

## Orality and Narrative Invention in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

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In an early review of Alexis Wright's 2006 novel *Carpentaria*, Alison Ravenscroft makes special mention of the narrator's voice. She says reading *Carpentaria* is 'like being spoken to by someone with a voice you can trust, someone standing close by.' She argues Wright has come up with a language to address 'the question of the oral and the written word,' and Ravenscroft adds: 'Of all this novel's wonderful inventions, the narrator may be the most remarkable' (Ravenscroft, Review). Since then, *Carpentaria* has attracted both critical acclaim and considerable scholarly attention, and although references to the unusual voice of the narrator run like a common thread through much of the commentary on the novel—it was been variously called 'a storyteller's voice' (Lowry 2), 'an expression of Aboriginal communal consciousness' (Aitken 21), and 'magisterial yet colloquial' (Perlez)—no one appears to have taken up the gauntlet that Ravenscroft very clearly threw down. That is to say, what many consider to be *Carpentaria*'s most remarkable invention, its narrative voice, has not been investigated in depth.

This may be because Wright appears to defy diegetic conventions, making it difficult, initially, to imagine who the narrator is and where to locate him/her within the text. He/she is mostly heterodiegetic, to use Gerard Genette's standard term for a narrator who is not a character in the story he/she tells (244–45), but switching occurs between singular and plural voices, between third-person omniscience and second-person familiarity. Then there are constant exclamatory interjections in the narration, such as: 'Goodness!' (14), 'Well!' (23), and 'Imagine that' (270). Who is the narrator addressing? Where do you position yourself as a reader here? The clues to unravelling *Carpentaria*'s narratological puzzle, I suggest, are to be found in considering the assertion of orality that Wright seeks to impose on the text. Put simply, the assertion of orality yields narrative structure in the case of *Carpentaria*. Therefore, this essay, which primarily investigates narrative voice and proposes a narrative framework for *Carpentaria*, will begin by discussing how Wright privileges orality in her novel. By 'privileging orality' I mean to say that Wright not only affirms orality's importance in Aboriginal life, as a cultural asset that has survived colonisation, she goes further: she challenges Western notions of orality's deficiencies, such as the idea that it lacks historical exactitude or that it lacks durability or longevity. And she does this by, among other things, patronising and ridiculing Western written forms of receiving, maintaining and transmitting knowledge. Her aim, I argue, is to deride non-Aboriginal knowledge systems, particularly written historical and political discourses, and to elevate Aboriginal storytelling in oral form. A closer reading of the text reveals the use of both *explicit* and *implicit* strategies for asserting the power and longevity of Indigenous oral storytelling and knowledge systems over and against (Western) written systems.

Before Wright gives her narrator voice to tell *Carpentaria*'s 'main' story, she establishes a framework—a special narrative stage—to allow the narrator/narrators to speak and to be listened to by attentive narratees. This stage, I argue, is created in the short opening sequence of capitalised

text, situated below the first chapter heading but clearly demarcated by a dotted line from the beginning of the ‘main’ tale. This opening sequence, starting with the sentence, ‘A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*’ (1), forms part of an external narrative framework, within which Wright has allowed another narrator the freedom, the breathing space, to unleash a huge tale of Indigenous Australian experience. In other words, narratologically speaking, the ‘main’ story of *Carpentaria* needs to be read as an *embedded* narrative, introduced by a *framing* narrative, comprising just two short passages of capitalised text, one at the beginning of Chapter 1 and another at the beginning of Chapter 2. The construction of this narrative framework allows Wright to position a uniquely Indigenous *oral* narrative voice at the centre of her story, freed from both the *written* text of nationhood and the constrictions of literary address that Indigenous authors often remain captive to. *Carpentaria* is a ground-breaking novel in a number of ways but its narrative framework may well be a unique novelistic invention.

