



ALEXIS WRIGHT'S *CARPENTARIA* FROM AN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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The following is a close reading of Alexis Wright's award-winning novel, *Carpentaria*, from an ecocritical perspective. This article aims to find answers to the following questions: How are the various representations of nonhuman nature significant in the novel? How is the relationship between humans and (non-)human others depicted? How do the characters treat spaces and places differently? What assumptions does the author seem to make about the readers?

Keywords: Australian aboriginal literature, Ecocriticism, Contemporary Australian fiction, Space and place.

Introduction

While it can be notoriously difficult to pinpoint any particular methodology that is appropriate and useful for environmental criticism and its various subdivisions, the following article is an attempt to analyze a certain novel specifically from this perspective. It is worth noting here that the expression "environmental criticism" means roughly the same as ecocriticism, but is simply the preferred term for some scholars, most notably Lawrence Buell and his followers. Buell himself describes environmental criticism as an "interdisciplinary mix of literature-and-environment studies, which has always drawn on the human as well as the natural sciences and in recent years cross-pollinated more with cultural studies than with sciences" (Buell viii). It is namely because of this high level of interdisciplinarity that choosing a method is rather complicated. Ecofeminists, for example, even go so far as to denounce any "exclusivist, either-or approach to organizing and describing 'reality' based on oppressive patriarchal conceptual frameworks ... /b/ecause such views serve to create, maintain, and reinforce male-biased worldviews and practices that justify the domination of the other." (Warren 154)

As I will be analyzing a piece of literature in this essay (instead of, say, government data or a TV-show), I have thought it best to do a close reading of this novel from an ecocritical perspective. How are the various representations of nonhuman nature significant in the novel? How is the relationship between humans and (non-)human others depicted? How do the characters treat spaces and places differently? What assumptions does the author seem to make about the readers? These are only a few questions that I hope to have answers for.

Only during the second half of last century (nearly 200 years after the beginning of the oppressive colonial regime) were Australian Aborigines able to start publishing their writing (Grossman for further information) – and in any language of their choice, expressing both their creativity and their concerns for the wider public. Few have done this with greater aplomb than Alexis Wright (b. 1950). She is originally

from Queensland, so it is hardly surprising that her greatest piece of writing to date is a novel, *Carpentaria*, that depicts Queenslanders very accurately, very humorously, and very bitterly. The major Australian publishing houses thought that she had written this novel a little too accurately, even, and refused to print it, so she had to take it to a small printing business instead. What followed was both public and critical acclaim, and the novel was the winner of the Miles Franklin Literary Award in 2007 (considered to be the most prestigious literary award of Australia, similarly to the Booker Prize in Britain). While Wright insists that the novel is not autobiographical, she also says, "I was asked to write a non-fiction work about the troubles that we had in the Gulf with mining, but I didn't feel I had the appropriate skills to write that kind of work without being sued." (Moss) With this in mind, the book is surely an intriguing read.

Carpentaria

Carpentaria is set in north-western Queensland, depicting life in a fictional town of Desperance, on the Gulf of Carpentaria. The population of this town consists of descendants of white settlers, and Aborigines, although the latter have been forced to live in a separate 'suburb' of their own – next to the white settlers' rubbish tip, constructing their houses out of everything that the whites have discarded.

"They had lived in a human dumping-ground next to the town tip since the day Normal Phantom was born. All choked up, living piled up together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too, salvaged from the rubbish dump. The descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all." (Wright 4)

Here, Wright's words are simply echoing the unfortunate policy-making tradition seemingly present all over the world: that incinerators or landfills "happen" to be located in non-white neighbourhoods. (Warren 13 e.g.) Also, judging by the description of the rubbish tip, the whites are not particularly keen on recycling, whereas the Aborigines' lives depend on it.

