

Finding Hope in the Stories: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and the Carnavalesque Search for a New Order

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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 they no longer know 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. So ... (12)

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* is a long and sprawling carnivalesque novel that offers a cautiously positive outlook for Aboriginal people, one that also recognises the difficulties of contemporary Aboriginal experience. The novel creates a space that is not 'within the imagined borders that have been forced' on Aboriginal people (Wright, 'On Writing *Carpentaria*' 82) by resisting being framed by the history of dispossession and marginalisation that so often defines Aboriginal people as silent and passive victims. The novel's use of the carnivalesque and magical realism, the latter a style also associated with the carnivalesque, disrupts accepted ideas, challenges mainstream or dominant representations of Aboriginal people in historiography, language, literature, and politics, and proposes new ways of thinking about the interaction between two cultures.

The carnivalesque features ambiguity, opposes uniformity and homogenisation and mocks authority and the familiar through the use of parody, exaggeration and the comic. It is a form that has traditionally allowed marginalised sections of society to resist the dominant culture. Carnival originated in the Middle Ages and was initially a physical celebration that allowed people some freedom from official rituals and ceremonies associated with the Church and political power. However, with the rise of the middle class in the seventeenth century Carnival was transferred from physical celebrations into literature, art and music (Stallybrass and White 181). Mikhail Bakhtin describes the carnivalesque in literature as the voice of the people that seeks to

consecrate inventive freedom to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their rapprochement, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from all that is humdrum and universally accepted ... [and it] offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things. (*Rabelais and His World* 34)

This essay proposes that Alexis Wright's novel draws on the carnivalesque and its subversive impulses to offer a counter-narrative to conventional depictions of Aboriginality. It argues that blending Aboriginal and Western approaches to writing history and telling stories opens up new opportunities for cultural harmony. *Carpentaria* begins with a description of the landscape of the Gulf country of north-western Queensland where the narrative is set. The

carnavalesque's association with change and renewal is here reflected in a landscape that alternates between being under water and bone-dry, where the river suddenly changes course leaving behind a 'waterless port' (3), where cyclones regularly alter the landscape and even disrupt time by stopping all the clocks. Importantly, the style also recalls, perhaps, a Dreamtime story where the sea, the land and weather, along with fish and animals are as essential to the narrative as human characters.

Change is also integral to the lives of the people in the Gulf who have lived there since 'before time began' (6). They have witnessed the arrival of a succession of foreigners, including other Aboriginal people who 'should be in the Territory somewhere' (157). All these newcomers brought with them new plants and animal species, English, Christianity, alcohol and rubbish. The novel privileges a notion of culture as living and evolving, a palimpsest in continual flux. The fringe humpies where the Aboriginal people live are built out of rubbish from the local dump and sit among the Pricklebush scrub, an imported European weed. Several vignettes provide a brief history of the area since colonisation including the fate of the abandoned camels of two Afghan camel drivers, the comings and goings of the mining industry in the area, a reference to Aboriginal massacres, and the failed attempt by the Town Council to re-name the local river after Normal Phantom, which bemuses the Pricklebush people because the river already has an Aboriginal name.

Carpentaria tells the story of the Phantom family, members of the Pricklebush people, who live in the fictional town of Desperance. Normal Phantom is the head of the family and of the Westside Pricklebush people. He is 'encumbered' with the title 'leader of the Aboriginal people' (37) and is 'a supernatural master artist who created miracles' (206) by preserving fish in the tropics. 'The whole town thought Norm Phantom was mad ... [but] claimed they had learned to live with his "harmless" insanity' (203). Normal's wife, the disruptive Angel Day, caused the great war of the dump after she found a statue of the Virgin Mary and a clock among the rubbish. She believed the statue would bestow on her the 'luck of the white people' and the clock would allow her to tell her people the time (23). With this knowledge she tries to take ownership of the dump; the ensuing war split the Pricklebush people into Eastside and Westside. 'Their language had no word for compromise' (380) and the feud was fuelled by the 'faded memories of the ancient wars' (31) between Aboriginal clans in the Gulf. Uptown where the white people live was left surrounded by Aboriginal people, a reversal of the usual framing of Aboriginal people by white people.

