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The 'Weight' of Words in Alexis Wright's Works

Françoise Palleau-Papin

Abstract: Alexis Wright has a unique way of appropriating and adapting the English language to an indigenous world vision in the manner in which she reactivates dead metaphors, mixes literal and figurative meanings, and uses elements of nature and artifacts in her similes and comparisons. She thus investigates the way words in English, the language of the colonizer, may have actual impact on her characters, on the world they inhabit, and eventually, on her readers. Her metaphors (from Greek *meta-pherein*, "carrying from one place to another") function to displace a Eurocentric world vision and offer an *alter/Native* connection with the community and Country. This article demonstrates that Wright creates and re-creates an organic world in which everything is unified, and animate—a world which has been severely damaged by colonialism. Revisiting the notions of ownership and Law, she conceives of a way to integrate indigenous thought within the language of the colonizer in writing about the land, the sea, and the sky, a language she transforms into an expression of Country, both tangible and holy.

Keywords: Alexis Wright; metaphors; metamorphosis; community; indigenous vision; ecopoetics

Language & World Vision

Alexis Wright holds a fairly unique position in Australian fiction writing today. She mixes two traditions, as she writes in English from her indigenous culture, and with an awareness of exogenous traditions which have gone native in her prose, not unlike others before or beside her, but with a degree of creativity that makes her works stand out. Her position in Australian letters is similar to James Joyce's in another context, as he was writing in English, tapping from the gift of the gab of his compatriots (Erzgräber 23), a gift that had its roots in the Gaelic oral tradition, and he published works that renewed the English short story and novel forms durably. While Wright's use of orality and indigenous narrative voice has been studied in *Carpentaria* (see Rodoreda), a study of her metaphorization throughout her published works will convey some measure of her stylistic inventiveness.

Stephen Muecke's study *Ancient & Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* has provided a general background to my reading of an indigenous world vision in this paper. I speak from another culture, as English is not my mother tongue and I have no knowledge of any indigenous language. Without developing the perspective of *Ego-histoire* (Castejon et al. 3-19), but with a dedication to decentering my limited vantage point, my goal is to look at the stylistics and language that reveal a world view. I do not wish to repeat seminal texts of post-colonial theory about language, politics and philosophy, but rather, to apply them to one author, in all of her published works to date, paying particular attention to her works of fiction. This paper will launch immediately into an analysis of her fiction, with only minimal contextualization of the close reading of the passages under study. Wright's language will be the story here, and the topic will be her "translation" (Bhabha 224) from indigenous Country to all readers.

The general idea underlying the precise examples Stephen Muecke gives in his 2004 publication is that indigenous philosophy is both embodied and anchored in Country and community, as he studies the "indigenous emphasis on participation and a world lived-in" (Muecke 18). To re-state that idea in Western philosophical terms, in indigenous philosophy there is little or no separation between phenomenon and concept, between mind and matter, between reason and belief, or even, to a certain extent, between animals and humans, or between the self and others. This is what Western philosophy has often called magical thinking, in which the secular world meets what is usually held invisible—a claim David Mowaljarlai has asserted with pride, mixing phenomenological experience and dreams as a source of knowledge or enlightenment in *Yorro Yorro*: "This light is really live in my body, look, it's swinging me all the time" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 37-8). This article follows these lines of convergence. The union of such dichotomies in a lived-in experience of concepts is what Alexis Wright calls the "blackman's" being "tied to his traditional country" in a reflective passage of her novel *Plains of Promise* (*PP*), which also comments on glottocide:

> The white man wanted to pay alright for taking the lot. But they didn't want to pay for the blackman's culture, the way he thinks. Nor for the blackman's language dying away because it was no longer tied to his traditional country … now prosperous cattle station or mining project. The white people wanted everyone to become white, to think white. Skin and all. (*PP* 74)

Through the focal viewpoint of Elliot, one of the main characters in the novel, Wright asserts that the tie to Country is what grounds the indigenous language. The loss of a language entails the loss of a world vision, and more generally, of power in the world. The general "think white" injunction covers every aspect of life, "[s]kin and all," including language. Elliot is an indigenous character travelling across country alone, and the narrator conveys his thoughts in the third person narration. Throughout his journey, he is walking his thoughts, reassessing his and his people's situation. The wording uses the third person for both "the blackman" and "[t]he white people." He is generalizing in English, and his words may bear the burden of colonization. He seems to use the word "skin" in the Western comprehension of the word, only meaning epidermis. With white skin, the colour of the epidermis also carries a certain set of connotations linked to colonialism (it comes to mean power and dominance in a colonial context). Whether denotative or connotative, in this context the word "skin" does not carry the further meaning of a skin name, the elaborate aboriginal kinship system according to linguistic regions. Thus, the dense expression, in a nominative, elliptic sentence—"Skin and all."—encapsulates a lot: both a discursive criticism of white hegemony and an inscription in its language as well through the vocabulary—without any elaborate explanation at this point.

Furthermore, in the character's stream of thoughts in indirect discourse, the lack of development may point to a shared view with the implied readers, in particular indigenous and critical non-indigenous ones, who are interested in the process of reassessing white hegemony. One does not need to elaborate much if one's audience agrees or already knows. The designation "the blackman's language" in the third person, instead of the second person deictic (not "our" language), emphasizes that this is an address from an indigenous man to white people. So, the condensed ellipsis and the third person deictic together seem to imply that Wright is writing from within the aboriginal culture, acknowledging that it has been colonized (in the reasoning and in the vocabulary), but addressing all readers. She speaks from Country, to everyone, translating, in the sense of Bhabha's analysis of cultural translation (after Walter Benjamin), or adapting "the element of resistance in the process of transformation" (Bhabha 224). To do

justice to what remains untranslatable, Wright's subversion consists in transforming English to make it encompass an aboriginal world vision, rather than translating the aboriginal culture into non-aboriginal terms, which would be an ultimate form of colonization. She colonizes the English language, so to speak, to make it mean more than it could say before her "translation" ever occurred.

