

Shifting Timescapes and the Significance of the Mine in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*

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PUBLISHED in 2006, Alexis Wright's epic novel, *Carpentaria*, quickly became a national classic. Described as 'the greatest, most inventive and mesmerising Indigenous epic ever produced in Australia' (Shoemaker 55) and a 'huge audacious monstrous work of genius' (Guest), it was awarded Australia's most prestigious literary prize in 2007, the Miles Franklin Literary Award. Although hailed as the 'Great Australian Novel', *Carpentaria* presents a major challenge to the settler project on which the nation state is founded.

Carpentaria is set in the fictional coastal town of Desperance in the Southern Gulf of Carpentaria in north-western Queensland, which floods regularly from monsoonal rains and tides. The novel focuses on the members of an Aboriginal family and the ways in which they negotiate the wide-reaching effects associated with the establishment of a multinational mine. It is a sprawling and multi-faceted narrative inhabited by a huge cast of human characters and non-human agents, including spirits and ancestors, as well as the land, waters and weather of the Gulf Country. Desperance is a traumatised and devastated community, and the novel's sometimes ironic tone does not blind us to the suffering it represents or the nurturing spiritual traditions of the land and its ancestors within which it is situated. One of its singular achievements is the way it explores racism, police brutality, violence, poverty, and substance abuse with a clear-eyed compassion in the midst of its narrative complexity.

While the novel can be, and has been, read in a range of ways, this article argues that the impacts of mining are central to any understanding of *Carpentaria*. I hope to demonstrate that the profound and pervasive effects

of mining permeate every aspect of the narrative. *Carpentaria* exposes how mining and the global forces that underpin it are brought to bear on the lives of the Aboriginal communities at the frontline of environmental destruction, especially in remote regions, and the variety and complexity of Aboriginal responses to such incursions. The novel also insists that the power of these forces is sustained through brutal racism, state-sanctioned violence and nationalist ideologies. This article elaborates upon a dichotomy the novel sets up between an Aboriginal Elder, represented by the central character of Normal Phantom, who sees mining as just another phenomenon in the vast expanse of time, and his son Will, who fights the mine on the understanding that it is a qualitatively different and unprecedented threat to the Waanyi people and their Country. Although I suggest that this wider debate, and the forms of agency it represents, remain unresolved in the novel, I conclude with a meditation on the character of Kevin, who has been all but ignored in critical responses to *Carpentaria*. I want to suggest that Kevin's life trajectory – his initial promise and then his ongoing acute suffering – complicates the novel's central tension and reminds us that such debates are a background to the lived experience of Aboriginal peoples. Kevin ultimately disappears from the novel, and his absence haunts its otherwise potentially hopeful resolution. In the light of ongoing controversies about the Adani Group's Carmichael coal mine in the north of the Galilee Basin in Central Queensland, *Carpentaria* remains more relevant than ever.

Alexis Wright is a Waanyi woman and a long-time activist and educator in northern Australian Aboriginal communities, who later turned to fiction to express her concerns, and it is possible to read *Carpentaria* as a work of activism with serious political intent ('Politics of Writing'). Wright insists: 'I want our people to have books, their own books, in their own communities, and written by our own people. I want the truth to be told, our truths, so first and foremost, I hold the pen for the suffering in our communities. Let it not be mistaken' ('Breaking Taboos' 2). But it would be both limited and limiting to approach the novel only as activism, as much of the commentary on the novel reveals.

The novel lends itself to reading through multiple frames of reference including genre (Devlin-Glass; Holgate), perspectives on time and history (Leane), questions of sovereignty (Brewster; Ravenscroft), the relationship between ecocriticism and decolonisation (Barras; Gleeson-White; Rigby), the trope of the apocalypse (Loomes; Sefton-Rowston); its transnational networks, via an exploration of covers and blurbs (Osborne and Whitlock), and, frequently, its unique and layered narrative voice. One of Wright's stated aims was 'to try to create in writing an authentic form of Indigenous storytelling that uses the diction and vernacular of the region' ('On Writing *Carpentaria*' 6). Geoff Rodoreda, in his astute analysis of the novel's narrative structure, characterises the cen-

tral account as an embedded narrative addressed by a third-person Aboriginal voice: ‘It’s the voice of Aboriginal elders speaking about people and country, talking about what Aboriginal culture is, what it means and how it might frame the future’ (187) to Aboriginal narratees. The narrator’s voice integrates the hallmarks of orality, with interjections, colloquialisms and exclamations spread throughout. As Anne Brewster has observed, this narrative voice ‘renders indigeneity the default position’ (87). The central narrative is framed by a larger narrative that invites non-Aboriginal readers into the story – an audience it needs to find – by providing them with a sense of orientation, an entry point into the (main) narrative, as listeners but not as direct addressees or participants (Brewster 187).