### **The Explicit Assertion of Orality in *Carpentaria***

Terry Goldie’s transnational study, *Fear and Temptation* (1989), reveals the pejorative associations of the oral (and Indigenous orality) that have mostly prevailed in Australian literature (107–26). In examining the portrayal of the indigene in non-Indigenous fiction in Australia, Canada and New Zealand, Goldie names orality as one of the ‘standard commodities’ of Western discourse on the Other (15).<sup>1</sup> He notes that Frantz Fanon saw orality as mostly associated with the infantile in the Other; that in European texts the pejorative implication of the idea that the ‘Negro loves to jabber,’ is that ‘the Negro is just a child’ (Fanon, qtd. in Goldie 107). So, for Fanon, the oral Indigenous Other is represented as child-like, immature (see Fanon 26–27). But Goldie notes that references to the ‘jabbering’ native in the settler-colonial literatures he examines are almost non-existent. What arises more commonly in Australian literature is the contrast between the ‘oral’ culture of the Aborigines and the ‘written’ culture of the settlers, so that orality signals illiteracy, and by association, a lack of high-culture, a lack of civilisation, stunted cultural attributes, and so on (Goldie 108). Goldie takes issue with Walter Ong’s 1982 study, *Orality and Literacy*, in which orality is located along a progressivist axis. In Ong’s words: ‘Without writing, human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials . . . [and so] orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing’ (Ong 14). Within Ong’s framework, as Michele Grossman points out, ‘the oral is invariably figured as doomed to extinction by writing’ (60).

*Carpentaria* also flatly rejects this paradigm of the inevitable demise of the oral upon contact with the written. What Alexis Wright does in her text is to take orality by the scruff of the neck, as it were, shake it free of all of its pejoratives and sneering deprecations, and boldly insert it back into the text, empowered. The orality-literacy dichotomy is discarded early on, as Wright invokes an already literate Aboriginal culture: ‘The old people wrote about the history of these wars on rock’ (23), the narrator tells us. But more significantly, we notice that the main Aboriginal characters who uphold orality are not illiterate: they have to read and sign contracts, they have to deal with bureaucracy. Will Phantom, for example, was a star student at school (311). These characters do not exchange the oral for the written; they are comfortable operating in both of these literary worlds. Instead, they often *choose* the oral over the written for the maintenance and transmission of knowledge, and for getting on in life. The oral works better for their purposes, even in contemporary Australia. Nevertheless, Wright’s text does explicitly work to valorise the oral over the written in two ways.

First and foremost, this is done through the representation of the oral competencies of the three main Lawmen in the novel. Norm Phantom, Mozzie Fishman and Joseph Midnight are revealed to be special recipients, carriers and transmitters of oral knowledge. Through their agency—though uncoordinated, as the three of them are ‘[stubborn] old mules’ who don’t get on with each other (360)—Indigenous Law and culture is able to survive, and is passed on to future generations, to Will and Hope, and their son Bala. Interestingly, the knowledge that each member of this Lawman-triad retains is specialised, and is equated, in particular scenes in the novel, to a powerful triad of Western repositories of knowledge, namely: a library, a bible, and a map.

To begin with, Norm Phantom, the novel’s protagonist, is the chief Lawman with a vast remembered-knowledge of the intrigues of the lands and the seas of the Gulf. He can ‘grab hold of the river in his mind and live with it as his father’s fathers did before him’ (5). We are also told that men such as Norm

kept a library chock-a-block full of stories of the old country stored in their heads. Their lives were lived out by trading stories for other stories. They called it *decorum*—the good information, intelligence, etiquette of the what to do, how to behave for knowing how to live like a proper human being, alongside spirits for neighbours in dreams. (207)

So Norm’s knowledge, retained in stories stored in a ‘library,’ encompasses the codes and conventions for living properly in country. Mozzie Fishman also retains knowledge in memory. He tells Will that he is ‘the living bible of all times’ (360), and he points to his brain and explains to Will: “‘Inside here is the whole history of your government. I can tell you if everything is correct, right back to when time began, before Adam and Eve’” (360). Fishman’s knowledge speciality is the spiritual realm, stored in a ‘bible’ of the mind. Finally, Joseph Midnight retains specific knowledge of land and seas further afield in the Gulf. He passes some of this knowledge on to Will, when the younger man needs to make a getaway at night, across the sea in a boat: ‘The old man gave [Will] the directions to the safe place in his far-off country—a blow-by-blow description sung in song, unravelling a map to a Dreaming place he had never seen’ (316). Midnight’s song recounts ‘hundreds of places’ in a long journey (317). And Will will only arrive safely if he remembers the song and sings it properly as he travels. Midnight tells him:

‘Sing this time. Only that place called such and such. This way, remember. Don’t mix it up. Then next place, sing, such and such. Listen to me sing it now and only when the moon is above, like there, bit lower, go on, practice. Remember, don’t make mistakes...’ The song was so long and complicated and had to be remembered in the right sequence where the sea was alive, waves were alive, currents alive, even the clouds. (317)

This is a demonstration of what are commonly known as songlines, songs that are stored in memory and which function, among other things, as direction finders across landscape. So Midnight’s distinctive field of knowledge, as portrayed in the text, is that of ‘maps.’

