

# Garbage, Gothic, Gyre: Glimpsing the Planetary on *Carpentaria*'s "Floating Island of Rubbish"

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When Will Phantom finds himself clinging to a "wet, slippery object" in the middle of the night, in the middle of the ocean, he thinks he may have landed on the writhing body of a "sea serpent" (Wright 493). The fugitive castaway in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* discovers that, in the wake of a "catastrophic" cyclone, he has been "dumped onto an extraordinary floating island of rubbish" (Wright 493). The rubbish island is reminiscent of the five garbage patches that swirl within the planet's oceans (Wright 493). The masses of plastic debris are gathered together by large gyre systems, in which swirling currents trap matter within a stable centre zone (NOAA). Harboured one percent of global plastic waste, the astonishing size of these patches is difficult to comprehend: the largest, located in the North Pacific Ocean, is over 1.6 million square kilometres in size and weighs more than 160,000 tonnes (Rummer et al. n.p.). In an age some have called the "Plasticine," in which floating islands of rubbish have become a terrifying reality, Wright's use of the term "extraordinary" warrants investigation (Reed 28).

In the sense that extraordinary means "outside the normal course of events," the word is comparable with "improbable," commonly defined as anything "not likely to be true; not easy to believe; unlikely" ("improbable, adj"). In today's climate, however, improbable events—like the creation of floating trash isles—are a frightening reality. In *The Great Derangement*, Amitav Ghosh investigates how improbable events have been largely excluded from the realm of literary fiction; when included, they are treated as "magical or metaphorical or allegorical" (25, 26). Ghosh argues that "highly improbable occurrences are overwhelmingly, urgently, and astoundingly real" and therefore there are "ethical difficulties" in treating them metaphorically (26). Following Ghosh, it would "serve no purpose" to interpret the rubbish island as representative of some other thing, or some other place, for this would rob it "precisely of the quality that makes [its representation] so urgently compelling, which is that [it is] actually happening on this earth, at this time" (Ghosh 27). In this paper, I ask: How do these astoundingly real oceanic regions bear upon a reading of the extraordinary region offered by Wright? What is the relation between these sites, real and imagined?

Inspired by the island's eclecticism, this paper attempts to draw together theoretical and critical insights from three scholarly fields: environmental humanities (garbage), literary criticism and Aboriginal literatures (gothic), and critical ocean studies (gyre). Where previous readings of the rubbish island have interpreted it as an allegory of the colonial nation or the trashed globe, I seek to build upon these interventions and explore what it could mean to read the rubbish island as an encounter with planetarity. In attempting to articulate the alterity of Wright's island figure—one that disrupts the boundaries between nature and culture, between things real and imagined—I begin with an analysis of the text's gothic tropes. While this carries me part way in thinking through representations of the "extraordinary" and the "other" in a colonial context, a reading through a generic framework has certain limits. I turn to "oceanic thinking" to consider what happens to the Gothic when it is put under the pressure of the Gulf's swirling waters. Caught momentarily adrift with Will aboard his raft, I argue that *Carpentaria* glimpses itself as a vessel upon which readers can venture towards imagining this strange home: the planet.

In *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* Eve Sedgwick offers a comprehensive list of the genre's tropes. Gothic settings feature ruined buildings and tempestuous weather, while the

cast comprises tyrannical villains and ineffectual heroes (9). The form of the gothic novel, too, follows certain conventions. Sedgwick writes: “[I]t is likely to be discontinuous and involuted, perhaps incorporating tales within tales, changes of narrators, and such framing devices as found manuscripts or interpolated histories” (9). *Carpentaria*—which has been described as “a swelling heaving tsunami of a novel” where “dream and reality blend, and time bends” (Grossman qtd. in Wright n.p.; Winch n.p.)—evokes many of these gothic qualities and others that Sedgwick identifies, including preoccupations with “sleeplike and deathlike states,” “subterranean spaces,” “doubles [and] the discovery of obscured family ties,” “unnatural echoes or silences,” “unintelligible writings, and the unspeakable,” “the poisonous effects of guilt and shame,” “nocturnal landscapes and dreams,” and “apparitions from the past” (Sedgwick 9–10).