Normal and Angel's son Will is an activist opposed to the Gurffurit mine, on the run from police for attempted sabotage of the mine. Will was good with 'all of the natural things, except he is not too good with human nature,' he had the 'knack' of rubbing people up the wrong way, just like his father (162). Normal has disowned Will after Will married Hope, the granddaughter of Joseph Midnight, the head of the renegade Eastside mob. Will had 'gone against the conventions of the family and their war', not only by marrying outside his mob, but also by refusing to 'cart the ancestral, hard-faced warrior demons around on his back as easily as others in his family were prepared to do for land' (203). Will's activism was larger than his family's war and Aboriginal land rights, he was 'trying to save the world' (289). Wright describes Will and Norm as the Pricklebush versions of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza of Cervantes' carnivalesque *Don Quixote* (Wright, 'On Writing *Carpentaria*').

There are two other characters associated with the family who play an integral role in the narrative. The first is Mozzie Fishman, a religious zealot who has an affair with Angel Day. Will spent his years away from home on the run 'travelling on sacred journeys' with Mozzie (164). Mozzie rescues Will after he is kidnapped by employees of the mine, and then

orchestrates the explosion that destroys the Gurffurit mine. The second character is Elias Smith, also a friend of Normal and Will. Elias appears one day out of the sea without a nationality, memory or identity and is given the name Smith by the town's white people. Elias is eventually run out of town by the white locals because they believe that as a 'new Australian' (167) he is somehow responsible for a string of unexplained disasters in the town. Elias later rescues Will's family from the mining thugs before he is murdered by the same people in their attempt to frame Will for the crime as a means of getting rid of him. It is Elias's death that brings Will back to Desperance.

The Pricklebush people live permanently in carnival time, free of rules, where participants and onlookers are one and the same and 'time was a fleeting whisper' (164). Time is truncated and protracted and there are frequent analepses in the form of flashbacks and memories often without any indication that the narrative has switched from the present to the past, from reality to memory. The effect is a little like being caught up inside someone's memories while they move around in time and space as prompted by external stimuli. Norm's five-year fishing trip is unremarkable and the Pricklebush people have four-hundred year old grievances. Following the cyclone Will seems to exist for several years, if not decades, on his island in the ocean while Norm, Hope and Bala (the son of Hope and Will) are adrift for forty days and forty nights after the cyclone. However, these two events seem to coincide within the narrative.

Religion and time are closely linked in the novel as manifestations of the rules of the coloniser who brought Christianity and clocks to the Pricklebush people. The title of the first chapter, 'From time immemorial', suggests the novel's broad chronological scope and the many biblical references position it as a parable for the Pricklebush people. Indeed, there is an underlying tension between the Western and Aboriginal view of time throughout the novel. The history of the Pricklebush people is from time immemorial, while the history of the Uptown people 'is only as old as the cemetery' (61).

Within the fluid, carnival time of the novel, characters possess supernatural powers or are 'possessed by dreams' (512), devils and angels. Spirits coexist with real people and the narrative has 'moments of magic,' exorcism (139) and miracles. The cyclones that regularly bring change and destruction to the area occur in the time of magic when the sea is full of spirits, brought about by the sea lady 'spinning herself into a jealous rage ... if you could believe in the power of her magic' (276). Magic and disrupted time confuse the reader because one is never quite sure where or when the narrative is taking place, how much time has passed, or when the narrative has moved from realism to magic. Blending the real with the surreal gives voice to possibilities that may seem unattainable in a world otherwise 'in perpetual political conflict' (Danow 71).