What we have, then, in the representation of the power of the oral in these three Lawmen are three distinctive tropes of knowledge reception and storage that are traditionally associated with Western written formats: a library, a bible, and a map. They are also tropes associated with colonialism. But

in *Carpentaria*, Wright appropriates these Western/written/colonialist knowledge-storage formats as metaphors for the expansiveness of Indigenous orality. These three receptacles of particular knowledge—the library, the bible and the map—can be equated, respectively, with that of stored volumes of knowledge of the world, a moral codex for using that knowledge, and a cartographic reference of country. In other words, the oral ‘text’ is shown to be cosmologically comprehensive. The knowledge of a whole world, how to live in it respectfully, and how to orientate oneself through its spaces is retained communally and then passed on to future generations through speech, stories and song. Wright thus demonstrates the capacious scope of the oral, its ability to function as the transmittable text of a people’s history, law, politics, religion, geography, and science.

A second way that Wright explicitly asserts orality in *Carpentaria* is by highlighting the transience and dysfunctionality of written texts in certain situations, and contrasting these with the sustainability, effectiveness and power of oral formats. The story of the destruction of Uptown’s history provides a good example of this. (Uptown is where the ‘white’ residents of the town of Desperance live.) The town keeps its written history, a so-called ‘Book of Books’ (71), in a padlocked shed in the backyard of the town’s official scribe, Sallyanne Smith. But we are told these volumes of history are ‘wasting away,’ slowly being ‘chewed by defecating vermin’ (72), so that inevitably Uptown’s history will be demolished. Then, at the end of the same paragraph that describes this destruction, we read: ‘Pretty good job vermin couldn’t shit on what the Pricklebush had locked up inside their heads’ (72). Whereas Uptown’s written history is destined to be destroyed by vermin, the history of the Pricklebush people (Norm Phantom’s mob), is immediately shown to be alive and immune from such ruin. In this instance, Wright ‘privileges the oral tradition of storytelling and law over documented history’ (Davison). In the end, the Book of Books is destroyed but not by vermin. It explodes ‘into a bonfire’ in a mysterious arson attack on the same night an explosion also destroys the Shire Council office (72), prompting the narrator to ask: ‘Who would have thought anyone would burn the history of Uptown?’ (73). Uptown loses its foundational texts, all of its written records, and is thrown into panic. The townsfolk meet in the local pub to find someone to blame for the arson attacks. Without any evidence, they accuse Elias Smith, a non-Indigenous outsider who had been appointed the town’s guard, of being responsible for the explosions (73). Denuded of written records, Uptown’s residents resort to rumour, innuendo and hearsay—spoken word run riot—to run Elias out of town. The narrator notes the town is unable to see ‘the power of words at work . . . [to imagine] what it was like to throw words around nilly-pilly’ (75). Spoken words are shown to possess a power that should not be abused, but Uptown is incapable of operating with any degree of the Pricklebush’s ‘*decorum*’ or ‘*etiquette*’ in the realm of the oral (207).

Uptown’s inability to operate effectively without printable records is again revealed in the search for the troublemaker and fugitive, Will Phantom. Senior police, big-city outsiders, are brought into Desperance in a serious attempt to catch Will and bring him to justice (310). They need an identikit picture of Will or at least a reliable description of what he looks like in order to find and arrest him. But the police cannot find a single picture of Will, neither in newspaper offices, the town council, Will’s former school, nor at the Phantom’s home (311–12). No one can provide investigators with a useful visual description of the town’s ‘black rebel,’ and residents tell the police: “‘Ah! They all look the same to me.’” “‘Can’t tell them apart, never could.’” (311). Will was simply too familiar, ‘like an invisible man, who walked through his whole life in a town without anyone batting an eyelid to notice what he looked like’ (311). The police fail to find Will. Wright demonstrates the inability of the law to operate effectively when photographs or identikit pictures of a fugitive—

reproduced, printed texts—are unavailable. In *Carpentaria*, an over-reliance on written/printed formats is shown to lead to failure; Western law and order becomes dysfunctional. And Uptown's citizens are not capable of drawing on reserves of memory for assistance; they are 'illiterate' orally.