All too aware that indigenous languages are threatened, and conscious of the predicament of indigenous writers writing in English, Wright implements a salvation of a different order than a conservationist linguistic commitment. Like many other indigenous writers before her, she writes in English, using several borrowings from indigenous languages which are always made clear in the English context. Most importantly, she manages to stretch the limits of the English language with unparalleled creativity, to transform it from the inside, and to bring it to encompass an indigenous world vision, combining two traditions in one augmented language. The term "augmented," as in augmented reality, may be seen to challenge the surfaces of a superficial, two-dimensional representation, adding multiple viewpoints. Linguistically and philosophically, it reflects on the preconceptions that inform any language, and delves into the way things are seen from an indigenous viewpoint, with the added tension of writing the experience of the colonized in the language of the colonizer. Geoff Rodoreda has studied the intricacies of the narrative voice in *Carpentaria* and its "strategies for asserting the power and longevity of Indigenous oral storytelling and knowledge systems over and against (Western) written systems" (Rodoreda). My reading demonstrates that the power of Wright's works comes from her style, in particular from her rich use of comparisons and her unique way of challenging established metaphors to signify an incarnated philosophy of community and Country, encompassing the belief that the tangible world meets the invisible, spiritual world.

Through the main male character Elliot's focalization in *Plains of Promise*, Wright also relays the idea that to counter the loss of the relationship with ancient beliefs under duress, one should foster the invention of new paths, new visions, new "alterations" on one's own terms, as expressed through the character's thoughts in which he mourns the loss of a spiritual connection with Country:

> The night might have been enjoyed once. He thought of the days when the spirits and the black people would have spoken to each other. But the blackman's enforced absence from his traditional land had inspired fear of it. They had to alter old, ongoing relationship with the spirits that had created man and once connected him to the earth. (*PP* 75)

It is interesting to note the absence of a definite article (or any plural) for the expression "to alter old, ongoing relationship with the spirits." It implies that the relationship with the ancestral spirits of creation goes without saying, that it is a given, that it does not need any more grammatical specification, in spite of the historical disruption that the character comments on. Most importantly, as this quotation emphasizes, after such a terrible disruption marked by the adverb "once" in her character's clear vision, Wright is attempting to re-establish connections with nature to achieve a sense of enjoyment of the night, of being in the world, in the sheer pleasure of making sense of one's cosmos and worldview in the physical reality of the world. Thus, later on in the novel, the naming of places and concepts in indigenous languages or their explanation in English is an exercise in control.

Wright uses striking resultative verbal phrases in English, borrowings from indigenous and foreign languages, and comparisons of comparisons for boxed-in characterization, to render her layered, complex, rich vision of the here and now, always embodied, as does the following example from *The Swan Book* (*SB*):

> Someone with special healing powers who traveled anywhere he was needed, just by thinking himself into a sick person's mind. His was *wanami*, like fuel, and *wakubaji*—goes like anything. He started to live like a persona non grata sitting up there like a motionless exile on the sand mountain's summit. Japanese type. Something *sage-guru-expert* turnout. He became simple, like a snail-eating dune hermit. (*SB* 11)

The resultative of the verb phrase "thinking himself into a sick person's mind" gives a powerful example of the mind process at work. Rather than the commonplace broadening of one's proverbial horizons, this is a projection into someone else's mind, relinquishing one's identity and, by sheer force of thought, becoming another to understand a pathology: this implies healing someone from inside, with full understanding and sympathy, as if it were the self, rather than patronizing the sick from a superior vantage point. This resultative process may be understood as metaphorical of indigenous knowledge, by which people are one with Country and history. The numerous words in native language in italics on the page (not all quoted here) underlie such indigenous vision and philosophy, even when they bridge over to the Latin "persona non grata," the Latinate English "sage," the Sanskrit "guru," and, finally, contemporary, corporate English "expert," before the climax in the final anchorite comparison, denoting the "hermit" crab and thus implicitly connecting the character to the animal world. Rather than the locusts that John the Baptist fed on, this sage relies on snails, possibly evoking something of a portrayal in the molluscs he feeds on, while the word "simple" to describe him is far from simple, and encompasses meanings as varied as artless, unsophisticated, foolish or feeble-minded. This characterization does not so much define the character as it makes him a hodgepodge of various languages and philosophies, emblematic of *The Swan Book*'s experimental gathering of several sets of beliefs to unsettle established conventions, while mixing concepts and animals, as Wright is prone to do.

Concrete & Abstract

To look at things anew, giving a body to ideas and language, Wright often brings concrete and abstract elements together in her metaphors. According to Lakoff and Johnson, "ontological metaphors" have become so commonplace to express experience that we no longer realize they are metaphorical, to capture the way the psyche works for example, as in the metaphor "the mind is a brittle object" to describe mental illness (Lakoff and Johnson 28-29). What Wright does, though, through her choice of arresting metaphors, or her disruptions of the conventional ones, is that she turns the largely ingrained and unconscious processes of the English language and transforms them into a conscious mode. In our usage of a common language, as Lakoff and Johnson have shown, we rely on preconceptions. By displacing such preconceptions, the unconventional metaphor makes them a source of questioning. For example, metaphors for thoughts and concepts are often associated with weight as in "to ponder on" where the buried Latinate/French root meaning "to weigh" is brought into consciousness when Wright, in *Carpentaria* (*C*), provocatively chooses to make her readers aware of the physical consequences of speech, hence, of the metaphorical "weight" of words, here to denounce the consequences of gossip (a quotation used in the title of this paper): "The Toyota, resurrected from Uncle's demise, was so loaded down with the weight of Aunty's rumours, the axles almost

touched the ground" (*C* 115). Elsewhere, gossip falls "like the blow of a heavy piece of lead, straight on the heads of this one poor, elderly couple" (*C* 122). The power of words is so great that gossip can kill.