Though superficially applicable, I am hesitant to approach a reading of the floating island of rubbish within a generic frame. Reading genre in Wright’s fiction is a well-debated subject. The problem articulated by critics like Jeanine Leane, Michael Griffiths, and Alison Ravenscroft is that a reading of *Carpentaria* through the imported lens of a colonial genre framework limits the scope of interpretive possibilities and boxes in expansive Indigenous cosmologies and storytelling practices. Ravenscroft explains what is at issue: this kind of critique “recuperat[es]” the binary which correlates “Indigeneity with magic, irrationality, delusion and dream, and whiteness with realism, reality and rationality” (197). The novel itself announces on various occasions its own preoccupation with, and distaste for, boundaries. In the throes of the cyclonic storm, all Will “could think of to save himself, was what would happen if he got caught in a snag? What if he became entangled in the lines of barbed wire fence strung across some boundary?” (492). I heed these warnings and accept that there are “limitations inherent in reducing *Carpentaria* to this [or other] generic classifications” (Griffiths 1). Such positions against genre speak to Ghosh’s argument, elucidated earlier. And yet, an experiment in reading genre may be worthwhile to consider how the text, while drawing from a Waanyi storytelling tradition, is also able to salvage parts of the Western literary tradition (amongst others) and refashion them into something entirely its own, something that is able to speak to the unsettling reality of the deranged planetary condition, while simultaneously imagining possible futures.

Ken Gelder has noted that “Australia was colonised and settled by the British—towards the end of the eighteenth century—at precisely the moment at which the gothic novel emerged as a clearly defined genre back home” (115). The Gothic thus permeates and haunts the Australian literary tradition in which Wright invariably takes part, even as she perverts, parodies, transforms, and transports it to new horizons. The concept of an Aboriginal Gothic has been theorised as a mode that “combines the European Gothic tradition, the colonial history of Australia, Aboriginal cultural traditions and the contemporary situation of Aboriginal people in Australia” (Althans 277). For literary studies researcher and Palawa descendant, Alice Bellette, the Aboriginal Gothic involves a “reclamation” of the very “tropes that sought to vilify and erase” Aboriginal people (264). Bellette advocates for the inherent playfulness and power of an approach to genre that resists the physical and psychic dimensions of colonisation: “[T]he gothic that we repurpose and reimagine is our own literary act of reckoning, and as a method of truth-telling it is destabilising—the continuation of unsettling the settler” (264). Bruno Starrs similarly argues that the Aboriginal Gothic speaks to the “historical horrors of colonisation” and, countering the trope of “the colonised subject as fearsome and savage,” “sometimes revers[es] roles and makes the invading white man the monster”; in this way, readers witness the “Other writing back” (4).

The spectres of settlement appear in *Carpentaria* in various apparitions—the Gothic being but one. Heather Ray Milligan argues that Wright adopts a “transgeneric aesthetics”; grounded in a Waanyi cosmology and narrative style, *Carpentaria* weaves disparate story

strands into its own hybrid form (11). Milligan explains how this “narrative hybridity” recognises a “complicated literary inheritance” that incorporates “Eurowestern forms and genres . . . as a textual reminder of settler violence and the interwoven lives that have followed” (11). Jerath Head notes that the “haunting in *Carpentaria* has to do with the spectres of Anglo invasion and settlement; but it also reflects the Dreaming, with its open-ended quality of forever time” (n.p.). Waanyi realism, as Leane has coined it, therefore stands as the driving aesthetic force: the force which places this story in a tradition connecting “all times and memory—not just the last 225 years” (“Historyless” 161). The question is not simply whether the extraordinary island (and the broader cyclone sequence in which it is situated) can be read as Gothic, but how the Gothic is transformed by Wright’s rendering of the storied and swirling waters of the Gulf. To interrogate this, I begin with a close reading of the concluding cyclone scene through gothic frames.

When Will travels through the flooded ruins of Desperance’s pub, the Gothic seeps through Wright’s descriptions of the waterlogged structure. The old pub, a dilapidated building “constructed of timber decades before Will had seen the light of day,” creaks and groans like an “open mouthed animal in pain” as it bears the brunt of “180-kilometre winds and rain” (474). Will, attempting to keep out the rising water, races through the upstairs passageways to close the windows or “the doors to rooms where the windows had been broken” (474). As “signs of darkness” fall upon the building, Will relies on his “echo” to orientate his movements (474). On the lower floors, Will is forced to “navigat[e] underwater” to make his escape (490). He swims through “corridors” and up “staircases” towards a “trapdoor” to find air (490). The claustrophobic and labyrinthine environment recalls the gothic castle-cum-prison setting with its dizzying layout and vertical proportions. As Sedgwick describes, a composition reveals itself to be gothic, not only in its “dark and menacing” qualities, but in the degree of “difficulty of getting from the foreground to the background” (25). The terror of manoeuvring through obstructed space is heightened when the boundary between inside and outside blurs: where exactly is the trapped hero, Will, escaping to?