It is not as if the oral is something that 'comes naturally' to the Pricklebush. It is represented in *Carpentaria* as sustained through memory training and storytelling practice. It is a serious literature, fashioned through attentive schooling. Mozzie Fishman, for instance, implores his disciples to keep stories alive: "[The] story has to go on. Nothing must stop our stories, understand?" (362). Norm has his stories 'practised down to a fine art' by telling them, when no one else is around, to his pet cockatoo, who answers "Too true," . . . inciting more to be said' (87). Further, Norm remembers the history of the country by integrating physical props or signs in the landscape into his stories. As the narrator puts it, Norm is able to '[glue his stories] to surviving relics' (87), such as a fire-gutted tree where Aboriginal people were once whipped, or a gap between boulders where cartridges litter the ground from a massacre of the local people. These material objects function as memory triggers for stories; they are textual markers in the landscape which aid the upkeep of an oral literature of the land and its people.

It is not clear whether Norm also participates in a memory-training ritual of the Pricklebush elders, who are said to sit in the long grass every morning to watch

the goings-on of Uptown . . . and shortly afterwards, [begin] their memory revisions. This was a daily task, a memory tribunal, undertaken with relish by the old people for everyone's matter of concern—talking oral history about the sequestrators who own Uptown. (44)

Orality is thus represented as embedded in the rituals of Indigenous existence, kept alive through repetition, memory revision tribunals, and signposts in the land. It is a knowledge system and a literature of the world requiring serious and constant attention. It is stored in memory and transferred to the next generation through stories and songs, and it is shown to provide practical, highly applicable orientation for getting on, coping with the day-to-day, surviving in the place known as Australia.

### **The Implicit Assertion of Orality**

An implicit privileging of orality is found in the narrative framework of the novel. Although *Carpentaria* is predominantly narrated in the third person, the text is also interspersed with a first-person plural 'we' voice as well as second-person narration. In Paul Sharrad's words, 'its voice comes from different locations . . . and its times keep shifting to and fro' (58). This voice switching may partly account for the difficulty some readers have had in accessing the text. 'It takes a bit of a brain readjustment to enter the world of *Carpentaria*,' wrote one critic (Guest). It is a novel that 'can prove challenging at times,' according to another (Poster). Ian Syson simply declared the novel 'just too difficult to be read by non-professional or non-literary readers' (86). Apart from apparent switches in voice, the course of the narrative is continually disrupted with colloquial exclamations, such as the following: 'Look!' (14), 'But listen!' (61), 'Alright! Go for it man' (74), 'Never mind!' (82), 'Well! Why not?' (83), 'What a story!' (92), 'My! My!' (92), 'Oh! Well!' (128), 'God's truth!' (183), 'Imagine that' (270), 'What a turnout. Gee whiz!' (344). Ravenscroft argues the reader is left with the impression that *Carpentaria*'s narrator is standing close by: 'It is as if you

[can] hear their intake of breath, the compassion in their voice, their amusement at the foolishness of mortals' (Review). Such narratorial simulations of breath intake, exasperation, wonderment, and affirmation of the story's 'truth,' serve to mimic aspects of oral performance. Oral literature scholar Ruth Finnegan points out that orally-delivered texts rest on performance 'and that in turn means that more than just "verbal" elements are involved' (19). The art and meaning of verbal texts, says Finnegan, 'are realised not just in words but also in the teller's delivery skills, the occasion, or the actions and reception of the audience' (19). Wright has thus sought to represent (and to highlight) the performative toing-and-froing that occurs between an orator and his/her audience during oral storytelling.

But beyond their evocation of oral performance, what is the narratological purpose of these exclamations? Who is the narrator actually addressing? Several longer exclamatory interventions, including the following one, may help us to answer these questions. Relatively early on in the course of the story, the narrator makes this statement: 'But listen! Listen? Quiet, quiet, at the back. Listen. You are not going to believe this' (74). This statement in particular, in second-person speech, can only be configured as an aside addressed to particular *listeners*, suggesting the main purpose of all of the exclamatory interjections is to conjure up, in the mind of the reader, the image of a crowd of people sitting around listening to an orator tell a great tale. This orator is heard continually breaking up the story with commentary and spontaneous exasperations, for the benefit of the listener, as the story becomes exciting or unbelievable. The appeal to be 'quiet, at the back' suggests that we might imagine a group of communal listeners sitting around a campfire or in a big hall or some such, being told a great story. Wright herself says the story in *Carpentaria* 'is told from the viewpoint of old people—how they see the world. What I tried to do is show how old people would tell a child a story about what's important' (qtd. in Vernay 121–22). From this we might suppose to imagine that in the main narrative of *Carpentaria* wise elders are the orators and younger, curiously-minded Aboriginal people are the listeners.<sup>2</sup>