This narrative structure incorporates a complex and layered commentary on time: its relation to memory, history and timelessness (see Leane) is signalled early in the novel. The first chapter, called ‘From Time Immemorial’, opens with the creative serpent’s descent ‘those billions of years ago’, ‘long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time’ (1). This framing narrative reminds us that the lives of human beings represent mere blips in time from the perspective of creation, but storytelling nonetheless remains a meaningful resource for understanding how to live, and a reminder of what matters. In this way, storytelling is also a means of asserting Indigenous sovereignty.

In *Carpentaria*, the mine is the most immediate threat to sovereignty. It permeates all aspects of the narrative, and impacts the lives of all the characters; indeed, the story of its arrival and ultimate demise is the central story within the narrative frame. Likewise, the mine itself, as a geopolitical and structural force, dominates the landscape of Desperance and is a source of conflict and division that exacerbates pre-existing and ancient tensions within the community.

The novel’s first reference to a point in historical time is on the day the river’s name was changed to Normal, after Senior Lawman Normal Phantom:

There was a celebration by the Local Shire Council. The occasion was the anniversary of the port’s first one hundred years. It coincided with a spate of unusual happenings during a short-lived era of Aboriginal domination of the Council. *Harmless coercing of the natives*, the social planners hummed, anxious to make deals happen with the impending mining boom . . . During this honeymoon period, those Aboriginal people who took the plunge to be councillors, wisely used their time in public office to pursue scraps of personal gain for their own families living amidst the muck of third-world poverty.

All this was part and parcel of the excitement of Desperance when the first multinational mining company came into the region. Numerous short-lived profiteering schemes were concocted for the locals, in order to serve the big company's own interests as they set about pillaging the region's treasure trove: the publicly touted curve of an underground range embedded with minerals. (8–9)

The day was met with great fanfare and turned the small town of Desperance into a location of national import: 'The elaborate white linen ceremony, paid for by the mining company, attracted southern politicians who flew in for the day' (9). The story that follows, of the mine and its destruction, is a somewhat ominous cautionary tale:

After the mining stopped, neither Normal Phantom and his family, nor his family's relations past or present, rated a mention in the official version of the region's history . . . All the old mines, old mining equipment, old miners, old miners' huts, skeletons of miners in the cupboard, anything to do with mining was packaged in a mishmash of nothing words and marketed on gloss as the ultimate of local tourist attractions . . . Wars were fought here . . . If you are someone who visits old cemeteries, wait awhile if you visit the water people. The old Gulf country men and women who took our besieged memories to the grave might just climb out of the mud and tell you the real story of what happened here. (11)

While few commentators have focused on the centrality of mining in the story – Philip Mead being a notable exception – this opening chapter sets the scene for a narrative that is all about mining.

Jane Gleeson-White's compelling eco-critical reading of *Carpentaria* pays attention to the conflict between capital and land and has been a key resource in establishing my argument. According to Gleeson-White, 'the Indigenous cosmology of Australia assumes the agency of place, or the non-human world, and a custodial, mutually nourishing relationship between humans and "Country", an Aboriginal concept which denotes land, its creatures, ancestors, law' (1). Under global systems of capitalism, however, land is viewed as a commodity to be exploited for profit, including what is underneath the ground. In the Australian context, the economic system of extractive capitalism is underpinned and enabled by a national discourse and ideology of mining that has dominated the landscape and lives of Australians since colonisation. As Malcolm Knox suggests in *Boom: The Underground History of Australia* (2013), 'mining is,

in a way that has not been properly understood or appreciated, integral to Australians' perception of themselves' (xii). David Trigger, in his ethnographic work in mining regions, has found that:

Those who drive the resources development industries are understood as pursuing the tasks of mineral exploration with a surety about its cultural and moral significance, as well as its economic importance. Their convictions in this respect constitute a dimension of ideology situated at the centre of Australian culture. ('Mining' 173)

Both Knox and Trigger suggest that to challenge mining is thus to challenge some of the most fundamental ways in which Australians understand and celebrate themselves and the nation. Mead has argued that Australian literary culture, because it has been dominated by a cultural nationalist paradigm and allegories of nation-building, has participated in this ideological project, making it oblivious to both its collusion in capitalism and the effects of the social and economic reality of resource extraction on Indigenous peoples. For Mead, *Carpentaria* exposes this blindness and functions as a 'savage critique of globalised resource exploitation' (36).

While the ideology and economics of extraction may lie at the centre of Australian culture, the locations where mining actually takes place are far from the metropolis, and its impacts are felt most keenly in remote zones, often in and around Aboriginal communities. As Benedict Scambury notes, while the exploitation of mineral reserves has brought considerable wealth to the Australian economy, the 'value of the minerals sector to Australian prosperity is in stark contrast to the economic poverty experienced by many Indigenous Australians, particularly those residing in mine hinterlands' (1). *Carpentaria's* careful embedding in place enables a blunt portrayal of a fractured Aboriginal community dramatically impinged upon by the abstract forces of global capital, which is always moving elsewhere, leaving behind only its concrete and destructive effects.