Just as chronology is confused so too are the boundaries between memory, history, imagination and reality. Rather, a people's historiography, literature and religion combine here to provide a more complete picture of the past. Thus Joseph Midnight, the leader of the Eastside people 'knew his country in its stories, its histories, its sacred places ... his time stretched over the millennia' (387). *Carpentaria* acknowledges multiple methods of recalling the past and referring to the future, including history, religion, rituals, dreams, wishes, prayers and imagination without making a clear distinction between them or privileging one over another. And in any case, all records of the past are precarious. Viewing the devastation after the cyclone, Will Phantom is struck by how

history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into something more of their own making. (492)

Carpentaria is not an historical novel in the sense of retelling an historical event; however, the past pervades the narrative, most often in the form of memory, which is unreliable and malleable. Memories are inherited, stolen, revised and paid for. Memory is short, defective, rich, lost, painful and 'honoured in death' (153). There are 'sweet reminiscences' (157), 'childhood memories' (163) and 'elephantine memories' (66) and the lad who was 'writing memory with a firestick ... made 'lightning look dull' (163). The reader is warned to be prepared to wait for the old people to 'climb out of the mud' where they lie buried with their 'besieged memories' to 'tell you the real story' (11). This is not the story told by Western historiography that may offer an 'impeccable recorded history' (89), when it is nothing more than 'just a half-flick of the switch of truth—simply a memory no greater than two life spans' (57), but a story that incorporates the whole of Aboriginal history and the little stories of the people. The narrative expresses an awareness of history, but is not constrained by the historical discourse defined by mainstream Australia in which Aboriginal people are portrayed as peripheral to the official story, as passive participants or as victims of colonisation and modernity.

The novel mocks the dominant cultural institutions responsible for remembering and preserving the past. Western reliance on the written archive to store and validate history is rejected and Aboriginal history that is written on rock (28), told with imagination and plucked at random from any 'era of the time immemorial of the black man's existence on his own land' (103) is considered equally valid as official versions of history. The written archive on which Western historiography depends is portrayed in the novel as being just as impermanent as oral history when 'one hundred years of impeccable recorded history' of the local Smith family goes up in smoke (89). And because the people of Uptown only record their past in the archive, in memorial objects and through rituals rather than within the narratives of their lives, they need to continually recreate their own legends, unlike the Pricklebush people who undertook daily 'memory tribunals' (51) as a means of keeping the past alive. The novel suggests that it is the people who are responsible for passing on the essential stories of history and culture to their families as lived history, not the official history held in archives and managed by institutions.

As well as challenging Western historiography, the novel also challenges the literary framing of Aboriginal people as the exotic other, as a dying race in need of comfort, or as marginalised victims. Blending the carnivalesque and magical realism with Aboriginal storytelling which also relies on 'symbol, imaginary presences and magic' (Jose) challenges the Australian tradition of classical realism to relate historical events in fiction. Aboriginal people needed to adopt Western literary forms—from Bennelong's letter onwards—to bring their stories to the mainstream reading public. Any challenge to received literary framing is necessarily made within forms recognisable to mainstream readers because to do otherwise would render the challenge unrecognisable. But while accepting that Aboriginal people must adopt Western forms to have a voice, the novel demonstrates that these forms can be changed and redrawn to reflect Aboriginal concerns, storytelling styles and language use. Not only does the novel seek freedom from political oppression, it also seeks freedom from oppression of the imagination: 'Nothing must stop our stories' (429).

Within both the literary representation of Aboriginal people and in their every day speech the novel challenges the use of Standard English. The slightly eccentric use of language reinforces the narrative's resistance to the established order—although the Pricklebush people use English, they have made the language their own, with its own style. Characters parody language conventions, asking 'pardon for using white man diction' (155). Speech is scattered with malapropisms and twisted idioms, and draws on a vernacular that is often unknown outside the communities where it is spoken. Aboriginal people express surprise when people use words that are 'not the language of the Pricklebush' but belong to Uptown (39) as though language is the property of particular groups.

Wright suggests that Aboriginal people are misunderstood because they do not speak standard Australian English, nor do their storytelling and historiography meet Western standards. The satellite disc recently installed in the town was viewed with suspicion as 'some kind of gadget that can take away all your myall words, transcribe what you say in better language so people can understand what you are talking about' (99). The dilemma of using a carnivalised language to challenge language rules is that it is only understood by the minority group who use it, and not understandable by outsiders to the group. Therefore, to be understood beyond the group, carnivalised language needs to be translated back into standard language, rendering it domesticated and normalised.

