

9. Historyless People

Jeanine Leane

*... theirs is a timelessness of men and women wandering around without recourse either to origin or destination ...*¹

The construct of 'history' defines time as a space that can be measured. Time flows in a certain linear direction where people 'make' history. Historical discourse defines timelessness as an existence where time is not marked but melds in an unchanging, static environment. This chapter looks at the reconfiguration of time, place, history, memory, myth, magic and impossibility in Waanyi writer Alexis Wright's story *Carpentaria*.

Carpentaria is an Aboriginal narrative set in the fictional coastal town of Desperance by the Gulf of Carpentaria in north-western Queensland.² There are few familiar moorings for readers whose ethnocentric education presupposes that literature and history rely on inherently coherent and linear narratives. People with time and timeless people inhabit the space of the Gulf. Time and timelessness, history, memory and the sacred are central concerns of *Carpentaria*. Representations of deep and shallow time, notions of cosmos and chaos, history and memory, myth and reason are juxtaposed in Wright's narrative.

Who are the timeless people? *Carpentaria* begins with a chapter called 'From Time Immemorial', exposing different systems of time that exists in one place:

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 the 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'.³

Directly following this image of sharp and shallow Gregorian time, a deeper, languid and characterful world emerges:

1 Wright 2006: 58.

2 Wright 2006.

3 Wright 2006: 1.

The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity. It moved graciously – if you had been watching with the eyes of a bird hovering in the sky far above the ground.

Picture the giant serpent, scoring deep into – scouring down through – the slippery underground of mudflats, leaving in its wake the thunder of tunnels collapsing to form deep sunken valleys.

The serpent travelled over the marine plains, over the salt flats, through the salt dunes, past the mangrove forests and crawled inland ... When it finished creating the many rivers in its wake, it created one last river ... a river which offers no apologies for ... people who don't know it. This is where the giant serpent continues to live deep down under the ground in a vast network of limestone aquifers. They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the lives of the river people like skin.⁴

Whose Armageddon are the opening lines referring to? When time and timeless meet, a warp occurs and cosmos becomes chaos. But whose cosmos and whose chaos? Is one people's chaos another people's cosmos?

Carpentaria is told from the third person omniscient perspective and in an Aboriginal storytelling style. To offer a plot summary would be reductionist, as the narrative is a complex layering of stories. It collapses time and space to honour Aboriginal past, present, memory, future and the sense of collectively experienced time like the serpent described in the opening passages, 'collapsing tunnels' that represent confined spaces to form 'deep sunken valleys' that are expansive and vast like the Aboriginal stories in the narrative.

Although fictional, *Desperance* is representative of small towns in the Gulf country, in terms of geography, climate, demographics, history and memory. It is home to a fractious Aboriginal community living on both the east and west sides of the town. The Pricklebush mob and their patriarch Normal Phantom make a life adjacent to the rubbish tip. A contrasting breakaway group, Joseph Midnight's mob lives in car bodies and they invent a fictitious Aboriginal identity to profit from a mine. Another group of separatist traditionalists led by Big Mozzie Fishman follow the ancient Dreaming tracks from across the Northern Territory border in battered Holdens and Fords that require constant maintenance and salvaging by bush mechanics 'using [the] tools and parts found only in nature'.⁵ This group is inspired by another group of guerilla warriors, led by Will Phantom, who are intent on sabotaging the mine.

4 Wright 2006: 1–2.

5 Wright 2006: 120.

In between and surrounded by these Aboriginal groups live the Uptown Europeans, who continually resist the efforts of 'southern bureaucrats' to rename their town Masterton because they are intent on honouring their pioneer history. Underneath Desperance is a place of deep time that is out of the visual range of the settlers, but whose presence makes itself felt in ways that they cannot comprehend. The narrator points out that:

The inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is Aboriginal Law handed down through [generations] since time began. Otherwise, how would one know where to look for the underwater courses in the vast flooding mud plains, full of serpents and fish in the monsoon season? ... Know the moment of climatic change better than they know themselves?⁶

Beneath Desperance, bits and pieces discarded from Uptown float to the bottom of the sea. The reefs are home to 'thousands of bits and pieces of chipped and broken China, sugar-bears, yellow chickens, spotted dogs and pink babies of lost cargo'.⁷ The ancient sea reefs begin to archive settler history in their depths.