In this way, Wright memorably brings abstract or complex systems of causality to the fore. The nearly immaterial, anonymous transmission of "rumour" from the character of Aunty to the general community of gossips is made as tangible as an overloaded car. To name the brand, a cheap and sturdy Toyota, and the previous driver, makes this even more concrete. In a similar way, Wright gives a physical reality to the workings of the political machine that touches people's lives in a direct manner, while many people in remote communities feel distant from places of decision-making and powerless to take action when trapped in the cogs of the system that directly impacts their lives: "away from the hustle and bustle of intra- and extra-racial Australian politics, a tyranny that they claimed was like a lice infestation of the mind" (*SB* 83). The invasive power of decisions from bureaucratic heights on individual and collective brains is expressed strongly through this simile and is more memorable than saying that bad politics act on the psyche as they itch like parasites inside the brain, rather than just on the scalp. Similarly, words are to be felt, they have physical presence and impact upon the listeners:

> Sleepy children from the little dwellings around the lake heard voices speaking from large leafy fields of water lilies. They felt words chasing after them, surrounding their feet like rope trying to pull them back as they ran away. Anyone daring to look back into the lake's echoes heard voices like dogs barking out of the mouths of fish skimming across the surface as they chased after the hordes of mosquitoes. (*SB* 7)

Here, words and the decisions they convey act like predators on children. The way the sound of words operates in this extract is reminiscent of white pastoralists rounding up Aborigines like animals to murder them. In the general mayhem that such violence has opened, nature speaks through its animals, mixing species in a general uproar, while the power of the striking simile "like dogs barking out of the mouths of fish" establishes the abnormality as possible, and underlines the abnormality of one species treating another in this manner—thus the abnormal becomes the normal and vice-versa.

Words are actual things—they can be seen, they have a visual reality: "Elliot watched the words come through the gap in her gums between the few brown stunted spikes that stood like lonely soldiers guarding the wisdom of age. 'You'll be getting married today,' Dorrie told him" (*PP* 123). Elliot does not want to get married to Ivy, so that the words Dorrie utters are hurtful to him. The comparison of Dorrie's teeth to "lonely soldiers guarding the wisdom of age" is ironic because her teeth stumps, dressed in army khaki brown, are far apart and her wisdom, thus poorly guarded, seems limited. She defends strict tribal marriage laws, in a world so disrupted that the defence seems uselessly authoritarian to the character of Elliot, who nevertheless surrenders to her decision and contracts an unhappy marriage. Reactivating dead metaphors, by actualizing them, taking them literally rather than figuratively, to the point of being absurd, or by using them ironically, restores the power of what usage has made commonplace and what is often taken for granted. It shows more forcibly the violence that language and actions may enact upon people. When Wright does not change the phrasal lexicon of set metaphors, she uses the distance of irony in taking up a trite metaphor such as "weeping like a willow": "the local broadcasters replied in song sung blue, and weeping like a willow" (*SB* 31). The association of the "blue" song metaphor with the following "willow" metaphor sounds like a hendiadys, the

expression of a single idea by two words connected with 'and,' and it generates unease. Or, Wright sets up a fictional context that makes the metaphor absurdly literal, as in the case of Rigoletto, a monkey who sings the libertine "anthem, 'Questa o Quella'" (*SB* 235), so that the expression "to sing like a monkey"—itself an ironic distortion of the more conventional expression "to sing like a bird" in the context of a monkey's howl—takes on the literal meaning: "Badly sung opera was enough for the street kids to stop using the lane. They left, while shouting that whoever was singing like a monkey should stop" (*SB* 235). The name "Rigoletto" points to the last of the fools, who is cruelly deceived in Verdi's opera, backing up the mockery of opera mimicry.

Occasionally, Wright underlines her literalizing process, although discreetly: "The fish-eating people literally bent over backward into a dancing, circling mob ingratiating themselves all over Warren Finch" (*SB* 117). In her use of the adverb "literally," Wright gives the key to her strategy of showing the absurdity of taking language and its meaning seriously or "literally" and of acting upon commonplace expressions without any critical distance. Some passages develop the materiality of speech extensively, spinning the metaphor of words like vomit, words like stone, words that destroy or lapidate, thus subverting the implicit saying "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me:"

> Oblivia overheard his whispering, and her guts had groaned and moaned while her stomach muscles tried to shove a jumble of dog-vomit words up her windpipe, although always in the nick of time, any of those screaming words that made it up to her mouth, crashed like rocks landing on enamel at the back of her clenched teeth. (*SB* 33)

The assonantic doublet "groaned and moaned" adds sound mimicry to the action, when the character's guts actually speak for her. The body knows more than the brains.

The brain producing speech is also described in a web of metaphors, its physicality likened to a material container that needs sorting out when it gets too messy: "The fiery woman worked her fingers to the bone to get into the girl's brain, as though this was where one removed grime, salt, vegetation, blood of dead animals, lice, and whatever thoughts about having different origins she had brought into the house" (*SB* 199). The trope "worked her fingers to the bone"—usually meaning hard physical graft—is used to get at Oblivia's "thoughts about having different origins" (*SB* 199). "Brainwashing" here takes on an extended meaning, literalized into tsunami proportions: "She knew it was not a safe place to stand against the wall breaking up in the flooded backwaters where volumes of words kept spilling over her head" (*SB* 199). The words of Oblivia's identity conflicts build up an indigenous image of the Big Wave, mixing two different cultural contexts.

Some conventional phrases are not even mentioned in the text, but built upon implicitly, like the expression "food for thought": "It was these little incidents that fed her loathing of the ugly man. Her mind grew fat on it" (*SB* 219). The brain may feed on scientific suffixes, metaphorically an "omelet": "the omelet of ology words floating gaily in the breeze of the noisy fans, and then dissipating featherlike, over and over in the ear en route to the brain cells" (*SB* 127). The beauty of the phrasing across languages (with the French expression "en route" blending into the numerous liquid sounds in "r" in "over and over in the ear en route to…") prolongs the euphony to culminate in the rather more scientific mention of the "brain cells." In this relationship between mind and matter, and in Oblivia's relationship with Warren, words

are a net catching a prey, ensnaring Oblivia. The courtly love metaphor of hunting birds (with a net) is here refreshed and reactivated in a different context of predation, emphasizing the double meaning of being caught in the prison, and language, of love: "His words caught her, ran along the surface of her arms as she ran, and as though a net he threw had unfurled over her, she realized in this moment, that she was attached to him" (*SB* 177-78).