As land becomes sea, the entire town is submerged in “mustard yellow waters” and “under layers of silt” (491, 492). Even when Will finds his way out of the building, there is no relief from the terror. “Swirling back into the flow of the water,” he worries what will happen: “[T]he monstrous palace following him would catch up, and drag him under, what then?” (492). The “colossal architecture” of the watery “castle” continues to contain, or rather submerge, him (Wright 492). The atmospheric quality of submergence *is* gothic for Sedgwick: “the space of submergence is not formally or topographically differentiated from its surroundings; instead, one of its functions is finally to undermine the sense of inside and outside, the centeredness of the ‘self’” (Sedgwick 27). Emily Alder, in her examination of the “nautical Gothic,” notes how Sedgwick’s “concerns, with surface and depths, the threshold and breaches of it . . . speak analogously to oceanic thinking” (7). It is this terror, evoked from Will’s excursion through an infinite and incoherent watery space, which speaks to the Gothic as a mode which is concerned with mapping the physical onto the psychic.

This island is a composite structure: in the process of its creation, “the sum total of its parts rubbed, grated and clanked together, as it became more tightly enmeshed into a solid mass that squashed every inch of oil and stench out of the dead marine life it had trapped in its guts” (493). As the island continues to float in the water, parts are added, and parts fall away. In her reading of the abject in *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva theorises the subject’s attraction to that which is repulsive. For Kristeva, the abject is not something “unclean,” but rather something that “disturbs identity, system, order”; that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). As an infant, the subject attempts to “throw off” all that is “in-between . . . ambiguous . . . composite” in its being, in order to stabilise identity (4). Most importantly for Kristeva, though the subject may be in denial, the abject constitutes its very being. In this

way, the rubbish island embodies the ambiguous, unfinished and composite nature of the abject. Bakhtin's figuration of the "grotesque" is also complementary here: this body "is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it . . . outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (Bakhtin 26). Through the frame of the abject, the metaphoric significance of rubbish as the specific material which comprises the floating island gains a specific resonance. Wright's island evokes horror for Will and readers alike as it is born from that which has been cast out of human life. It is not repulsive specifically because it is dirty or unclean but because it has been ejected, excreted, and excluded from conceptions of the self. Waste is not simply banished into the category of "bad" pollution, but is also registered as a necessary metabolic function of physical and psychic life. As Gay Hawkins and Stephen Muecke write in their introduction to *Culture and Waste*, "expelling and discarding is more than biological necessity—it is fundamental to the ordering of the self" (13).

The island's genesis recalls a birthing scene, both of mother bearing child, but also of the Waanyi creative serpent pulsing through the Gulf Country. From atop the slimy conglomerate of rubbish, Will bears witness to a strange scene of watery birth:

Will listened to the embryonic structure's strange whines echoing off into the darkness, then, he realised the enormity of those sounds was familiar to him. He was astonished and then weakened by the feeling of helplessness, that a man feels, hearing the sounds of labour. He felt like he was an intruder to be clinging to a foetus inside the birth canal, listening to it, witnessing the journey of creation in the throes of a watery birth. (493–94)

The fleshly descriptions of a body actively pushing, squashing and groaning in labour, lubricated by fatty fluids, reminds us of the site of "primordial violence" which is, according to Kristeva, our birth (10). The moment we, as subjects, are most "in-between" is when we are being birthed, both inside and outside of the mother (Kristeva 4). Uncanny in its familiarity, Will relates to the sounds and sights of the heaving mass with trepidation and curiosity. In describing the island as "serpentine flotation," Wright also connects the island to the Waanyi creation story which opens the novel: "the serpent's wet body . . . came down those billions of years ago" and scored the mudflats, mangroves, and marine plains (493, 1). The ancestral serpent moves through some of the other representations of waste in the text, like Angel Day's house which is "built on the top of the nest of a snake spirit" and constructed of materials she gathers from the rubbish dump (13).