Beyond the town is the rubbish tip. It is home to the Pricklebush mob and one of the central characters in the story, Normal Phantom. Normal shares this home, built from all sorts of scraps thrown away by the white folk, with his wife Angel Day and their seven children. Normal was:

an old tribal man who lived ... in the dense Pricklebush scrub on the edge of town ... They had lived in a human dumping-ground since the day Normal Phantom was born ... The descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said 'the Aboriginal was not really part of the town at all' ... 'Furthermore', they said, 'the Aboriginal was dumped here by the pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfellas equal wages, even when it came in. Right on the edge of somebody else's town, didn't they?'⁸

The Pricklebush mob fashion their dwellings from settler rubbish and in this way the settler waste takes on a different value. It becomes a layer of a deeper landscape and memory of place and is incorporated into the depth of the lands and waters. Like the bits and pieces under the sea, the Pricklebush transforms the tip; it becomes a layer of a deeper history. A record and an archive to the everyday life of the recent settler diaspora, they seem to undervalue it in favour of bigger, more important quests; for example, attempting to distinguish the town with a giant statue to celebrate local mining and cattle industries or

6 Wright 2006: 3.

7 Wright 2006: 61.

8 Wright 2006: 4.

local pastimes, such as drinking and fighting southern bureaucrats over the pioneer history. They are adamant that the town's name remains the same in honour of Matthew Flinders, who Uptown *insisted* discovered the deep port. To the Aboriginal residents it is a constant and quiet source of amusement to know that, 'no one in Uptown accepted that Matthew Flinders was a prize fool [for going around] saying he discovered a deep water port'.⁹

The Pricklebush mob knew that:

Normal Phantom could grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father's fathers did before him. His ancestors were the river people, who were living with the river before time began ... he came and went on the flowing waters ... out to the sea. He stayed away ... as long as he pleased. He knew fish, and was on friendly terms with groper, the giant codfish of the Gulf sea, that swam in schools of fifty or more ... the prickly bush mob said he had always chased constellations: 'We watched him as a little boy running off into the night to try and catch stars'. They were certain he knew the secret of getting there ... right up to the stars in the company of groper fish ... when the sea and the sky became one ...¹⁰

Islands of floating debris, so large and so dense that they can support vegetation and human life, surround the waters around Desperance. In the final scene, one of these islands, largely formed of waste from a mine nearby, is used as a hideout for an Aboriginal guerilla warrior who eventually destroys the mine. This image of human-made islands floating in a wider, deeper, natural sea, provides us with a significant metaphor for reading between the contested space of Aboriginal memory and realism and western history and rationalism.

At this point a fair question may be to ask what has all this to do with history? Since its publication in 2006, *Carpentaria* has won a host of awards and attracted much critical attention from a largely non-Aboriginal readership. It has been described, for example, as a blurring of fact and fantasy, myth and history, a 'sprawling carnivalesque novel', a dreamscape of which magical realism is also associated, and 'a dreamscape'.¹¹ Literary scholar Ian Syson commented that while the novel had the 'bones of a contemporary realist plot' they are bones only – for they do not get fleshed out. Rather, the novel favours a 'more ornamental, magic-enabling mode'.¹² My interest as an Aboriginal reader is in

9 Wright 2006: 60.

10 Wright 2006: 6–7.

11 Delvin Glass 2007: 86; Molloy 2012: 1; Syson 2007: 86.

12 Syson 2007.

the use of descriptors such as these that defer to the magical, mythical and the incredible, and how such terms position Wright's narrative outside the realms of western realism.

Many of the incidents described revolve around Mabo-style native title claims in the far north. Clashes between Aboriginal communities and mining and pastoral leases are also reported in the colonial records, such as the sabotage of a mine in a similar setting by Aboriginal guerillas and the cyclone that levels the town in Armageddon-like circumstances. But what of that which is described as myth and fantasy, the unsubstantiated beyond the boundaries of western possibility? The epic sea journeys by Normal Phantom that are neither marked by days, weeks, months, years, fathoms, leagues or any other conventional marker of space or time; or the malfunctioning of every single watch, clock and timepiece owned by the settlers, thus suspending western time for the duration of the narrative?