The net metaphor recurs, coming up to a resolution at the end of the novel, as an instrument of salvation when instead of falling into Warren's net towards her destruction, Oblivia and the swans, who were also caught in the fishing lines knotted together (*SB* 100), are carried by the net of the ancestors' spirits in a moment of grace:

> Oblivia thought that she was in the sky, flying, and could not remember the journey. She and the swans were caught in the winds of a ghost net dragged forward by the spirits of the country. The long strands of hair flying among the swans, holding them together, and those long strands capturing her, made her fly too, close to the ground, across the country. (*SB* 294)

Such extended metaphors build up, cumulatively throughout the novel, into the idea that violence may be turned into a moment of saving grace by some redeeming twist of ancient power, helping the victim soar above the predators. This is similar to what Kathleen Birrell, in her analysis of the novel *Carpentaria* sees as "a Benjaminian notion of divine violence, located beyond the law as revolutionary potential" (Birrell 214). In *The Swan Book*, here less climactically than in *Carpentaria*, nature becomes a helper in the physical sense but also in the spiritual sense of a redeemer, as well as a relay or a prop for action, countering deadly words functioning as snares.

Adding to the cumulative build up, in a seeming opposition to words and their heavy materiality, feelings are sometimes seen as weightless and best captured by the metaphor of dust: "They could see that Warren Finch's feelings were nothing more than weightless dust, particles of responsibility from their own Brolga plains he had scattered across the globe" (*SB* 121). Yet feelings and intangible prophesies also speak in nature through the physicality of dust, no matter how light or negligible it may seem, as in the following "oracle": "The same oracle was everywhere, even in the dust of rats" (*SB* 152). The mysterious "oracle" speaks through the infinitesimal particles of dust, and through the lower orders of animals usually seen as pests, as the adverbial emphasis on "*even* in the dust of rats" (my emphasis) tends to imply. This voice of matter, emanating from the lowest orders of particles and the animal realm, runs throughout the novel. It carries forth the voice of the ancestors, just as the cattle bells remind Oblivia "of Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions singing sacred texts to unlock the terrifying memories of her people" (*SB* 152). "The same oracle was everywhere" refers to the paragraph about "the terrifying memories of [Aunty Bella Donna's] people" which in turn points to the sacred texts that Oblivia actually remembers, in spite of all the oblivion inscribed in her name and in spite of the drug inscribed in her Aunty's name. Belladonna, a poisonous plant "also known as *atropa belladonna* or deadly nightshade, contains … atropine, a non-selective muscarinic antagonist that is mainly used as an adjunct for anaesthesia" ("Belladonna"). In spite of all the deep, poisonous forms of oblivion, the dust still carries the voice of the ancestors like a powerful, indestructible oracle. The dust is the spirit of the Country. In *Carpentaria*, Kathleen Birrell sees the final explosion of the mine as the moment when the men "literally coalesce with this ancestral earth" (Birrell 219) because they are covered in dust, and "camouflaged by dust" (*C* 416) to make their escape, having destroyed the mine.

Soon after in *The Swan Book*, Oblivia feels threatened by Warren, a dangerous character who attempts to change the role of the dust, and to distort the oracle, as he pulls her "into the blanket of dust" and makes her feel "that she was in the grip of a snake" (*SB* 154). Carried by the wind, the dust in *The Swan Book* comes to embody a warning against dangers of loss, but it also gives a physical body to what remains of a forgotten culture, scattered in incomprehensible signs, like superstition if one has lost access to the underlying spiritual meaning of the signs of nature: "She listened closely to the dry grass and shadows of scrub being rustled by the wind, singing stories and laws that she could never know, and knowing this single thing about being its stranger was like having the weight of the world on her shoulders" (*SB* 154). In an oxymoronic turn, the lack of knowledge is what weighs heavily on the girl, rather than the words of the community. The cultural void weighs her down, in a striking reversal of the commonplace metaphor that knowledge is ponderous, and ignorance for airheads. The dualistic metaphor between light and heavy runs against conventional preconceptions or the metaphors we live by. Here, a void is given heft. Such an inconsistency with the commonplace metaphors in English makes the image memorable, embodying the aporia of attempting to create without memory, the mother of all muses, after a cultural discrepancy in the generational transmission. In the image of the dust, the spirit of the land speaks against oblivion, disrupting expectations of concrete and abstract metaphors, and implementing a transmission of a new order.

The Politics of Displacement

Following the general definition that the use of metaphor "is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff and Johnson 5), the displacement becomes twofold when the metaphors distort set images, drawing more attention onto the transfer they operate. A political discourse thus appears through Wright's playful twisting of set English expressions, also called "speech formulas," or "fixed-form expressions," or phrasal lexical items (Lakoff and Johnson 51). In a collection of essays on *Carpentaria* edited by Lynda Ng, Estelle Castro-Koshy has commented on a metaphor revealing political criticism: "Norm's accumulation of dangling hyperbolic and dramatic expressions comically emphasizes the sense of entitlement he uses to justify the manner in which he treats history like weeds or a chicken—ready to be 'plucked'" (Castro-Koshy 129). In a similar understanding of the politics of metaphors, I would like to explore another image, one that runs throughout Wright's body of work.

The distortion of the set image "a stunned mullet" into a "stuffed" mullet is a recurrent example which appears three times in *Carpentaria* (22, 225, 262). The expression is used in its common phrasing in *Grog War* (*GW*): "The two younger brothers staring at him like a pair of stunned mullets from the car window (*GW* 205). Does this imply that in a work of non-fiction, no matter how well written, the writer takes less liberty with the common language? In the novel *Carpentaria*, the expression becomes a "stuffed mullet," doubling the dazed, goggle-eyed stare of the fish with the aggression of the culinary, or possibly erotic, stuffing, thus making the image more brutally and ironically damning. The stuffed mullet is ready to be consummated, either way. In the context of an indigenous woman at the police station, it becomes threatening, in Angel Day's viewpoint: "She considered the likely consequences of sitting around like a stuffed mullet at the police station" (*C* 22).