Like the petroleum-based matter that the island is mostly made of, the rubbish island has a certain metaphoric plasticity that evokes fear and fascination while simultaneously "call[ing] attention to the constructed nature of its creation" (Halberstam 340). In this way, following Jack Halberstam, it could be read as a "technology of monstrosity" (332). Halberstam posits that the Gothic has a "thrifty metaphoricity," meaning it compresses a multitude of interpretative possibilities into one unsightly, and terror-inducing monster; he writes, a metaphor is Gothic in its "ability to transform multiple modes of signification into one image, one body, one monster, a totality of horror" (345). Thriftiness may be an apt descriptor for the rubbish-rummaging Will who forges a life on board the raft, but not for Wright as an author. Her epic novels showcase her distinctive prose style, which is marked by a formal excessiveness. As Tara June Winch writes of *Carpentaria*, "you'll need a span of time to truly and deeply engage with this oral story turned epic novel . . . the whole truthful story . . . couldn't have been trimmed" (Winch). Without trying to contain Wright's broad influences and unique style, I posit that the Gothic finds its way into this aesthetic abundance. If, for Halberstam, the "production of fear in a literary text . . . emanates from a vertiginous excess of

meaning,” then the floating island of rubbish may be intriguing for its “rhetorical extravagance” (2).

While this extraordinary figure may be open to a myriad of interpretative possibilities, what is most significant is the way it takes on a creative energy entirely of its own; this perhaps marks the very point at which a gothic framework reaches its limits. The island, like the other representations of rubbish and pollution in the text, signals the possibility for its self-governed flourishing and growth. The nourishing potential of waste is illustrated when the island transforms from oily raft to flourishing habitat in a matter of days, as “all manner of life marooned in this place [sprouts] to vegetate the wreckage” (Wright 495). It begins when the droppings from flocks of birds “eventually cover the entire surface in the thick fertilising habitat” (Wright 495). Will learns to live in harmony with the island’s rhythms, “[singing] ceremonial songs all night” (496). Peter Minter writes that, on the flourishing raft, there is “no requirement of the purgative dialectic of the cathartic mode,” which is, by contrast, often in operation in gothic portrayals of the abject (203). Lynda Ng explains that, in this process of ecological rejuvenation, waste is “transform[ed] from a category of ‘no-value’ to inherent value,” such that it is recuperated as positive “abundance” which can be “life sustaining and malleable,” “the territory of multiple and overlapping organic networks” (“Looking” 15; “Abundance” 108). Such readings of the rubbish island have importantly worked to recuperate the category of waste as positive abundance within an Indigenous cosmology. I wish, however, to follow a different current of thought to centre the imaginative alterity constitutive of Wright’s rubbish island. Using the gestural coordinates of the planetary to guide the reading, I will attend to the rubbish island as a space that cannot be entirely recuperated. Is there a way to retain the strangeness of this figure, without getting caught in the lines between useless and useful, real and surreal?

In the wake of the Anthropocene, the concept of the “planetary” has gained momentum in the humanities (Elias and Moraru xi). Emerging in the 1990s from critical dialogues between postcolonial, globalisation, and comparative literature studies, the term seeks to intervene in the hegemonic discourse of globalisation. It gestures to a large-scale perspective that, unlike the global, de-centres the human and the associated circuits of capitalist and geo-political power. In “The Climate of History,” Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the crisis of climate change requires us, “human beings,” to see ourselves, simultaneously, from global and planetary perspectives (206). He writes, this is a “[call] for thinking simultaneously on both registers, to mix together the immiscible chronologies of capital and species history” (219). Jennifer Wenzel rephrases this imperative as a question: “How might one calibrate the globe in globalization with the planet at risk in environmental crisis?” (19).