However, to leave our analysis here is to sell the text short because such an explanation of orator/listener positioning cannot account for the beginning to the novel. The very first sentence of *Carpentaria* is: "A NATION CHANTS, *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*" (1). Written in capital letters and italicised as shown, the nation's bombastic story and all of its incumbent history is brought to a halt after just three words. The nation-story, articulated here as chant, a monotonous refrain that irritates, is interrupted, derided and dismissed by the 'we'-narrator, who has heard it all before. The narrator of this opening statement cannot be narrating to the same communal listeners referred to above. The 'compassion' that Ravenscroft found in the voice of the narrator, who utters things like 'What a story!' and 'Never mind!' is absent here. The narratorial tone is different in the opening block of capitalised text: it is distanced and dismissive rather than warm and familiar. This is because, I suggest, there is a different narrator and—more importantly—an altogether different *narratee* in the opening few lines of capitalised text. The only other block of similarly capitalised text in the novel is at the beginning of Chapter 2 (11). Both of these two text passages demarcate themselves from the rest of the text by way of a dotted line. They are strictly portioned off in form, tone, typeface, and by a dotted line, from the rest of the narrative. What is their function? How are they to be related to the rest of the narrative? An examination of the second block of text helps us to address these questions. It reads, in its entirety:

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 KNEW WHAT HOPE WAS.

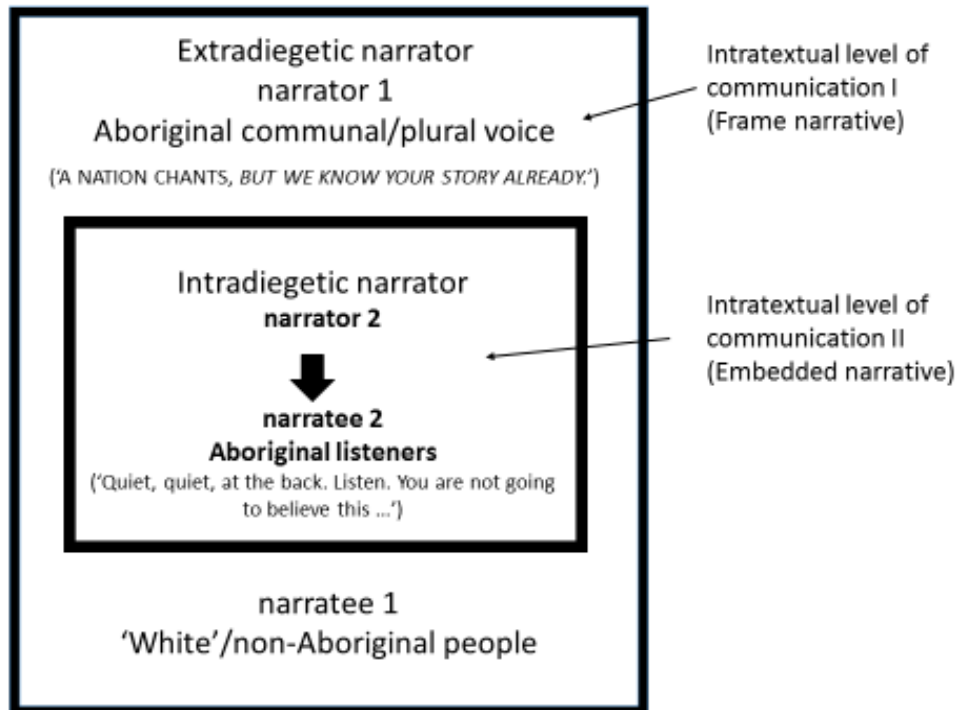
THE CLOCKS, TICK-A-TY TOCK, LOOKED AS THOUGH THEY MIGHT RUN OUT OF TIME. LUCKILY, THE GHOSTS IN THE MEMORIES OF THE OLD FOLK WERE LISTENING, AND SAID ANYONE CAN FIND HOPE IN THE STORIES: THE BIG STORIES AND THE LITTLE ONES IN BETWEEN. SO...