When Norm, who preserves fish as a taxidermist, begins to look like one of his own creations in a moment of repressed anger, the comparison turns literal, in a comical twist: the "stunned mullet" has indeed become a "stuffed mullet" echoing previous usage, and doubling up on itself

with the literal meaning of stuffing dead fish to embalm them: "Norm was sitting at the table, rigid, like one of his stuffed mullets" (*C* 225). He is facing the police officer Truthful (whose name is obviously ironic), fuming because he does not want to see him in his house. The 'stuffed mullet' distortion comes as a summary after a long enumeration of the abuse the community has suffered from white people, whose police never solved or attempted to solve the crimes the indigenous characters were the victims of: "Norm stared at Truthful, while the room bristled with long-unresolved tensions about dead bodies, finding someone to blame, how to classify the terms of victimization, trashed homes, and ramshackle bodies recovering from sexual abusers who wallowed with joy, like they were opening presents on Christmas" (*C* 225). The "stuffed mullet" is thus doubly stuffed, once in the obscene sense, literally raped like the anonymous women mentioned, and also stuffed like preserved fish. The layering of the distorted expression makes for its intensity, explaining the character's anger: "He was brewing again" (*C* 225). The figure of speech operates for the readers' delight when the condensed punning of the last sentence is fully grasped: "Norm was sitting at the table, rigid, like one of his stuffed mullets" (*C* 225).

More humorously, and likewise obscenely charged with taboo innuendoes, the distortion of a pastoral cliché encapsulates a condemnation in scathing terms, in the expression: "The good old days. What a memory. A reminder of the showing-off days when men were men, and the fish were plentiful" (*C* 18). This turns the implicit pastoral, zoophiliac saying "when men were men, and sheep were nervous" into a hybrid image with fish rather than sheep; the metaphor has gone native in the Gulf of Carpentaria, in the hilarious change of species, taking zoophilia from warm-blooded mammals to cold-blooded fish, beyond the pale of the pale.

In general, animal similes abound, for a grotesque gallery of portraits. The "stuffed mullet" expression makes a final appearance to depict the lost survivors of a miraculous catch of fish, whose mates drowned with their fish after overloading their boats. The survivors look like ghosts, more dead fish than men: "You got to pity them, the ones you see hanging around Desperance with that funny, faraway look on their faces—like a stuffed mullet" (*C* 262). And because they are the ghosts of men, they err between animal species, from fish to dog, without any identity: "They skulk around looking like flea-bitten dogs, running from corner to corner, hiding behind fences and in other people's yards" (*C* 262). Mixing animal metaphors and similes renders the complexity of characters humorously, encapsulated in a nutshell: "Yet on the other side of his mind, he fought like a rabid dog to maintain an octopus vision of himself, where all arms lead to great glory and success" (*C* 414). Characters are likened to animals, flirting with the notion of totemic grouping and family identity, without the need to explain the cultural notion, precisely because the novel relies on the indigenous world vision: "Edgar was a tall and beautifully proportioned, strong-boned, golden-brown-skinned man with a face so flat and smooth, it made him look like the brother of an owl" (*SB* 128).

When the numerous examples of animal metaphors combine several species for the same character, it tends to betray the dehumanization of the viewer, as when Warren Finch, whose name combines rabbit and bird, sees Ethyl as a rat or as an echidna in the two following examples: "He caught her glance and his face softened momentarily, as though it amused him to catch the rat girl off guard" (*SB* 143), and "She was still the girl in the tree. Untouchable. Rolled up in a tight ball like a frightened echidna" (*SB* 155). Animal metaphors or similes thus serve various functions, ranging from the denunciation of inhumanity, to a totemic depiction of community for indigenous peoples, but what they have in common is that they are most often native species, thus "deterritorializing" English commonplaces, to use Deleuze's coinage (93).

In another example, "The fuming controller's many freckles looked like a nest of redback spiders about to burst" (*SB* 136), the image of "a nest of spiders" becomes venomous, as they are redback spiders, mimetically and comically rendering the harmless freckles of the "fuming controller" lethal. English freckles have come a long way, just as in *Carpentaria*, "the white cliffs of Dover" have been displaced with great colonial irreverence, the Shakespearean symbol of England turning into a metaphor for the "big white dress" of a black woman (*C* 25). The latter metaphor emphasizes that the white dress is, like the white language, a superficial covering over an authentically black vision and identity.

Separate vs Together

The animal metaphors converge into a general depiction of the community, in Wright's *Plains of Promise*, *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*. They combine with other metaphors to convey an idea of the community culture that is specific to indigenous society, in opposition to the more individualistic tenets of European culture and common law, as Wright summarizes in her non-fiction study *Grog War*: "What happened was that in European law rights are based on the individual but in lots of societies all over the world, including Indigenous society, rights are based on the community where family and community are more important than the individual" (*GW* 62). It is one thing to analyze cultural differences, but another to make them felt through the power of literature, bringing the concept closer to the reader's heart and imagination, not just to our analytic understanding. Even in her non-fiction study, Wright uses a beautiful expression for the schizophrenia of a member of the community, who no longer belongs anywhere, estranged even from himself, because of his alcohol addiction: "Dwayne wandered around depressed like a lost soul from one drinking camp to the next. He had become a vagrant inside of himself" (*GW* 216). The wanderer is a loner, and in his loss of community, in the here and now as well as in any sense of connection to his ancestors, even his sense of self has weakened, because eventually, there is no self without action and interaction with others, as Paul Ricœur has argued in *Oneself as Another* (299-302). In her intricate spinning of metaphors, Wright builds up a network of imagery, creating a whole set of interactions and echoes in her character's journeys, somewhat in the manner that songlines make sense of the history of the community on the land, and of the group's stand in the world.

Recurrent metaphors accumulate into a totem, which encapsulates a whole system of belief rather than a limited set of metaphors, as seen in the depiction of Elliot, who functions as a relay character in *Plains of Promise*, an intermediary between the characters' viewpoints and an authorial narrative voice, in the following excerpts:

> Sometimes his movements were as graceful as his totem, the brolga. A flock of brolga were now up ahead, quivering in a lake mirage across the plains, wavering in an eerie dance routine, there to greet him. He kept his promise to his father and ate only the food he saw the brolga eat on his journey. (*PP* 43)
>
> Although he lay with some sense of security beneath a gidgee tree, his father's totem, he was brooding about how he could get rid of the pigeons. (*PP* 72)

By extension, the crows in the tree are seen as totemic of the entire community, here mixing totemic image and metaphors:

> Mary remembered someone telling her once that crows pair for life, and look after their young for a very long time. Children. Uncles and Aunts. Grandparents, great