Although there is some trash that is contained within the limits of the town's dumping-ground, there is trash everywhere else as well – leftovers of a white middle-class life. One of the characters of the novel, Elias Smith, is floating on open sea after a storm has passed, and he is able to find food in a rather unusual place: a polystyrene container floating nearby that has some fruit in it; and later he is having serious problems with reaching the shore, as he has to pass several decades' worth of half-submerged car and trailer wrecks (Wright 50; 67). The self-claimed town guard can aim at intruders better by stepping on empty jerry cans. There are entire flotillas of empty cordial cans that are floating off the coast of Queensland. A constantly travelling set of characters have no need to find a car repair shop if any of their cars should happen to break down in the middle of nowhere, "But out on a lonely dusty road of the never ever, Mozzie's bush mechanics would have picked up enough man-made rubbish to fancy-dress a car, or do a complete engine rebuild, gearbox overhaul, the upholstery and welding done to suit." (Wright 144) The author contrasts the ability and keenness of the natives to reuse things with the wasteful manner of the whites. The latter seem oblivious to the vast quantities of trash all around, perhaps because they do not view it as significant enough for them, not directly affecting their everyday life and good living standards. They seem to fret about nature (and man-made climate change) only around Christmas, when there is a risk that gale force winds might tear off some plastic reindeer statues (Wright 47).

"Thousands of dry balls of lemon-coloured spinifex, uprooted by the storm, rolled into town and were swept out to sea. From the termite mounds dotting the old country the dust storm gathered up untold swarms of flying ants dizzy with the smell of rain and sent them flying with the wind. Dead birds flew past. Animals racing in frightened droves were left behind in full flight, impaled on barbed-wire spikes along the boundary fences. In the sheddings of the earth's waste, plastic shopping bags from the rubbish dump rose up like ghosts into the troposphere of red skies to be taken for a ride, far away. Way out above the ocean, the pollution of dust and wind-ripped pieces of plastic gathered, then dropped with the salty

humidity and sank in the waters far below, to become the unsightly decoration of a proper's highway deep in the sea." (Wright 229) History has shown that the Anglo-Saxon keenness on fencing has had devastating effects in several countries. Here Wright exaggeratedly presents one of the negative aspects of trying to enforce rigid boundaries on land, instead of following natural ones like the natives do (rivers, mountain ranges etc.); which seems to serve as another example of why it is ill-advised to try to be superior over nature.

The fascinatingly named Normal Phantom is one of the protagonists of the novel, which follows his family's struggles with and various approaches to the problem of a mine built near the town of Desperance (a significant toponym in itself). He and other natives are forced to do the town's dirtiest and most dangerous jobs, and one of Normal's sons develops a mental disability after a working accident in the mine (Wright 104). Throughout this book, Wright often mentions how the effect of the whites on nature and the natives has been devastatingly negative. Elsewhere, she has summarized this effect as follows, "No matter what we do, new ways are found by this country to treat us with dishonour and disrespect." (Wright, *Overland Magazine*)

Already from the beginning of the novel it is evident that Wright is not very pleased with the actions of the white settlers, and she never misses a moment to use very dark humour to make fun of them: it is very dark indeed, as she is, in effect, describing the whites' deliberate destruction of her homeland. As one reviewer puts it: "The comedy is high and dark; the satiric butts are sharply and quirkily observed; but the difference is that the angle of vision is very much that of an insider who knows indigenous politics intimately and affectionately. Wright is Waanyi and has a long history of working in Aboriginal bureaucracies in the Centre and Top End, and a fine contempt for self-serving small-town mindsets." (Devlin-Glass 1)

The theme of possession starts from the very beginning of the novel as well: the conflict between the Aborigines who never consider themselves owners of land, but merely (?) its custodians; and the white settlers, who are keen to draw borders and declare what is theirs by "right", desperately trying to claim a new place for themselves. Also, the particular problem in Australia is that for the Indigenous peoples, their entire Dreamtime mythology is contained in various places on, forms of, features of their land, which makes it sacred. But, as Wright pithily puts it, "The outsider to these dreams [sees] only open spaces and flat lands." (Wright 59) Australian Aborigines have a special connection with the land, which directly influences their social, cultural and economic well-being; and when such ties are severed, there is no more well-being. (Lonely Planet 35) The native characters in this book see ancestral creation spirits (and their work) everywhere, even in white people's houses; and the spirits act like the natives' support network, for want of a better term. For example, the natives (in this book) interpret various natural and weather phenomena as positive or negative signs from the spirits, which help them decide if it happens to be a good day for fishing, for example. The whites, obviously lacking this support network and completely disconnected from the land, are portrayed as being at a disadvantage, but their financial wealth helps them overcome many problems.

