has molested the young Aboriginal woman Sofie: "If you are ever near it or accidentally go inside then it'd be best for you to leave immediately" (20). The shed gradually emerges as a place where things have happened associated with menace in the past—and the menace of potential retribution in future. The female white gentry of the town, the Red Rose Ladies, refuse to admit Reginald's wife, Caroline Drysdale, into their group and maintain their own style of exclusion and exploitation. Caroline is bashed by her husband and categorised by him as mad. Tamara Dalmaine and the other Ladies try to have bulldozed the house where Sofie lives with her sister Murilla (who works in the Drysdale house as a domestic). Tamara considers there to be "*Four* undesirables in Mundra, Caroline Drysdale, the Salte women and that halfwit gardener with his minefield yard" (200).<sup>11</sup>

In the closing chapter of *Her Sister's Eye*, Murilla and Caroline, following Archie's death, plant roses that he could never make grow in an act that suggests a symbolic transformation of the earlier dominance of the Red Rose ladies.<sup>12</sup> Archie's garden has "great piles of dirt and unusually deep holes" but: "The dirt won't give to him; he can't grow roses at all, they always die. But he reckons the deeper he digs, the more chance he'll have of one taking root, surviving" (129). Nana Vida had also found that "the dirt ain't what it used to be. I can't grow anything much in the yard now", (143) and all that would do well was chrysanthemums in tubs. When Murilla and Caroline plant the roses from the pots from Archie's garden, Caroline says: "Nothing ends, Murilla, don't you see? The ground, the soil improves. Quite simply, it must give again" (231). When she asks Murilla if she thinks the plants will grow, Murilla says: "They just might but we have to keep an eye on things" (232).

Early in *Her Sister's Eye*, Sofie is told by Murilla that their relation Nan Vida will have to be called upon to "keep an eye upon" her near the river. Sofie cries "She's not me sister's eye" and Murilla reassures her: "I'm ya eye dove. Always was n always will be" (34). In perhaps recalling the chant, Aboriginal land, always was always will be, this passage extends belonging to the land mother to the solidarity between the sisters. Murilla (while unaware then of what might be the basis for her sister Sofie's mental disturbance), protects and looks after her following the sexual assaults on her by Drysdale (Mr Peekaboo) and his nemesis at the river when "*he snake cut off right at the top*" (60)—and she

drowns him. But Sofie does not feel her sister's eye upon her when she lights a fire in the garden shed of the ironically named Polly Goodman, burning herself and, less seriously, Polly, with whom Caroline's husband has been having an affair. The curse upon generations in *Plains of Promise*, stemming from the suicide by fire of the grandmother, is perhaps revindicated in agency through the use of fire in the more recent second novels, in both of which a fiery nemesis befalls the oppressors. In *Carpentaria* the Gurfurrit mine installations are destroyed by arson.<sup>13</sup> Commenting upon Moreton-Robinson's *Sovereign Subjects*, Irene Watson suggests: “Speaking of colonialism and the possibility of its passing, Franz Fanon saw ‘the smoking ashes of a burnt down house after the fire has been put out, [but] which still threatens to burst into flames again’” (2007). She relates this, I think, to Indigenous structures, but it can have a wider application in the contemporary contexts that Cleven and Wright depict.

*Her Sister's Eye's* mixing of genres, and its partial move away from realism while still retaining a resonance of truth effects in the retelling of history, marks something of a departure for Aboriginal women's writing. To some extent it follows on from *Plains of Promise's* story of three Indigenous generations of women and their emergence from reserves and missions, as well as the search for the past associated with the maintenance of cultural identity. The quest of a young man from the mission named Eliot, who travels off to seek, but not find, the answer to the curse that seems to be on the community, becomes in *Carpentaria* several wanderings and quests, engaged in almost exclusively by male characters. *Her Sister's Eye*, in its partial move away from realism, depicts a bleak history but one that offers some hope of redemption as Sofie distinguishes the secrets:

*Here the secret  
the bad one  
Naaahh not the bad one the good one. (57)*

When Nana Vida finally tells her granddaughter, Doris, the remaining hidden history, she concludes with: “That's the story. I let it go now” (228). This can be read as Nan being both to some extent freed from the burden of the knowledge that has been picking her heart apart, and letting the story out to have its effects in being told: “Keep this alive, tell them all . . . If you remember what others went through to get ya here then all is not lost. Some died for you, others fought for you. Always remember where you're from. There's hope” (229).