> grandparents maybe. Cousins, brothers. No possibility of divorce. No losing your parents or someone you care about. A real traditional, tribal life. All sitting up high in the gum tree together. Resting in the heat of the day, talking about crow matters… (*PP* 257)

This is a founding metaphor, grounding the indigenous world vision, because it is reversible: people are like crows, and crows like people. The interconnection respects nature's power over people, because people do not master nature, but live with it and in it. A few pages further on, the metaphor of the indigenous mob as crows doubles up with ancestral belief that crows have power over people: "'Crows can make people die,' came the slow, guarded answer to Jessie's question" (*PP* 261). In English, not coincidentally, the expression a "murder" of crows is used for the collective noun of the flock of birds, as if the English language only needed to be revitalized through this fictional usage, to go back to its ancient, early Germanic origins and get closer to (English) Country. Thus, in this case, the children's education of Jessie into the tribe grants the implicit expression its full ancestral, indigenous meaning, literally colonizing the English language, and making it mean what it did not before contact, unless it might have long ago, in a forgotten, bygone past.

When an actual thing in nature, like a tree, is understood as a spiritual or mythical element, it provides access to the ancient beliefs, serving the function of a portal into the Dreamtime, or Creation story:

> In her dream Ivy watches her body slip uncontrollably through the narrow darkness of a deep channel. It burrows deeper into the bowels of the earth. She asks herself if she is dying. She asks if she is already dead—if so, the occasion of her death passed without her realising it. She remembers the entrance to the channel. It was in the tree stump on the other side of the river, all that was left of a giant eucalyptus struck by the lightning of the Great Spirit. It had fallen into decay after death, one stick, one branch after another, termite-hollowed wood falling free with each rain. An ancestral entrance through the dark hole left there.—Or perhaps, if you looked at it another way, it was the whiteman's traditional culture that put an end to it. (*PP* 58-59)

The process of burrowing reads like a reverse birth. In the end, the dash before "Or perhaps" does not quite cancel the previous interpretation of an "ancestral entrance," but puts a damper on it. Ancestral narratives and post-contact destruction cannot be bridged, and they are simply juxtaposed across the syntactic break, and the difficult connection made by the dash. The short syntactic sign of the dash carries much weight since it marks a logical hurdle in the sentence, and an epistemicide, or murder of ancestral knowledge, in the culture.

The meshing of metaphors often brings together birds and people, birds having a society like people, or people behaving like birds, and not only for crows:

> There were elderly owls in the room. Not local. These came from other wild places in the world. The old owls sat very still and civilized on perches, so as not to waste their breath on life's flippancies. Only the younger owls did that—flying soundlessly to and fro across the room—leaving and returning from the city streets. The room's other large bird life consisted of several old rare and valuable parrots that preserved the entire history of their species inside their heads. (*SB* 233)

People and animals blend, and like a bird, the Chinese hermit literally grows into his environment, as the two following excerpts show:

> The environmentalists and their families lived rough along the water's edges like nesting swans or a colony of egrets, in makeshift rafts, or roughly made reed huts. Even their babies knew how to cling to the watery nests, or the bosoms of their mothers. (*SB* 275)
>
> The only person who lived on the water among the flooded trees where no one ever goes was an old Chinese hermit. He lived on an island of sticks that looked like an enormous swan's nest. His white hair and whiskers were filled with sticks too. (*SB* 279)

The transformation shows symbiosis at work. The "old Chinese hermit" has not only gone native, he has naturalized, having turned into a native swan or egret. The magic of Wright's creation is that she delights in the transformative power of language, and the creation of new relations between people and the world that language may bring about.

Not surprisingly, in her works, speech is not a lonely affair, but a connection to people and to place, at a particular time. Speech establishes a relation, in the telling expression "walk the talk" (itself a subversion of "walk the walk and talk the talk") which Wright uses to describe Tracker Tilmouth in her non-fiction biographical collection *Tracker* (*T*): "Tracker hated being tied to an office desk, or sitting around hour after hour to belt out his latest ideas and theories on a computer. He preferred to walk the talk, to be with people, to be where he could talk directly to them" (*T* 9).

The written word comes close to such an airing, because walking is talking in the songlines, and communication with the land, mimicking a walkabout in the sprawling narrative and meshing of recurrent metaphors in Wright's novels, tangibly layering group beliefs and political aspirations in an experience of understanding and fullness in the here and now. In the case of the character Normal Phantom, such mind and body airing shows that metaphors are not only imaginary constructs, but they also suggest direct action: "he knew that when his mind went for a walk, his body followed" (*C* 7). Taken literally, metaphors can change the world. Several extensive metaphors linked to the open country recur and build up a cumulative argument in *Carpentaria*, opening up a new vision, a new understanding of indigenous culture, and suggesting action. I will be quoting extensively to analyze how some key metaphors come to define Wright's artistic vision *in situ*.

The Music of Nature as an Ecopoetical Metaphor

In keeping with the ancestral belief that the forces of nature mould the natural world into being and into beauty, inspiring reverence, the wind as "grand old composer" (*C* 208) metaphor goes against several tenets of Western philosophy. Primarily, it butts against the idea that nature does not create art, that art is a man-made artefact, an elaborate creation for the purpose of beauty, or critical reflection, or an awareness of man's place in the world. The Romantics were notable exceptions, with Coleridge's "Eolian Harp" and Schubert's rendition of a swan's song (quoted in *The Swan Book* 152), glorifying nature's creative powers. Coleridge heard the instrument of nature as a form of animistic, godly presence:

> And what if all of animated nature
> Be but organic harps diversely framed,
> That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps
> Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,
> At once the Soul of each, and God of All? (88)

In *Carpentaria*, the expression "spirited away" and the fright of the old people, implicitly closer to traditional belief, betray similar awe in front of the divine music of nature:

> Over time, the whirly-whirly local winds composed much of the new music for the modern times. The wind squeezed through every crack and hole to loosen sheets of corrugated iron for the salt in the air to rust nails that went pop, until all those old pieces of tin whined, whistled, banged, and clapped. Every day, all day and all night sometimes, the town jammed jazz with bits of loose tin slapping around on top of the mud-stained fibro walls to pummel the crumbling, white-ant-ridden, honeycombed timber frames, until one day, only paint held up those buildings.
> This indescribable concoction of rhythms escaped into the atmosphere, and was spirited away across the continent to somewhere else more fraught with modernity than Desperance. There, wafting into the minds of modern-day composers like lights of stardust, inspiring them to create weird, unfathomable orchestral music which the old people now heard on the radio and recognized as the uncontrollable airs of Desperance. What a fright! They turned the radio off. (*C* 56)