Carpentaria is a working and weaving of many Aboriginal stories of place; the spiritual beliefs of the Waanyi passed down from Wright's grandmother, of whom she wrote:

She had stories to explain everything – who we are, who each of us were and the place on our traditional country that was very deep.¹³

There are stories of place from elder storytellers and stories gathered from Wright's long career from the late 1960s onwards, working with political movements in Mount Isa and throughout north-west Queensland, including the Gulf – her traditional country. She draws upon her time at Mornington Island, when the Queensland Government, under Bjelke Petersen, wanted state control of the island after the Uniting Church mission withdrew. The Lardil people wanted self-determination and worked against the government. In this way, it is a work of Aboriginal realism.¹⁴

Wright recalls:

I am still involved in campaigns for our rights. I am indebted to the generous spirit of men and women of great wisdom and knowledge ... they gave me the tool of writing. I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way to tell the truth ... more of a truth than non-fiction which isn't really true either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what it is safe to tell.¹⁵

13 Wright 2002: 13.

14 Alexis Wright resisted the term magic realism to describe *Carpentaria*. 'Some people call the book magic realism but really in a way it's an Aboriginal realism which carries all sorts of things.' Wright quoted by Dart 2007 and Ravenscroft 2010: 216.

15 Wright 2002: 13.

Furthermore, Alison Ravenscroft points out in relation to western categorisations of Wright's work, that when western translations of Aboriginal knowledge occur, the discourse surrounding it slips into familiar vocabulary and generic codes: magic, superstition, myth and the supernatural – western readings that label the knowledge of 'others' unexplainable and 'magic'; 'a move that paradoxically tames and familiarises'.¹⁶

Ravenscroft asks in relation to such terms: 'Whose magic, whose reality?' She refers to Toni Morrison's essay 'Rootedness: The Ancestor is Foundation'.¹⁷ In response to interpretations of *Song of Solomon* as mythical and magical, Morrison stated: 'Among African Americans there are ways of knowing that might fall into the magic or superstitious in the eyes of white American readers.'¹⁸ She went on to say: 'Flying was one of our [great] gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem ... it's in [our] spirituals and our gospels.'¹⁹ What is taken by a white reader to be magic in texts such as Morrison's might not be so for the world of the author.

Ravenscroft's question is poignant as it draws attention to the frequency by white critics and scholars to refer to stories such as Toni Morrison's, and later Wright's, as magical or mythical. Morrison's, and later Ravenscroft's, reservations about these and similar descriptors are that the white western reality becomes the only reality.

Patrick Wolfe critiqued the term Dreamtime as an invention of anthropological discourse, where dreams are associated with the unconscious, imaginary and illusionary rather than what might rightly be called Aboriginal Law.²⁰ Wolfe argued that in the Australian colonising context, the combination of 'Aborigine' and 'dream' made for the dispossession of Aboriginal peoples by removing us from western historical time.²¹ This makes colonial times and places the only reality. I am reminded here of Syson's comment that Wright may well have perfected the art of magical realism in Australia, pioneered in his view by Peter Carey and Richard Flanagan, by 'giving the magic more indigenous [sic] and Indigenous sources'.²² Does this perfection lie in what the settler imagination insists and persists in reading as an ideal combination: the Indigenous and magic?

16 Ravenscroft 2010: 216.

17 Morrison 1984: 340.

18 Cited in Ravenscroft 2010: 200.

19 Quoted in Ravenscroft 2010: 200.

20 Wolfe 1991.

21 Wolfe 1991: 210.

22 Syson 2007.

What is at stake for Aboriginal writers of stories of place, deep time, present time and the future when contemporary historians, literary critics, cultural theorists, anthropologists continue to read our narratives via the constructs of 'the dream', 'the mythical' and the 'magical', thus making an association between Aboriginal storytelling and fantasy, the impossible, the illusory and the unreal? Or, as Ravenscroft asks, 'where Dreaming is translated as legend, myth or children's story ... the kind of dreaming one does on one's pillow, a fantasmatic distortion of everyday life without geographical or historical coordinates.'²³ From where I stand such readings assimilate our knowledge and stories of time and place to the familiar discourse of the settler readers' comfort zone.