With both these two novels comes a writing in of Indigenous men as central and sympathetic characters. This begins in *Plains* and in Cleven's first

novel *Bitin' Back*. In *Her Sister's Eye* Archie is an important character, and in *Carpentaria* male characters are central. This can work to counteract the demonising of Aboriginal men, also raised earlier, which is beginning to give rise in the dominant ideology to a twenty-first century moral panic.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the female characters in *Carpentaria* are quite peripheral to the action. One in particular who one might have liked to see more of is Angel Day—in the view of her husband, Normal Phantom, “a hornet’s nest waiting to be disturbed” (13), while, in the eyes of the community, “Angel’s house exuded lust” (349). Angel and Norm live on the edge of the town rubbish dump—in even more straitened circumstances than the poor whites in Janet Frame’s *Owls Do Cry* (1957), in that Angel has created her home entirely out of things salvaged from the dump, including, notably, a large figure of the Virgin Mary that she has repainted: “Improvisation with Norm’s fish colours and textures resulted in a brightly coloured statue of an Aboriginal woman who lived by the sea” (38). But Angel disappears from the action quite early on, in the company of Mozzie Fishman, with only briefly recounting what later befalls her appearing toward the end of the book.

Another feature of Cleven’s and Wright’s novels is an almost Rabelaisian treatment of white police and other authority figures, with black humour used as a mode of resistance.<sup>15</sup> In the town of Desperance in *Carpentaria* live an Uptown crew of whites represented by Mayor Stan Bruiser, who considers “If you can’t use it, eat it, or fuck it, it’s no use to you . . . Everyone in town knew how he bragged about how he had chased every Aboriginal woman in town at various times, until he ran them into the ground and raped them” (35). The local cop, Truthful E’Strange, recalls Cleven’s clownish police—although, as Ian Syson points out, there is also an underlying awareness of their periodically exercised power (as in the recent death in custody of Murunji Doomajie): “there are points in this book where Wright drops all ornament and tells it straight. In a four-page section dealing with the bashing of three Aboriginal boys in a police cell, Wright’s rage is almost palpable through the absence of symbol and dream and metaphor” (86). The three boys hang themselves and Truthful is shown as completely bemused about how this has happened. The naming of the cop as “Truthful” performs particular counter-ideological work here and also operates to raise, in a different form again, the recurring questions posed through Aboriginal writing of fact and fiction, fact and truth.

Michele Grossman finds one of the central reading effects of *Carpentaria* to be that the “doppelganger effect of indigenous and settler ways of being and knowing is fully, furiously, sustained as tandem stories and lives variously

intersect and diverge, yet remain haunted by the shadows of others’ truths and lies” (10). Symbol, dream and metaphor are the pervasive modes of Wright’s text, and give it much of its haunting power. She stated recently:

*Carpentaria* attempts to portray the world of Indigenous Australia as being in constant opposition between different spaces to time. Time is represented by the resilience of ancient beliefs overlaying the inherited colonial experience, which sometimes seems nothing more than hot air passing through the mind, while the almost “fugitive” future is being forged as imagination in what might be called the last frontier—the province of the mind. (“On Writing *Carpentaria*” 83)

Both *Her Sister’s Eye* and *Carpentaria* strike a note of hope in the remembering and evocation of other frames of reference and notions of time, of past, present and future. Moreton-Robinson has suggested:

In our engagement with white Australian society, Indigenous people have learnt to create meaning, knowledges and living traditions under conditions not of our choosing as strategies for our survival . . . There is no single, fixed or monolithic form of Indigenous resistance; rather than simply being a matter of overtly defiant behaviour, resistance is re-presented as multifaceted, visible and invisible, conscious and unconscious, explicit and covert, intentional and unintentional. (Moreton-Robinson qtd. in Anderson 128)

Water along with fire is associated in both novels with acts of resistance associated with nemesis and renewal. In *Carpentaria*, the town of Desperance is destroyed by a cyclone. The inhabitants are preoccupied with paranoid worries about disease from fruit bats, and are distracted from the cyclone’s approach because they are mainly concerned with cutting down the trees to drive away the bats.