Carpentaria also uses laughter to free people from the constraints of unreasonable authority, oppression and violence, as an antidote to fear and humility and as a means to restore self-worth. Carnival laughter is the people's laughter, it is shared, ambivalent and universal and in *Carpentaria* laughter is directed at the Pricklebush people and their four hundred year old hostilities, as well as at the Uptown people and their white cultural institutions: the law, education, religion and the economy. Laughter serves as a temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and established order, echoing the potential for humour to undermine and subvert.

Laughter releases social and political tensions and makes way for the little stories in between the lines of the larger, national narrative to help understand history from the Aboriginal people's point of view. Those who laugh at themselves and their world are expressing their belonging to that world. It is through laughter that the people seek to turn the official world on its head, to challenge the authority of dominant institutions. Wright and her characters are asserting their spiritual and political belonging to the world and to the land. Humour, parody and chaos subvert and disrupt official narratives, and laughter and popular speech make official subjects familiar.

Laughter can be healing, but carnivalesque laughter often has the 'ring of madness' to it (Patterson, 126). Madness could be described as the 'carnivalization of the mind' (Lachmann, *Memory and Literature* 175) and many characters in Wright's novel exhibit some form of 'temporary insanity' (337) or eccentricity. The whole town went 'stark raving mad' when Will Phantom tried to stop the mine (350). Captain Nicoli Finn is a madman; Elias Smith thought he was going mad when he found himself washed up on the beach in Desperance. Some people have moments of madness, while others are permanently mad. Kevin is 'a mental retard' after his accident in the mine (104). Madness and foolishness, like magic and the supernatural, are manifestations of boundary transgression that allow characters to view the world outside normal paradigms.

Madness is also a shield against the vagaries of life. Loneliness caused Angel Day to 'collapse into temporary insanity' (337) when she was left alone while Mozzie was on the

road. Mozzie Fishman saw visions, and Norman 'felt like a fanatic, a madman' (237) as both men sought a better future for their people. Lloydie Smith was in love with a mermaid that lived in the wood of his bar that was made from the salvaged timber of a shipwreck (341), and the policeman Truthful was 'off with the pixies' after he found the three little boys dead in the police cells (361). Uptown people suffer from paranoia (33) and phobias (51) and thought Pricklebush people were 'like mad people' when they spoke their 'mumbo jumbo' (77). Madness and laughter save the people from otherwise unbearable aspects of life when 'revolt is not a solution, neither is submission' and all that remains is 'laughter, metaphysical laughter' that is more than mere entertainment (Wiesel 199).

Exaggeration and parody do not obscure reality. The novel is not blind to the problems Aboriginal people face—the characters do share 'bad realities' (Wright, 'On Writing *Carpentaria*' 83). The stories and memories the novel relates resist the 'official version of the region's history' (10) from which the Pricklebush families were excluded, and instead offer to tell the ambivalent, funny and tragic 'real story of what happened here' (11); or maybe just 'the possibilities of other worlds' ('On Writing *Carpentaria*' 84). What really happened here is not the history of a utopian world free of pain and suffering until the arrival of the white man. The 'local history of centuries' that the sea lady recites to Norm includes the 'wars of the families ... [the] exact time, precise location, whose boundary it really was, the reason why others thought it was theirs' (262). The great war of the dump shatters the 'precarious modernity' (25) that had brought a degree of stability to the region as the Pricklebush people 'started to recall tribal battles from the ancient past' and ignore the harmony brought 'by the invader's governments' (26).