Alexis Wright refuses such assimilation of Aboriginal experience and beliefs within western paradigms and exposes the dreams and beliefs of the settler residents of Desperance as impossible and a mere fantasy. It is the settlers who continually confront timeless un-belonging. From the Aboriginal perspective, Desperance is but a 'shared slither of similarity with others'.²⁴ Ironically, true Desperanians are described as 'blue-eyed, blond, nervy, skinny, freckled types belonging to old families whose origins in town stretched back several generations, not Johnny-come-latelies – no way'.²⁵

The old people of the Pricklebush give their children, who they must send to Uptown for school, a job to do: "'Go", they told the schoolkids, "search through every single line of those whitefellas' history books"'. The children flicked through the damp pages of western history books to find that 'whitefellas had no secrets'.²⁶ At the end of the exercise, the 'little scholars' report on 'whitefella dreams' to their elders:

These children stood full of themselves in front of the old people and proclaimed loudly, that the folk of Uptown could be masters of their own dreams. Yes, like stonemasons, who in a night could relay every single stone in an invisible boundary surrounding the town into a wall so solid it had the appearance of [an] important medieval palace. *But where were stones to be found in the claypans?* In these times it was assumed that any outsider to these dreams would never see the stones of Desperance, if he carried a different understanding of worldly matters originating from ancient times elsewhere. The outsider to these dreams only saw open spaces and flat lands.²⁷

23 Ravenscroft 2010: 197.

24 Wright 2006: 55.

25 Wright 2006: 57.

26 Wright 2006: 57.

27 Wright 2006: 58–59.

The Aborigines are the outsiders to this dream, yet their deeper understanding of place, people and time make the settlers' certainty, and their dreams seem ridiculously impossible. Their faith in an invisible net that is 'made up of prayers and god-fearing devotion ... a protective shield, saving the town from a cyclone ... every November',²⁸ is juxtaposed over deeper Aboriginal knowledge of place and time. As the cyclone approaches, the omniscient voice of the Aboriginal storyteller speaks as the land itself and asks:

The old, unanswerable question: [H]ow the heck were they going to keep themselves out of the water?²⁹

For the Pricklebush mob: 'Crickets and frogs were the guardians of the night for generations of Pricklebush folk.'³⁰ The Pricklebush mob see not a boundary or a net or a fence but:

huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town, even inside other folk's houses ... Nothing ... good was coming out of these puerile dreams of stone walls, big locked gates, barred windows, barbed wire rolled around the top to lock out the black demon. Pricklebush decided the Uptown boundary must be a gammon one. Then the Uptown folk showed their boundaries which they said had been created at the beginning of their time.³¹

The Pricklebush look on in disbelief at the settlers who believe that they can make and master their own dreams. This is a myth as the impending cyclone and destruction of the mine prove.

In the closing, highly symbolic passages of the novel, Desperance is levelled by a cyclone and Aboriginal activists use the settler chaos around the cyclone to carry out an attack on the mine. Settler rubbish in the form of a floating island of debris is used as a hideout for a guerilla warrior who survives for months floating around the Gulf of Carpentaria. For the settlers, the town is levelled and destroyed. For the Aboriginal residents, the town is transformed as part of the cosmos of the underground serpent. It never was a question of 'if', but 'when'. In this way, Wright challenges European arrogance and inexperience with the living land.

But like her refusal to accept a narrow and shallow definition of history, Wright also challenges the adequacy and accuracy of western terms like science to describe Aboriginal knowledge. In *Carpentaria*, Aboriginal knowledge

28 Wright 2006: 58.

29 Wright 2006: 55.

30 Wright 2006: 59.

31 Wright 2006: 59.

is grounded in its faithfulness and faith in a particular place, its ancestry, its people, its seas and skies, and the deep interpretation of these with the sacred – despite European efforts to consign this kind of knowledge to discourses of the irrational, superstitious and the pre-scientific. Aboriginal knowledge of sacred is summed up in the words of one of Wright’s Aboriginal characters as already ‘scientific enough’. This is a beautifully derisive term and the ‘if-y-ness’ of western science is contrasted throughout the narrative to the depths of Aboriginal knowledge of place. The question is posed in the opening passages as to how does a person who did not grow up in a place that is sometimes under water and sometimes dry as a bone, ‘know the moment of climatic change better than they know themselves’.³²

Carpentaria then is a continuing narrative of Aboriginal experience of place, people and of *all times*. Wright rejects the term history to describe the narrative for its confinement of Aboriginal people to victim spaces and its shallow view of time. Time is represented in *Carpentaria* by the resilience of ancient beliefs overlaying the inherited colonial experience that the author describes as ‘nothing more than hot air passing through the mind’. And, of this shallow settler history,

with no disrespect it is expedient to say at this point, that such little towns are apt to do one thing right, and this is how a town like Desperance shared a slither of similarity with others ... it too sought glory in its own legends. A single, important legendary lore of place developed over a century or two ...³³

The irony that runs through the story is that while the settlers are intent on recording their history – the ‘things that are safe to tell’ – they fail to realise that they are already incorporated into a bigger past that is Aboriginal land and memory and that, in this scheme of things, they are the shallowest layer. The most striking contrast in Wright’s narrative between deep and shallow time is arguably what the settlers cannot hear.