Nobody walked the streets at night during the mango season because nobody had any trouble visualising the deadly virus pissing on the town. Seven o’clock at night fearing the whole town would be found dead in bed the next morning. It was a sad, sad, self-perpetuating sad town. Nobody had any idea how those kids grew up so fearful of the world and everything. (464)

After the cyclone, Will Phantom, Norm’s son, ends up drifting on a huge pile of floating rubbish for forty days in a strange displacement of the material of which Angel’s home was made; Norm, having escaped with the son of Hope and Will, Bala, comes back to Desperance where nothing remains but a few dogs and “song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh” (519). This mode of metaphoric representation can be juxtaposed to the similar narrative offered by Steven Jampijinpa Patrick, an assistant teacher at the

school at Lajamanu (close to Yuendumu), in response to the arrival of the Federal government's "Intervention taskforce":

We're using Milpirri as a way to get into people's minds. Milpirri—it's a rain cloud. Well, when we talk Milpirri here at Lajamanu—it's a ceremony and it's a cloud—it's a certain cloud that one, that builds up in the hot weather and it's full of lightning and all that. We're using that as a metaphor, you know, it takes two to build up that cloud. You've got the cold air falling, you've got the hot air rising and there you've got the cloud being formed, I guess. All that lightning, fury, it's just all sorting itself out and you've got the rain falling and then it's drenching the land I guess and that brings the goodness out of the land—it brings back all animals, birds and everyone. ("Voices" 15)

While similar, this narrative of the interaction of "yapa" (black) and "kardiya" (white) also differs from the end of *Carpentaria* in which the Indigenous grandfather and grandson stand upon land from which the white settlers have been washed away.

An antecedent that comes to mind here is Labumore Elsie Roughsey's 1984 *An Aboriginal Mother Tells of the Old and the New*, in its recollection of the old Indigenous stories. Perhaps the difference to which Wright referred in my epigraph is not, as one might have thought, the racial difference with which European theory engages—racial difference as the fantasy of whiteness which is unsettled by the creative production of the Indigenous self. It may be, again, the North's difference in terms of its different composition of capital, its different population distribution and its different patterns of exploitation of labour. This suggests also a need to restore consideration of the economic basis of Indigenous oppression—and the economic benefits to the colonising settlers, especially through mining, are certainly foregrounded in the novel. The difference as well perhaps lies in the ability to feel the presence of the natural world evoked so pervasively. The power of the rainbow serpent features centrally in parts of the book, recounted with great poetic force. As Moreton-Robinson comments:

Indigenous people's sense of belonging is derived from an ontological relationship to country derived from the Dreaming, which provides the precedents for what is believed to have occurred in the beginning in the original form of social living created by ancestral beings. During the Dreaming, ancestral beings created the land and life, and they are tied to particular tracks of country. Knowledge and beliefs tied to the Dreaming inform the present and future. Within this system of beliefs there is scope for interpretation and change by individuals through dreams and their lived experiences. (*Uprootings* 31)

Wright wrote recently, asserting the Indigenous concept of time and history:

A friend once said to me while we were looking at the Gregory River . . . that the white man had destroyed our country. He pointed out the weeds growing profusely over the banks—burrs, prickles and other noxious introduced plants grew everywhere. It would take decades to eradicate the past decades of harm . . . What he said was true, but what I saw was the mighty flow of an ancestral river rushing through the weeds, which were only weeds fruitlessly reaching down into the purity of this flowing water . . . The river was flowing with so much force I felt it would never stop, and it would keep on flowing, just as it had flowed by generations of my ancestors, just as its waters would slip by here forever. (“On Writing *Carpentaria*” 79)