For Gayatri Spivak, the distinction between global and planetary is not that of “political” space and “natural” space; she insists that one cannot neatly think the globe on one hand and the planet “on the other” (72). Rather, the planet belongs to a “species of alterity” (72). The gesture towards planet-thought—what she coins “planetarity”—is one that turns to embrace the “defamiliarization of familiar space” (77). It is this move towards defamiliarisation that propels my analysis of the rubbish island. As inhabitants of the planet, how are we called to be “responsible, responsive, answerable” to this “mysterious and discontinuous” figure? (Spivak 102). Importantly, Spivak’s planetarity centres on the notion of an “inexhaustible taxonomy” of alterities (73). There is an insistence on a collective multiplicity that speaks to Achille Mbembe’s claim that “multiplicity cannot only be theorized as difference or even as singularity” (88). He writes:

Singularity itself must be understood not as that which separates and cuts off one cultural or historical entity from another, but as a particular fold, or twist, in the undulating fabric of the universe. This is crucial if “decolonial acts” are to be

anything more than mere “acts of disconnection or separation,” if they are to be more than gestures by which one is cut off, or one cuts oneself off, from the world. (88–89)

Multiplicity and relationality are thus key registers for thinking the planet. If the Gothic encounter with alterity typically runs on the high affective charge of terror, repulsion and separation, Wright’s strange, twisting and undulating island invites an open, contemplative response to the unintelligible or unfamiliar. Paul Giles has offered *Carpentaria* as an exemplar of “literature for the planet,” as its “focus on the uncanny . . . elucidates a world in which social designs of every kind are always in the shadow of planetary space” (156, 154). This is not, as Giles insists, a unifying or totalising vision; rather, the novel is predicated on a “cathexis of disorientation” and “disjunction,” even as it recognises cultural and environmental “crosscurrents and crossovers” (156, 150, 145). I seek to elaborate Giles’s reading with a particular focus on the figure of the island. I contend that the rubbish island, situated in the swirling waters of the Gulf, offers a “displaced site for the imagination of planetarity” (Spivak 95).

In *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey posits that the island is the “essential constellation for figuring the planet” in an era of climate change (*Allegories* 166). Working within an allegorical mode, DeLoughrey explores how the spatial setting of the island facilitates a “multiscalar” method of “telescoping between space (planet) and place (island)” (*Allegories* 2). Across many literary traditions, islands are “foundational” figures for the “micro- and macrocosmos” given their histories of empire, nation-building, biological research, plantation slavery, militarisation, nuclearisation, and more recently, anthropogenic sea-level rise (*Allegories* 81, 18; see *inter alia* Edmond and Smith, *Islands in History and Representation*). Island allegories—as figured in Wright’s rubbish island—engage with a multitude of “disjunctive” interpretative frames, including the nation, the globe, and the planet to track a “historical and spatialized narrative of the Anthropocene” (DeLoughrey, *Allegories* 15, 18). Wright’s rubbish island is a multivalent figure that restages the Western allegory of a colonial nation and trashed globe, while simultaneously offering the counter allegories of abundance, connectivity and regeneration from the locale of Waanyi Country.

The debates of the 1980s surrounding allegory and “third-world literatures” warn against a myopic vision that looks to the nation as the main interpretative frame (Jameson 69). Fredric Jameson’s intervention, though often quick to be discarded, asks important questions about how to engage with “collective investments” and “subjectivity structures” alternative to those offered by late capitalism (Arac 335). With regard to *Carpentaria*’s critical reception, Ng’s edited collection, *Indigenous Transnationalism*, is demonstrative of a body of scholarship that departs from the “hierarchy of Western dominance” inherent in words such as “national” and “global” (11). The “transnational” frame seeks to recognise the enduring role of the nation while paying attention to the cultural interactions or exchanges that occur across national lines (Ng, “Looking” 11). Leane, in the collection’s afterword, further articulates this disavowal of the nation: “[I]t is not the globe or the nation—the imagined geo-political construct of Australia” that “resonates with . . . different locations” but “Wright’s Country—Waanyi Country, its people and its creator” (“Vastness” 213–14). As advocated by Ng and Leane, locality has become a significant anchor from which to base readings of *Carpentaria* that look beyond the bounds of the nation in a globalised world.

Wright’s rubbish island does not offer a universalising view of the globe, but rather glimpses global flows and planetary currents from its oceanic vantage point in the Gulf. It occurs to Will that “the whole oceanic world seemed to be occupied in the Gulf” (Wright 388). This is not a view of the entire world from above—as in the 1968 Earthrise photo, or the virtual cartography offered by Google Earth in the 2010s—but one positioned from the “bobbing,”