"True Desperanians were those blue-eyed, blond, nervy, skinny, freckled types belonging to the old families whose origins in town stretched back several generations, not Johnny-come-latelies – no way. On request, these descendants of the original residents could rattle off from the top of their heads the who's who in town, and who went six foot down and under in the local cemetery. /---/ On the scale of things, their history was just a half-flick of the switch of truth – simply a memory no greater than two life spans." /---/ The old [native] people gave the little kids whom they had send into Uptown every day to get educated, a job to do. *Go*, they told the school kids, *search through every single line of all those whitefellas' history books*. The little boys and girls flicked through all the damp pages to find out the secrets of white people. They reported finding not one single heroic deed about Uptown. The old people almost flogged those kids for lying about white people, or laziness, or both. *How could you find nothing?* The little scholars insisted that they were telling the truth. *Alright! What else then?* Not any religious places of worship so steeped in prayer and devotion the ground was too holy to walk on belonged to

Uptown. *They got no sanctified ground? They got no sanctified ground.*" (Wright 57-8) Again, an example of how the white settlers are desperately trying to look like the legitimate owners of the land, while managing to have only a few generations' worth of history in that particular area, as opposed to the native settlements that first existed tens of thousands of years ago. As explained before, the Australian landscape serves as a visual prompt for the natives' mythological narratives, making many areas of it sacred and even taboo. The whites with complete disconnection from the land have no such feelings towards any inanimate objects.

This masterfully written farce keeps highlighting the antagonism between the native and the white town officials (and the nearby mine), sketching a tragicomical picture of how the natives always lose the fight against the bureaucratic machinery, just as is convenient for the colonizers.

"[The celebration] coincided with a spate of unusual happenings during a short-lived era of Aboriginal domination of the Council. Harmless coercing of the natives, the social planners hummed, anxious to make deals happen for the impending mining boom. /---/ During this honeymoon period, those Aboriginal people who took the plunge to be councillors, wisely used their time in public office to pursue scraps of personal gain for their own families living amongst the muck of third-world poverty. All this was part and parcel of the excitement of Desperance when the first multinational mining company came into the region. Numerous short-lived profiteering schemes were concocted for the locals, in order to serve the big company's own interests as they set about pillaging the region's treasure trove: the publicly touted curve of an underground range embedded with minerals. The elaborate white linen ceremony, paid for by the mining company, attracted southern politicians who flew in for the day." (Wright 8-9) The deep cynicism of the natives shows that they are accustomed to being ignored.

Later in the book, Wright describes the effect on the townspeople after the mine has been in operation for some time.

"Desperance had become a boom town with a more sophisticated outlook now, because it belonged totally to the big mine. When the mind came along with all of its big equipment, big ideas, big dollars from the bank – Well! Why not? Every bit of Uptown [the white settlers' neighbourhood] humanity went for it – lock, stock and barrel. The mine bought off the lot of them, including those dogs over Eastside [a natives' neighbourhood]. They would be getting their just deserts, Westside [a natives' neighbourhood feuding with Eastside] told those traitors who ran down to the mine crawling on their stomachs for a job. They were all doing deals. /---/ There was plenty of work. Too much work. A perpetual round of work, repairing flood-damaged roads hacked to pieces by road transports carrying heavy machinery and grinding their way up to the mine; then loaded, returning to the coast, hauling the country away to pour into ships destined for overseas refineries." (Wright 98, 107) Indeed, increasing local employment rates seems to be the only positive thing about the mine; but even then is the hiring process connected to the superiority of the decision-makers over those who have to live with the consequences of those decisions. Nowhere in the book does the mine take into account the natives' opinions and local knowledge.