Mudrooroo argues that irony and humour are used in Aboriginal novels to 'lessen the reality of the narrative' (173); however, the humour in *Carpentaria* intensifies the reality and the violence rather than lessening it. Kevin Phantom is in many respects a comic figure. He is the youngest of the Phantom children, considered to be the brains of the family because he got an A plus for his essay on Tim Winton, but he was not expected to get a job because he was the 'most unco kid you ever come across' (106). In spite of this he was given a job in the Guffurit mine, to the dismay of his family. On his first day on the job he came out of the mine 'barbecued', 'burnt and broken' and an 'idiot' (109). Later in the narrative Kevin is savagely beaten by a gang of white Uptown louts as revenge for the death of Gordie, the town guard, and for the memories of when his brother Will Phantom opposed the mine (356). We laugh at Kevin at first, but it does not lessen the violent reality of his life or the narrative. Ultimately he is a tragic figure, an innocent victim of white progress and black protest, caught between two cultures, and valued by neither.

Seriousness and laughter appear together in *Carpentaria* as two parts of the whole, creating a deep sense of ambivalence in the narrative, with its 'blend of realism and the visionary' (Sharrad 60). Humour allows Wright to include the many ills and grievances, and tragic circumstances of the Pricklebush people while still allowing a vision of hope. Hence realist passages that depict Aboriginal deaths in custody, racism and the third-world living conditions of Aboriginal people are juxtaposed with the utopian proposition of a new world order figured as a return to pre-colonial times. But overall the novel paves the way for pathos rather than pity through laughter that expresses hope for a better future, for social justice and economic prosperity.

As I have argued above, *Carpentaria* offers a complex response to the place of Aboriginal people within the dominant Australian culture (Castellanos 1). It celebrates the Pricklebush people, Westside and Eastside, and their capacity to survive and to change, to recognise that

some traditions must make way for the new world. For instance 'Nomadism was no longer the answer' and '*Aborigine* people were different now, they knew the scientific as well' (123, italics in original). The people recognise that some aspects of their culture need to be relinquished and that survival and prosperity in the modern world require a conventional education, albeit aligned with traditional Indigenous knowledge. Mozzie and his pilgrims were 'responsible for keeping the one Law strong' (124) even though the people found the responsibilities associated with keeping the law too imposing. But there is a deep sense of ambivalence towards the possibility of a future where good and evil, and black and white are no longer clearly defined and where the old rules no longer apply.

Yet, while boundary transgressions in the novel result in new ways of representing Aboriginal people and their history, there are limits to the possibilities this unravels. For Terry Eagleton has argued that freedom and equality are only 'a permissible rupture of hegemony' (148) during Carnival, which is unlikely to transform the *status quo*. Ultimately the Pricklebush people may have to return to their place in the world where established hierarchies and rules are respected and everything returns to the way it was. Thus it may be that the novel rehearses merely a temporary suspension from the dominant framework for the production of art and historiography, and from political and economic hegemony. The subversive forces of Carnival exist in the text, but it is unclear how they can be translated into the day-to-day of Aboriginal lives and politics. Hence old Joseph Midnight struggles to understand the 'contemporary world' and 'he did not want to understand if it all meant that in the end the hope for a better world had perished in the sea' (379).

The novel's fluid time and profound ambivalence make the reader aware of a different sense of unity and harmony by bringing together myth, history, memory and imagination, by combining humour and seriousness, Dreamtime and Christianity, ambivalence and certainty, and politics and art. The combination of laughter, parody and irony together with the serious produces a new meaning that sits outside the official cultural framework for representations of Aboriginal people and culture. *Carpentaria* calls for a re-birth of Aboriginal culture and provides a new perspective on literary representations of Aboriginal people while recognising the limits of literature to bring about social change.

In the last pages of the novel, after the cyclone has destroyed the town, Norm, Hope and Bala finally make land and Norm heads towards the town to resume his life, to rebuild his house where the old one stood. Norm does not want to be 'a theorist who drowned in his own daydreams' (265); he had 'doggedly worked on regardless, so they could be where they were now' (513) and he would continue in the same way. For the time being Hope has left to pursue her own dream of finding Will. Although Norm felt the urge to bring her back it was 'as though a shield had been put up between him and Hope' and he knew he had to leave her, 'he could not interfere with other people's dreams' (517). Wright's use of the carnivalesque demonstrates that the dominant culture is vulnerable to change and renewal. Reality and textual realism are suspended for a time leaving us free to imagine a new order and a different vision of the future, which are not tied to official ways of being and thinking.

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