.....  
(Wright, *Carpentaria* 11)

This passage emphasises the overriding importance of storytelling, the action of telling and passing on stories, for Australian Indigenous cultures. It is an assertion of the power and significance of Indigenous orality. Storytelling is shown to be not just a cultural appendage for Aboriginal people but the very *means* of survival. And the suggestion here is that in order to survive, *speakers* and *listeners* are needed, not writers and readers necessarily. The most competent storytellers, those who can instil hope in the people, are ‘the ghosts in the memories of the old folk’ (11), that is to say, the ancestral voices retained in memory by the elders.

What occurs, then, exclusively in these two sections of capitalised text at the beginning of Chapters 1 and 2, is that an omniscient Aboriginal ‘we’ narrator addresses a white Australian (or at least a non-Aboriginal) narratee. We might imagine this narratee as the embodiment of a non-Aboriginal reader of *Carpentaria*. This non-Aboriginal narratee, who is associated at the beginning with those who engage in the nation’s chant, is told very quickly to shut up: the Aboriginal ‘we’ narrator has heard the nation’s droning mantra too many times before. Before the beginning of the second chapter the same we-narrator reappears to introduce the narrator of *Carpentaria*’s main narrative: the elders with the voices of the ancestors in their memories. This first, briefly-attendant narrator then performs a final, important function. Like a stage manager, he/she sets up the story for the narrator who is to take over and concomitantly announces his/her own departure. This is done by way of the ‘SO...’ at the very end of the narration. ‘So’ is a word signalling diversion to something else, to someone else, and with the ellipsis attached to it, this shortest of sentences imitates a moment of slippage into another narrative voice, a handover to another storyteller. The narratologist Monika Fludernik notes that conversational storytelling ‘is characterised above all by its framing’ (63). She says there are ‘separate conversational sequences that are set off from the surrounding discourse’ (63), and that, as a consequence, ‘conversational narratives are almost always announced or invited explicitly, to ensure that the audience will yield the floor for a lengthier period of time’ (63). This is what the ‘SO...’ does. It announces a yielding of the floor to a new storyteller. It imitates the kind of ‘turn-taking procedure’ that Mary Louise Pratt identifies as a key characteristic of conversational storytelling (105).

It should now be clear that *Carpentaria*’s main narrative—the one told by the elders—needs to be read as an embedded narrative. *Carpentaria*’s narrative framework, with the two main levels of textual communication, might be visualised in the following way:

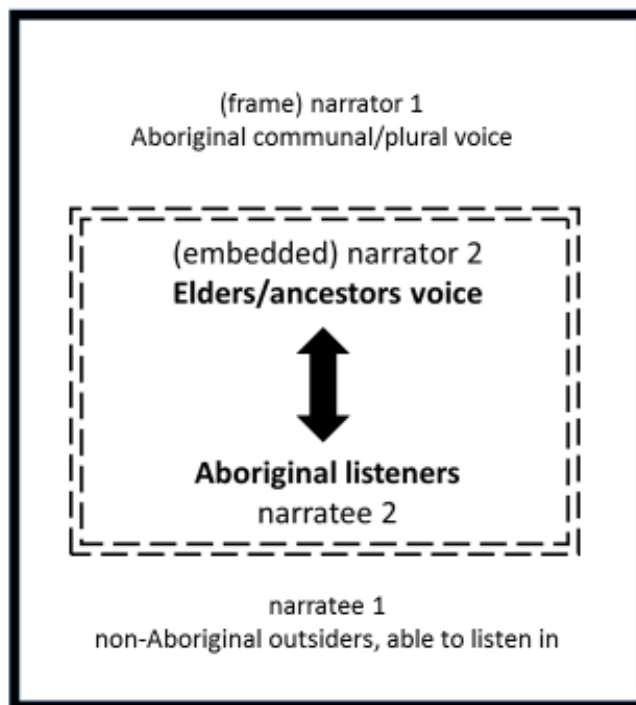


**Figure 1. *Carpentaria*'s narrative framework**

In the diagram above, I have given the two narrators and their corresponding narratees matching numbers. At the first intratextual level of communication, an extradiegetic narrator (an outside, framing narrator), who is an Aboriginal narrator speaking in a communal voice, addresses non-Aboriginal narratees. The nation-story of narratee 1 is known to narrator 1, and dismissed. This narrator then announces a turn to a counter story of nation. In the second instalment of the framing narrative at Chapter 2, narrator 1 formally introduces, and hands over to, another narrating instance. Narrator 2, then, is the intradiegetic narrator of the main (embedded) narrative. Crucial to an enriched reading of *Carpentaria* is a recognition of the close proximity of narrator and narratee in the embedded narrative. Here, Wright has created a zone of storytelling intimacy at the heart of her novel which allows a wise Aboriginal narrator the freedom to speak *directly* to attentive Aboriginal listeners *without* needing to adjust the narration continually to accommodate listeners who do not know what it's like to live as an Aboriginal person in Australia. This storytelling space is sovereign to Aboriginal people. The narrator can laugh and scoff and marvel, along with his/her listeners, at the habits and antics and foolhardiness of non-Aboriginal Australians from within the intimacy of this sovereign narrative space.

But I would suggest one more adjustment to the model to account for the way in which non-Aboriginal 'listeners' (or readers) might position themselves in relation to the narrative. Here is a second, updated version of the narrative framework of *Carpentaria*:





**Figure 2. *Carpentaria*'s narrative framework, adjusted**

The non-Aboriginal narratee in the frame narrative, if imagined as a non-Aboriginal reader, can never really be shut of the main narrative altogether. This non-Aboriginal reader is, after all, given de facto access to the embedded narrative via the written text. But his/her positioning beyond the frame of the embedded narrative, as an outsider, listening in, is important. I suggest the frame of the embedded narrative, the boundary of the space within which the main story is told, becomes porous, so that the non-Aboriginal narratee is at least able to hear a counter narrative to nationhood. (Fludernik refers to the 'permeable boundaries' that can exist between levels of textual communication in second-person narratives [246].) Indeed, I would argue that it is this outside-the-frame position that Wright *invites* her non-Aboriginal readers to take up; they are asked to be content to remain at the periphery of a grand Australian story, just listening in. 'It was the voice that Australians have never listened to,' Wright herself claimed of the narrative voice in *Carpentaria*. 'It's the voice of Aboriginal elders speaking about people and country, talking about what Aboriginal culture is, what it means and how it might work in the future' (qtd. in Ravenscroft, 'Dreaming' 211). The framing narrative allows non-Aboriginal readers a sense of orientation, an entry point into the (main) narrative, as distant listeners but not as direct addressees or participants.

The intratextual arrangement in the embedded narrative not only frees up the narrator to tell his/her story in a style and a tone and a language of preferred choice, it also places a community of Aboriginal listeners in a privileged position at the centre of *Carpentaria*'s main story. Wright has invented a narratological framework which allows a story of closely shared experience to be told by Aboriginal elders to an Aboriginal audience in a sovereign space. As Anne Brewster points out, Indigenous characters in *Carpentaria* occupy the subject position 'within the wider cosmology of the land,' and the narrative perspective 'positions them as central to this cosmology and renders

Indigeneity the default position for humankind' (87). In other words, both the characters in the novel *and* the central narrator and narratees occupy subject positions, which serve to articulate an Indigenous worldview.

If you are non-Aboriginal, cognisant of *Carpentaria's* narratological framework, you are better able to position yourself to read the text: you are 'reading in' (or, rather, 'listening in') from the sidelines to a story being told to a group of people in which you figure as an occasional subject of discussion, but in which neither storyteller nor listener pay any heed to your presence and don't bother explaining their in-jokes. These tellers and listeners have their own discourse, their own jargon, their own shared ways of understanding the world. In a sense, the non-Aboriginal narratee (or, de facto, the non-Aboriginal reader) is forced to occupy the position of 'white' nation-chanter, as prescribed at the beginning of the text, and to remain an *object* of conversation, an outsider for the course of the narrative. It is not a position a 'white' Australian reader is usually expected to take up in an Australian text. But recognising and acknowledging this 'non-Aboriginal' position helps a non-Aboriginal reader to understand, and to accept, that not everything may be understood, that some aspects of the narrative might remain extrinsic to personal experience or personal comprehension.