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It is interesting that when many are lamenting the decline of the literary, especially perhaps in relation to the novel, that some Indigenous writers are producing some of the most innovative and exciting texts in Australia.
- <sup>2</sup> By contrast, on the State front, there had been a step forward. Until recently, Tasmania was the only state that had agreed to pay compensation to victims of removal from their families since the release of the Bringing Them Home Report in 1997, but, after a nine-year court case, Bruce Trevor was awarded compensation by the South Australian government in early August 2007 (Singer).
- <sup>3</sup> For example: “The Northern Territory intervention is targeting poor school attendance, with the quarantining of up to 100 per cent of a parent or carer’s Centrelink payments being used to encourage attendance. A leaked plan from Yuendumu’s new government business manager, Noel Mason, proposes that truant children be required to pick up rubbish under supervision until they are ‘visibly tired’.” (“Voices”, Jeeves 15). Strong statements from the past such as that made by Mick Dodson about the coloniser’s “intrusive gaze” under which “Aboriginality changed from being a daily practice to being a ‘problem’ to be solved” start to sound like understatement (3). With the election of a Labor government in November 2007 it remains to be seen how far this approach will continue to be followed.
- <sup>4</sup> Spivak also comments in relation to this in Chakravorty’s book: “international communism, one of the main reasons it failed was because it did not engage the subjectivity of the subaltern. What it did was mobilise them” (15).
- <sup>5</sup> Bruce Shaw drew attention in 1984 to the traversal of genre boundaries: for example, that “life history writing crosses the thresholds of anthropology and history and is knocking at the door of literature” (52).
- <sup>6</sup> In “The Last Interview”, in *Milli Milli Wangka*, he commented further on this in relation to Ginibi’s work: “*My Bundjalung People* is a much better book

- because it is more community . . . it is a very strong woman's text . . . it is community which is most important in Indigenous culture: this is what she set up and so it's one of the reasons why her book is being ignored" (214).
- 7 In Daisy Corunna's story in *My Place*, she recalls:
 

"Alice kept telling me, 'We're family now Daisy.' Thing is, they wasn't my family. Oh I knew the children loved me, but they wasn't my family. They were white, they'd grow up and go to school one day. I was black. I was a servant. How can they be your family?" (334)
  - 8 This approach is found elsewhere internationally. Mahasweta Devi similarly asserts in her Introduction to *Bitter Soil* (2002): "The sole purpose of my writing is to expose the many faces of the exploiting agencies: the feudal minded landowner, his henchmen, the so-called religious head of the administrative system, all of whom, as a combined force, are out for lower-caste blood . . . I have based my writings on truth and not on fiction" (vix).
  - 9 For Williams, writing is aligned, expressing "specifically selected experience from a specific point of view" (*Marxism and Literature* 199).
  - 10 The *Adelaide Advertiser's* brief review, in suggesting it deploys something more akin to an "Aboriginal Gothic" perhaps implies affinities with Mudrooroo's writing (England 11).
  - 11 These four outcasts, marginalised and pathologised, recall somewhat Patrick White's four visionaries in his *Riders in the Chariot* (1961), one of whom is an Aboriginal artist.
  - 12 There may also be some intertextuality with Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and her memories of her own earlier life: "my mother adorned with flowers whatever shabby house we were forced to live in . . . Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms" (241).
  - 13 Martinello also made a connection between the intervention and current applications for more mining permits (to expand Jabiluka and establish a new mine at Coronation Hill, and also proposals for a nuclear waste dump). Katona referred to the "political debt to the Gulf with the campaigns against mining", in which Yanner (probably a model for Will Phantom) has been prominent (Unpublished speech).
  - 14 Ned Jakamarra Wilson from Yuendumu, comments: "When they made all this child abuse thing on the radio—a state of emergency or whatever—just like this is Iraq or, like, it's a trouble spot, but it's not". ("Voices" 15)
  - 15 In Cleven's first novel *Bitin' Back* this emerged, and was further developed in the stage adaptation of the novel.



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