Southern people who like noise would say that something north of the Tropic of Capricorn like Desperance, was just a quiet little town, but if you listened hard enough, you would have heard the silence screaming to be heard.³⁴

32 Wright 2006: 3.

33 Wright 2006: 55.

34 Wright 2006: 55.

The silence that screams to be heard is the Aboriginal reality of past, present, belief and memory built over (albeit temporarily), and just below the surface of a literal and figurative colonial construction of a town and its settler foundation myths, superstitions and beliefs.

In reflecting on the lengthy process of telling an Aboriginal story of collective memories, Wright wrote:

[The story] could not be contained in a capsule that was either time or incident specific. It would not fit into the English and therefore Australian tradition of creating boundaries and fences which encode the development of thinking in this country, and which follows through ... the containment of thought and idea in the novel.³⁵

And:

I wanted to examine how memory is being recreated to challenge the warped creativity of negativity, and somehow becomes a ... continuation of the Dreaming story.³⁶

Aboriginal Dreaming is not a static place or time as western discourse often implies. *Carpentaria* challenges ideas of boundaries and confinement by exploring how ancient Aboriginal beliefs sit in the contemporary world as a continuation of our Dreaming stories.

So why, since much of what happens in this story could be substantiated by 'facts' that a western historian would have to accept, does the author reject 'history' as it is currently defined? Wright said she did not want to write a historical novel, even though Australia appears to be a land with a disappearing memory. She goes on to describe Australian history as 'the colonising spider' and certainly in a very short and shallow space of time it has woven a very tangled web and 'netted' (to use the author's own term from the novel) Aboriginal people within its colonising discourse. As Wright reminds us: 'History drags every Aboriginal person into the conquering grips of colonisation' – and it does! It brings us into someone else's time and that time has been written of as *the only time*. Wright goes on to say:

the story does not only come from colonisation or assimilation or having learnt to write English, or arguing whether people with an oral history should write books, but is sung just as strongly from those of our ancestors who wrote our stories on the walls of caves and on the surface of weathered rock.³⁷

35 Wright 2007: 81.

36 Wright 2007: 82.

37 Wright 2006: 13.

In trying to configure the history Wright knew, and the reality she understood, to tell an Aboriginal story of all times, she looked outside of Australia.³⁸ She was inspired and influenced by novelist Carlos Fuentes who described Mexico as a country of suspended times, where no time has been resolved. Fuentes explained that European writers assimilate and direct the past by writing with a sense of linear time that assumes a forward progression. He believed that novels were places where all times meet and 'past becomes memory, and the future, desire ... The novel expresses things that history did not mention, did not remember or suddenly stopped imagining.'³⁹ Similarly, Uruguayan journalist and author Eduardo Galeano wrote in the introduction to his work *Genesis* that he 'wanted to contribute to the kidnapped memory of all America (Latin America) and to speak to his land, to talk to her, to share her secrets, ask of what difficult clays she was born, from what acts of love and violation she comes'.⁴⁰ The failure of history then, for Indigenous writers and storytellers is its containment, its selective memory and its general reluctance to recognise land as living.

Carpentaria closes with a different song to the one at the beginning. 'It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh.'⁴¹ So Desperance is transformed, not destroyed. The settler disaster is reconfigured as Aboriginal cosmos. Land decides the destiny of people. People tell stories that existed before settler occupation and remember.

Historians write retrospectively and selectively. Wright reconfigures conventional meanings of time and timeless in a story of Aboriginal realism. More specifically, it is Waanyi realism as the story is born of Waanyi times and place and the Gulf of Carpentaria is a place for all times and memory – not just the last 225 years. The historyless people are those without deeper connections to the land that they occupy. Their timelessness is the vacuum of the short history they have made. The settler's belief in an invisible net protecting the town's colonial history from Aboriginal superstition and natural disaster proves to be but a slim veneer. In the face of a deeper, greater and more powerful force, *history* as currently defined is similarly a slim layer in Aboriginal memory and time.

38 Wright 2007.

39 Fuentes 2005: 178.

40 Galeano 1987: xv.

41 Wright 2006: 519.

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This text is taken from *Long History, Deep Time: Deepening Histories of Place*, edited by Ann McGrath and Mary Anne Jebb, published 2015 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.