The wind unmakes the "frames" of the shanty towns of the colonizers, already attacked by white ants, first creating beauty by erasing the man-made ugliness. Such beauty is inhabited by divine forces the old people acknowledge as signals as easily transmitted as radio waves. Eco-poetically, it also defines rhythm and time passing: "Years passed with the winter winds blowing south-easterly in weekly rhythms after midnight. Like nobody else, Norm loved the grand old composer, the rapturous melodies which swam along the tin walls of the corridor from the house to the fishroom" (*C* 208). Not only "weekly" in its periodicity, the wind is organized, and conducts a "mass choir of crickets" which characters can join: "Norm sang Gloria, alongside the old composer conducting his mass choir of crickets that sang Glory! Glory! in time with the rattling walls. The crickets, part of the fishroom's metamorphosis, lived in the dark, musky, fish-smelly environment" (*C* 208). The wind brings out the crickets' music and thus resonates the music of dead animals in Norm's fishroom at night: "Dozens of the gleaming fish hanging off the rafters sang eerie songs in shrilled, mezzosoprano voices that floated out of their mouths from the crickets' hidden nests, from deep inside the fishes' horsehair bellies" (*C* 209). Such animation of non-animate is unusual in English, and forces the language to acknowledge another world vision, in which dead animals have a spirit, and even a voice.

From dead animals to dead people, the logic follows that in *Carpentaria*, the wind is the expression of the ancestors, because it is their music: "All day and night the wind played ancestor music. The sounds rolled in the skies, gathering up the waters of the ocean in heavy clouds, whistling while they passed through rocky ledges of the highlands and through the gorges where the twisting river tracks led" (*C* 455). With supernatural power, the wind penetrates some characters' thoughts: "The magnificent hand of the wind pushed into his back, and its song whistled into his ears like a devil, and into his mind" (*C* 456). It may be a malevolent figure. In any case, it is irresistible and produces wonders, like the cricket or the fly.

The latter's "operatic voice" combines with classical flute music from the radio to operate a metamorphosis, a transformation "into mystical patterns":

> He could see the song was being performed by a mythmaker fly with operatic voice, creating impromptu notes, as it circled around the Fishman's head. Accompanying the fly, traditional flute music flowed from Fishman's battery radio over the homelands. The landscape of stunted spinifex clumps and gidgee trees mutated through distance slid from note to note, into mystical patterns of a garden of the Orient under morning dew. (*C* 456)

The connection is thus established, through the music of nature, between the ancestors and the present characters, enacting a transformation, and granting access to mysticism of a foreign nature, expressed poetically as "a garden of the Orient under morning dew" (*C* 456). The expression echoes a lore of Arabic poetry, somewhat orientalist in its unidentified vagueness, calling for images of dew and gardens against the desert. Buttressing one's poetic expression on an ancient tradition from another land, the narrator glorifies the creative powers of nature first, as the primary poet that human poets only imitate. This recalls an ancient, medieval tradition in Europe, that God's creation was the first poetic gesture. Thus, the natural world of the ancestors and their mystical realm are perceived jointly, resettling the ancestral world vision in the center, while acknowledging the beauty of classical music in the same pursuit of the divine. To borrow from Julia Kristeva's analysis of St Paul's spirituality and his Church founding, by which Paul created a community of equal rights for all, "[T]he splitting that has become a link is called Resurrection or Eucharist" (Kristeva 82). The dichotomy between Jews and Gentiles, as well as between matter and spirit, is bridged in the belief that mankind is inhabited by the divine, or transfigured and transubstantiated. In Wright's fiction, the process of transubstantiation is extended to the whole of nature, as the Fishman has made city-muffled ears aware of the sounds of nature in their glorious, spiritual wealth. He has opened the ears of indigenous and non-indigenous people alike to hear the divine in nature, and to reach a "sense of lightness" that brings everyone close to the divine: "The Fishman's men in broken jeans, shorts, and T-shirts faded and holey followed through the dry riverbeds, grace-like behind the old man with the radio, in a travelling mirage of grey brolgas at one with the universe. Will yearned to rejoin their sense of lightness" (*C* 456). The aptly named character is a fisher of men, with the pun on his holey/holy clothes. The informed ancestral vision, including Christianity and modernity without disruption or destruction, is what makes poetry possible, or etymologically, it enables creation and thus establishes one's place in the world, with equal rights between all.

The Ray Metamorphosis and Transubstantiation

When the character Norm and the body of his dead friend Elias are on a boat, a ray literally catches Norm's thoughts as he contemplates "the manta ray with its greying form moving through the depths of ocean below. Norm became intoxicated by watching the prolonged movement of the suspended ray" (*C* 242). The magical fish uncannily captures characters' thoughts, but also seems to "intoxicate" the text, calling for the homonymy of a "ray of sunlight," as if endowed with the magical power to create with words, in the vision Norm has of his wife Angel Day:

> The grey sea creature willowing below carried his subliminal mind on its back, absorbing those captured thoughts of Angel Day walking out of a submerged track

> in the sea towards him. She walked out of the water not far from the boat in a dazzling *ray of sunlight*, and she walked away, back on the track that led to the rubbish dump. Norm gripped the vision, staring straight through reality to watch her for the first time that long-ago day when Elias had seen her. Looking so closely into her face, he was astounded at its clarity. … She walked with a tranquillity and a beauty that was her normal face, but which she had carefully folded up and stored away, saved only now for stolen occasions of when she was completely alone. (*C* 242, my emphasis)

From the manta ray to rays of sunlight, the passage moves to a metamorphic vision of a stingray in the sky: "he noticed the strange shape of a giant stingray, as big as the boat itself, flying across the sea like a passenger of the wind" (*C* 243). The blending of the light and the fish is complete, and culminates in alchemy, the liquid gold created in this ecopoetic moment being far more precious than what any white man's mine could ever dig up from the ground: "The sun sitting low on the horizon threw its bright *rays* across the water, which simulated liquid gold" (*C* 243, my emphasis).