The Aborigines' ancestral spirits are all watching how their land is being mistreated, "It occurred to Mozzie that the silent spirit men were listening to the sound of Will Phantom's country, to the dull, monotonous clanging made by heavy machinery churning and gouging into the land." (Wright 150) An Irish priest is convinced, „It's gone too far this time Will, too far, this mine, using technology to control people. Very unwise. They cannot crush people just because they have the power to crush the landscape to smithereens." (Wright 193)

Will Phantom, Normal's son, is the key activist fighting against the mine, but not even his own family take his warnings seriously. The white propaganda machine belittles him:

"So much trouble, fights, and what have you, all because one person kept telling the world he did not want the mine to be built. The very building they were sitting in front of, the beautiful new Council offices, had replaced the one they all reckoned he burnt down. Someone had to have done it. It could not have burnt down by itself. Happily for everyone, the good neighbour mine came to the rescue. It honoured its word: said it was going to donate a brand-new building when it got the green light on Native

title problems.” (Wright 326) This and the following quotes are examples of how the mine is portrayed in the book as namely that – the mine. It is an abstract, impersonal, inhuman, non-human being that is extremely controlling over everything else.

“Mining changed the way people had to think about looking after themselves. If a man was to survive, he had to first think of what the mine was capable of doing to him.” (Wright 386)

“This war with the mine had no rules. Nothing was sacred. It was a war for money.” (Wright 378)

The way the white settlers have mistreated the entire region has even started to affect the weather, with the cyclone activity increasing manifold. “The weatherman ended with a short statement about a tidal surge due to the cyclone activity in the region. Will closed his eyes and saw the tremendous fury of the winds gathering up the seas, and clouds carrying the enormous bodies of spiritual beings belonging to other worlds. Country people, old people, said it was the sound of the great spiritual ancestors roaring out of the dusty, polluted sea all of the time nowadays. Will believed this. Everyone clearly saw what the spirits saw. The country looked dirty from mining, shipping, barges spilling ore and waste.” (Wright 401)

Conclusion

It is painfully obvious how much Wright despairs over the state of things in her country, but she playfully lets the reader draw their own conclusions, instead of reverting to a simplistic narrative that would lay the blame on particular groups of people, or objects. Through *Carpentaria* she implies that it is namely because the white settlers are so detached from the land that they are able to abuse it so easily. They see it as an abstract space, instead of a concrete place. Buell talks about the concept of place as something that is at least threefold: it comprises environmental materiality, social perception or construction, and an individual affect or bond. (Buell 65) The white settlers of Desperance (and, indeed, of Australia) do not seem to view the land as anything else except as a way of making a profit, and they go out of their way to prove to themselves and to others that they actually have some right to do this. Wright does not find any positive aspects of mining (are there any at all to be found?). The mine is depicted as the most negative non-human character in the novel, and its relationship with all of the human characters in the book has a devastating effect on all parties concerned. The author gives numerous examples of how the land itself is fighting against the imposed changes; how the ancestral spirits are fighting against the abuse directed against them. This novel could be read as an example of brilliant magical realism. However, bearing in mind that this book began its life as a piece of non-fiction, it could also be read as a true description of events, with a few literary flourishes thrown in. It depends solely on how well the reader is prepared to accept the presence of Aboriginal ancestral spirits both in the book and in the real world.

Without wanting to give away much of the plot, I feel it important to note that the novel ends with a positive note. That is, positive for the natives. Perhaps because of the white-settler-caused weather changes or perhaps because the ancestral spirits have had enough, a big cyclone wipes out the entire town of Desperance. Only Normal and his grandson manage to find their way back alive to the ruins of their home, but they are content to see a new beginning. After all, theirs is a culture of survival.

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