“floating,” and “drifting structure” of Will’s raft (Helmreich 1211; Wright 495, 383). Where images of the globe tend to “occlude their infrastructural histories” and the voluminous materialities of ocean space, Wright’s island is attentive to the aqueous materials that comprise it (Helmreich 1211). Will observes how the island is constructed from the excesses of industrial activities which fuel rapid consumer appetites, including “barges, ship’s hulls, fishing boats, prawners, plastic containers, timber and whatnot” (Wright 494). While omnipresent and un-erodible, anthropogenic global waste is often kept out of sight. Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky note that “many aspects of waste are entirely hidden from common view, including the wider social, economic, political, cultural, and material systems that shape waste and wasting” (2). *Carpentaria* draws readers to these offshore hiding places to render visible “the bits and pieces of uncharted land and floating objects that nobody cares about in the world’s oceans” (501). Described as a “roaming armad[a] of the world’s jetsam,” the rubbish island also registers the militarisation of the world’s oceans with the production of waste (Wright 386). Tangled up in what Laleh Khalili describes as “the sinews of war and trade,” the rubbish island serves as a local synecdoche for a global phenomenon (1).

In addition to the materials that comprise the island, the agentive watery forces that give shape to this extraordinary setting are equally significant to a reading of form and locality. As in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, it is the swirling ocean gyres and cyclonic winds within *Carpentaria* that gather the jumble of things. Here, the turning form of the gyre transforms from a diagrammatic symbol of European History in crisis—as famously sketched by William Butler Yeats—and is instead encountered as an agentive force in the planet’s oceans and atmospheres. As both noun and verb, gyre draws attention to the ways in which “space is an active process rather than a location” (DeLoughrey, “Gyre”). The gyre, like the ocean more generally is, as Peter Steinberg and Kimberly Peters have argued, “indisputably voluminous, stubbornly material, and unmistakably undergoing continual reformation” (247).

Moreover, in *Carpentaria*, the form of the oceanic gyre is entwined with the aerial gyre of the cyclone (for further readings of the cyclone in the novel, see McDougall; Spicer). This locates the novel in relation to other tropical cyclone (or hurricane) regions, from which emerge some of Wright’s literary interlocutors, including Carlos Fuentes and Patrick Chamoiseau. Thinking locality through the form of the gyre thus draws connections between broader literary and hydrological circuits. Here, it is also worth noting that much of the rubbish island’s ecology is tropical. The “deep, nutrient-rich humus” that forms on the island fills with worms, and sprouts “coconuts,” “seedlings of mangrove, pandanus,” “a wasted banana root,” “guava,” “mango” and even a “peanut vine” (Wright 495). The seedlings carried within and beyond the Gulf’s waters demonstrate this expansive regional connectivity, and show how seemingly disparate and distant materials can be gathered together through oceanic forces to create unlikely and life-sustaining forms.

Wright offers, through the rubbish island, a strange figure that attends both to the materiality and locality of water, and its manifold cultural and literary histories. To return to the earlier discussion of genre, the waters of the Gulf assist in “repurposing and reimagining” gothic tropes, which “unsettle” dominant frames of reading (Bellette 264). The sea, as Meg Samuelson argues, produces “uncanny textual spaces that surface repressed narratives and histories,” setting “the national imaginary adrift and creat[ing] new cross-currents of reading” (557). Isabel Hofmeyr’s concept of the “hydrocolonial gothic” is also complementary here, as it responds to the genre’s adaptations and transformations in the “South”—a locale into which *Carpentaria* may also be tentatively placed (n.p.). Tracing the flows of the “hydro” and the colonial, Hofmeyr inserts the category of the Gothic into the “material, regional, and historical” matrixes of the South to reveal how stories from “enchanted” southern waters approach strange figures that are “less a matter of dread than of ancestral consolation” (n.p.). Where the Gothic may appear in *Carpentaria*, its tropes are used to critique colonial constructions of the ocean

that reduce it to an amorphous monster or render it a blank space to be crossed, like the container ships “ploughing through the high seas” as if on their own “highway” (*Carpentaria* 501). The waters of the Gulf, though sometimes evoking in Will “another brand-new scenario of horror,” are also a source of ancestral connection to Waanyi Country, which extends beyond the shoreline and beneath the surface of the sea (500).