In this moment of intense vision, Norm believes he has seen a "sea woman"—a "death angel" (*C* 245) from ancient belief: "He now understood the travelling phenomenon he had watched was the sorrowful woman, a cursed spirit of death who had come to find them" (*C* 244). The passage mixes elements of realism and magical thinking, bridging a gap between ancestral tradition and contemporary life, to mourn the death of a friend. Norm then follows a giant groper, and at the end of a trying voyage of mourning, buries his friend at sea.

Strikingly, the metamorphosis and homonymous punning on the radical "ray" brings about an inversion of the "up-down spatialization metaphors" (Lakoff and Johnson 17) that we rely on in our common usage of the English language, when the character Norm dreams about the groper, and his dreams compose with ancient stories "from the Dreamtime" about the groper's "sea palace, a circular fish city full of underground caves where the huge fish liked to live" (*C* 248): "He dreamt he watched the stars fall deeper through the water, where their light lit up the watery world of the gropers' palace" (*C* 255). Stars fall down into the sea depths, casting their light from below.

The flexible imagination of dreams and myths helps Norm have a vision of his deceased friend Elias as a star, uniting the sky and the abyss of the sea in its double metaphor of "a man like a star" and a man like a fish:

> Norm, drifting in and out of sleep, caught a glimpse of the fish become stars shooting back in the skies, and finally, the night caravan moving further and further away on its journey. He knew at once Elias was up there with them. … Norm was ecstatic with his generous vision of Elias. He knew for the rest of his life he could stop looking out for him. He would no longer resemble a man. He would be like a star. A man like a star. Fish stars. (*C* 256)

The "fish stars" that light up the gropers' underwater "palace" also light up the sky, and function as beacons for the survivors, from above and below. This combination of polarities, with the reversal of up and down, sends opposites back to back as so many false foes. High and low, above and below, air and water, light and dark are here united and open the possibility of a new alchemy, for a new creation.

Toward the end of *Carpentaria*, metaphors for the psyche follow the metamorphosis images, here as a butterfly might emerge from its cocoon:

> He craved to walk outside into the deluge to escape a world that seemed to be falling in on him; he was overcome with a desire to rip off the bare shell of his being so that he could walk free from thoughts that were so oppressive, he felt like he was going mad. But somehow, in this madness, a plan was hatching. Other ideas emerged from the twisted wreckage of his brain. Something that resembled an escape plan was fighting its way through the catastrophic imagery like a flea. The plan seemed easy, but it too was slippery to hold, for it resembled something of a truth. (*C* 473)

In this intricate expression of a psyche striving to create itself anew, Wright counters the common metaphors that the truth is something stable, to hold onto in the final sentence of the paragraph quoted above: "The plan seemed easy, but it too was slippery to hold, for it resembled something of a truth" (*C* 473). If the truth is "slippery" to hold, its beauty lies in its elusiveness. The indefinite article in "a truth" adds to the slippery nature of knowledge, which may not be grasped wholly. The image could be read as emblematic of the novel's philosophy of metamorphic creation. After unsettling established metaphors or having them combined in a new way, after a storm and a flood in the plot, something may emerge from the chaos of *Carpentaria*, something as slippery as "a" truth.

Conclusion

In her reflection in "On Writing *Carpentaria*," Wright explains that she set out "to explore the possibilities of other worlds" than "the known country of colonialism":

> This authenticity, of how the mind tries to transcend disbelief at the overwhelming effects of an unacceptable history, could be understood as bi-polar: it's there and not there. When faced with too much bad reality, the mind will try to survive by creating alternative narratives and places to visit from time to time, or live in, or believe in, if given the space. *Carpentaria* 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 Carpentaria" 221)

By unsettling established metaphors, by composing or mixing them in unusual ways, Wright makes way for a new philosophy, a creation that might restore the ancestral world vision, with a memory of the loop including the rupture brought about by colonization. Her works criticize the dead end of capitalist greed and colonization, with its disregard of humanity and nature, and offer a new dreaming, a re-creation on one's own terms, from within the English language. In her search for "new dreams" ("On Writing Carpentaria" 220), Wright explores a new common language, working in English, from within the colonizer's language, but making room for another vision in that language, a process Gilles Deleuze sees as "deterritorializing" English into "the language of the whale" in *Moby Dick* (Deleuze 93). Wright works not only as a keeper of memory, but also as a visionary in the language that emerges enlarged by her usage: "The idea of the novel was to build a story place where the spiritual, real and imagined worlds exist side by side. The overall aim of the novel was to create a memory of what is believed, experienced and imagined in the contemporary world of Indigenous people in the Gulf of Carpentaria" ("On Writing Carpentaria" 223). Changing metaphors is a way of changing

perception, of adapting one culture to another, of learning how to listen, to see anew, to imagine a new world, and by phrasing it, of bringing it closer to a programmatic enactment. In the final sentence of *Carpentaria*, Norm Phantom and his grandson Bala walk home hand in hand, listening to the song of nature, with its ongoing, open process of "singing the country afresh" (*C* 516). Just as Norm understands the unifying force of the river, his dead son Will Phantom "literally *becomes* country – 'mud', the trunk of a dead tree, a puff of smoke, able to hide behind thin air, every dust storm" (Birrell 217, original emphasis). Replacing an indigenous cosmic vision at the center of her novels and reinventing a spiritual contact with nature, while living in her contemporary, mechanized, Anglo-dominated world, Wright also sings the Country afresh in an augmented usage of the English language, for all readers to engage in her songlines.

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Françoise Palleau-Papin is Professor of American Literature at Sorbonne Paris Nord University. After completing a PhD dissertation on Willa Cather, she has published a critical study of Willa Cather's novel *My Ántonia*, a monograph on David Markson, and edited a critical study of William T. Vollmann's novel *The Rifles*. She recently co-edited *An Introduction to Anglophone Theatre*, and has written numerous articles on contemporary North American authors. Her passion for Australian literature began when she was a student, and she has been a lover of Australian cinema, art and literature ever since.
Email: francoise.palleau@univ-paris13.fr