What this narrative strategy also achieves is the circumventing of a problematic confronting Aboriginal authors generally, namely, that most of their readers are non-Aboriginal. Mudrooroo Narogin argues the Aboriginal writer 'exists in ambiguity . . . writing for the white world, the world of the invader. It is a curious fate—to write for a people not one's own, and stranger still to write for the conquerors of one's people' (148). This dilemma is also recognised by the Martinique poet and critic Edouard Glissant (a writer who inspired Wright in the writing of *Carpentaria* [Wright, 'On Writing' 17]). Glissant says that in the faltering efforts of colonised peoples to access a 'collective memory,' they produce what he calls an 'opaque' literature, not necessarily 'written for *someone*,' but aimed at deconstructing 'the complex mechanisms of frustration and the infinite varieties of oppression' they encounter (qtd. in Praeger 46). In other words, Glissant suggests one problem colonised people face is not having anyone specific to *address* in their writing. However, by creating a narrative frame within which an Aboriginal narrator tells a story to an exclusively Aboriginal audience, Wright works to avoid the production of an 'opaque' literature, a literature written for everyone and no-one-in-particular.

Wright says of *Carpentaria* that it 'imagines the cultural mind as sovereign and in control, while freely navigating through the known country of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds' ('On Writing' 6). She continues, 'Parallel to this aim of portraying the *sovereignty of the mind* was another, to try to create in writing an *authentic form of Indigenous storytelling* that uses the diction and vernacular of the region' (6, my emphasis). So Wright's stated purpose with this novel is to portray a sovereign Aboriginal mindset in an authentically Indigenous storytelling mode. This dual purpose is neatly encapsulated in the narrative framework of *Carpentaria*: the chief narrator occupies a storytelling space sovereign to Indigenous people, embedded at the centre of the novel, and this narrator is able to tell, as Wright herself puts it, 'just such a story as we might tell in our story place' ('On Writing' 16).

There is certainly nothing unique about second-person voiced, exclamatory interjections in a novel. In many Indigenous-authored narratives—though not exclusively in these—such interjections become invocations of an oral, conversational storytelling voice. The use of multiple narrative

voices is also common in Indigenous fiction. Indeed, Cree author Greg Young-Ing (aka Younging), drawing on the work of Ojibway writer Kim Blaeser, argues that instead of speaking with a ‘monological voice,’ contemporary Indigenous literature gives authority to ‘all people’ or multiple voices in a story, including ‘the voices of animals and messages given by spirits and natural phenomenon’ (184). Likewise, the use of embedded narratives in Indigenous-authored novels is not new, nor is the act of staging a handover from one narrator to another. Thomas King’s 1993 novel *Green Grass, Running Water* begins with the word (as a paragraph in itself) ‘So’ (1), in order to introduce the multiple narrating instances of a framing narrative. These framing narrators then intervene, playfully and often, in the various embedded narratives that make up the bulk of the novel. However, I’d like to suggest that Alexis Wright’s carefully constructed narrative framework in *Carpentaria*, in terms of the function it is intended to serve, is unique in postcolonial literature. This is my claim: Wright’s narrative structure, in which certain addressees (also her main potential readers!) in a framing narrative are so purposefully shut out from the very beginning, and shunted off to the edges of the main, embedded narrative so emphatically, to be unaddressed thereafter, is a bold, risky and unique strategy designed to exclusively privilege and empower marginalised voices and audiences in a literary text, and to bring them to a literary centre.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Goldie borrows here from Edward Said, who, in *Orientalism*, speaks of ‘Oriental sex’ developing for Europeans into ‘as standard a commodity as any other available’ in mass culture (190).

<sup>2</sup> In other interviews and written statements Wright has described her narrator (and her narratee) in other ways. She told one interviewer she found the voice for her story one day in Alice Springs: ‘I was walking over a footbridge behind two elderly gentlemen and hearing them talk, and that’s when I thought “That’s the way I have to write this novel.” It reminded me of the way people talk up in the Gulf. Kind of musical’ (O’Sullivan). She has also written that she wanted to create a story ‘like a narration to the natural world,’ as if the narrator were ‘telling stories to the land’ (Wright, ‘On Writing’ 7, 9). More recently, Wright told another interviewer: ‘*Carpentaria* was more like trying to write to the ancestors of the country, telling a story to the ancestors . . . as well as . . . to future generations’ (Wright, ‘Alexis Wright’). But we find in the text of *Carpentaria* itself—in a ‘prologue’ to the second chapter (11)—the best clue as to the identity of the main-story narrator and his/her narratee. I examine this piece of text shortly, suffice to say here that Wright’s statement to Jean-Francois Vernay, quoted above, about the storytelling ‘viewpoint’ in *Carpentaria*, equates best with what the text itself reveals about its own narrative structure.

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