The rubbish island emerges from, and is situated within, the gyres of the Gulf—and yet it retains an openness to drift beyond them. As Nicholas Birns writes in his analysis of locality in *Carpentaria*, the “liminality,” “circularity,” and “inherent instability” of the sea means that its locality—and belonging to it—cannot be conceived of as static and grounded. He writes: “However parochial, [a sea-people’s] parish encompasses leagues and fathoms and depths that cannot be parcelled out or be the object of confident geographical mastery” (63). Again, the strange and stubborn excess of the ocean, its unfathomable depths and planetary reach, repeatedly alerts us to that which resists—or exceeds—interpretation. DeLoughrey explains that oceanic and atmospheric gyres are “vortexes that are largely out of sight for most humans, and thus demand a kind of visual logic for representation” (*Gyre*). The rubbish island exemplifies this visual logic: an imaginary response to that which cannot be represented in its entirety. In it, we glimpse the forces of the gyre that are at once stable and in motion, located and adrift.

Allow me to swirl back to the beginning of this essay, where I asked: *How do these astoundingly real oceanic regions bear upon a reading of the extraordinary region offered by Wright?* Perhaps the very premise of this question—a distinction between real and imagined—is flawed. Planetary, though offering no clear line of sight, gestures to how real and imaginary are invariably entangled. The island retains its material dimensions while also figuring itself as the stuff of imagination, in all its strange excess and immateriality. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the novel’s final chapter. Hope Midnight, Will’s wife, begins to have a “strange dream” of his “junk pile island floating further away” (512). After the cyclone, she is aboard Norm Phantom’s boat with her son, Bala. To Norm’s disbelief, she can imagine the “floating island in every last detail as though she had been involved in its construction” (512). Within the “sovereignty of [her] imagination,” Hope has the “audacity” to embark on a voyage to find Will with that “crazy map she had inside her head” (Wright, *On Writing* 149; *Carpentaria* 518). Norm worries that her journey will be treacherous as “she did not come from the sea” and does not know its intricate patterns and stories (514). However, when watching her depart, Norm notices that she is being propelled by the “surging flow of the changing tide” and supported by the strength of the mighty “groper fish” (518). In *Imagining for Real*, Tim Ingold asks: “How can we even talk about imagination without reviving the spectre of human exceptionalism?” (3). This scene in *Carpentaria*, which draws together Hope’s strange dream with the ocean’s lively agency, offers a response: the extraordinary imaginings of the island appear not only in the domain of the human mind, but also of planetary forces. To adopt Ingold’s phrasing, the story of the island, and the journey towards it, offers a “more generous understanding of reality” that “is not already precipitated out, into fixed and final objects, but launched in ever-flowing currents of formation,” while simultaneously providing “a more generous understanding of imagination” that allows it to “overspill the limits of conceptualisation and representation, into unmapped realms of conscience and feeling” (5). The narrator remarks: “It was a strange story that mystified Norm. Sometimes the waves rolling onto the beach spill their stories right at your feet” (512). This reading of *Carpentaria*’s rubbish island has sought to respond to this very strangeness, washed up in the waves and carried forth by the giant gopers, the changing tides, and Hope’s imagination.

While previous readings of the rubbish island have fixated on the bounded space of the nation or the globe, my venture to read the abject at sea draws attention to the ambiguity of this figure. The rubbish island is uncanny in its resemblance to the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,



the nation, and the trashed globe. And yet, it is not entirely contained within any of these sites. The island also bears resemblance to the novel itself, as Russel West-Pavlov acknowledges (42). If the central question driving West-Pavlov's analysis is: "Can *Carpentaria* be read as world literature?" then perhaps mine has been: *How can we read Carpentaria as world literature?* (23). I have sought to ask: What kind of world are we reading? What material comprises it? Who creates it, nourishes and supports it? How is it being transformed?

It is difficult to argue that the rubbish island allegorises planetarity. As Spivak warns, it is folly to assume that we can even "think" of planetarity: "[I]t contains us as much as it flings us away" (292). And yet she urges that we must "persistently educate ourselves into the peculiar mindset of accepting the untranslatable, even as we are programmed to transgress that mindset by 'translating' it" (292). This energy of transgression animates, in part, Wright's oceanic figure of the abject, as I have explored through a reading of the Gothic. In encountering the strange island, we, as readers, are positioned to "imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents"—a sentiment that Wright has expressed, stating in an interview with publisher Ivor Indyk: "We belong to the planet" (Spivak 292; Wright qtd. in Ng, "Looking" 17). On the rubbish island, we cannot gaze at this strange home from afar; it is the vessel upon which we are flung, cast out with Will, if only for a brief moment.

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