Century Mine

The conflicted history of the Century zinc mine on Waanyi/Garrawa country in the Gulf informs *Carpentaria's* fictional representation of the impacts of mining. The High Court's Mabo judgment of 1992 recognised that Indigenous claimants did traditionally have rights to their land under common law, and the subsequent Native Title Act (NTA) of 1993 established a framework for the recognition of pre-existing Indigenous rights to land. The NTA enables mining companies to negotiate Indigenous Land Use Agreements with recognised native title holders. The mining industry, however, has 'successfully combined its

activities with the ethos of frontier development and nation-building that has marked Australia's colonial history' (Scambury 11). In so doing, it has positioned recognition of Indigenous rights as not being in the national interest.

Aboriginal people of the southern Gulf communities first began hearing of Century Mine in late 1990. Negotiations between Conzinc Rio Tinto of Australia (CRA), the original owner of the Century Mine in Queensland, and the Gulf communities began just prior to the Mabo judgment in 1991, and they took place against the backdrop of considerable shifts in Aboriginal policy in Australia. The negotiations revealed a deep ambivalence towards the mine, unhelped by government and industry rhetoric that touted the great value of the 'biggest zinc mine in the world', a project with 'the potential to generate absolutely massive wealth of the State and the nation' in the words of the Queensland Premier in 1996 (qtd. in Trigger, 'Reflections' 118). As Trigger's meticulous research has shown, the 'Century case illustrates the very great strains that negotiations over large-scale resource development projects prompt in Aboriginal communities' (113).

Negotiations in relation to the mine saw the intervention of the since disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC); state-appointed mediators; disputation among Indigenous groups with interests in the project area; several overlapping native title claims; and militant action by the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation (CLCAC) under the leadership of Murrandoo Yanner. Yanner is one of the Aboriginal leaders Wright acknowledges as having inspired the novel, and perhaps also the character of Will Phantom. Actions against the mine included an extended occupation of the Lawn Hill National Park 'by approximately 150 Waanyi people in 2002 [that] threatened its closure' (Scambury 188), bringing intense media interest in the Gulf negotiations, and the fostering of links with the Bougainville Revolutionary Army in Papua New Guinea. The negotiations culminated in the signing of the Gulf Communities Agreement (GCA) between Pasminco Century Mine Limited, the Queensland Government and four Indigenous groups, including the Waanyi. As Scambury explains, 'since the signing of the agreement, and the subsequent construction of Century mine, Indigenous parties to the agreement remain factionalised in relation to the agreement, its associated structures, the mine and each other' (187). These were complex negotiations. Although the Queensland government was a party to this agreement, in such communities multinational corporations are the predominant market force and in line with economic liberalist agendas, 'mining agreements with Indigenous people vest considerable "state-like" powers in the industry in relation to the delivery of social policy' (4).

Among the many involved factors driving these negotiations were the ‘capacity and desire of individuals to engage in mediated assessments of the costs and benefits that such engagement may entail for other obligations to country and to kin, and ultimately to cultural identity’ (15). Wright has declared that an important seed for the novel:

came from witnessing the deterioration of relationships between people in the communities of the Gulf from the negotiations to develop the Century Mine. The so-called native title negotiations forced people to choose between the intangibles of the future in a hostile environment that was at best patronising, and at worst, dominating, threatening, devious and cruel . . . The people of these affected communities had very little, owned nothing but enormous poverty, but they were being bombarded by a rich multinational mining company that was backed absolutely by the state. These communities were given little choice but to argue with each other, and forced to choose how to hold onto fragile cultural interests, from a sale that was a pittance in the scheme of things, just so that the vast interests of the company could proceed. (‘On Writing *Carpentaria*’ 93)

The conflict that unfolds in the novel needs to be understood in this context (see Jose). As the narrator of *Carpentaria* explains: ‘Some people were talking about the jobs they would be getting. *You very, very wrong*. They were arguing about the pro-land-rights brigade . . . Others were saying they wanted the mining company to give the country back. Others were opposed to having any mines on their sacred country’ (392).

‘Desperance belonged totally to the big mine’

Desperance is home to a divided Aboriginal community living on both eastern and western sides of the town on the fringes of a white settlement, and the mine hovers as a menacing shadow over every aspect of the community. The novel focuses mainly on the family of the Elder of the Pricklebush mob, Normal (Norm) Phantom, who lives on the western side of town, but the mine is, as we shall see, an overwhelmingly oppressive force that seeps into the lives of all the characters.

Norm is a taxidermist of fish, a keen fisherman and a sailor with deep knowledge of the waterways of the Gulf, and he is ‘the rightful traditional owner’ with responsibilities to maintain law and custom. He retains and tells important family stories, including the story of a massacre, witnessed by his father, in which his grandfather was murdered. Norm seeks to pass on his traditional

knowledge, but his family is falling apart. His wife, Angel Day, with whom he has seven children, has left him and his children are as conflicted as the town.

His eldest two sons, Inso and Donny, ‘did nothing for anybody except for money. They worked in the mine from day one’ (107). We later learn that the ‘mine in their mind meant good food . . . and nobody to fight you for it’ (180). Norm’s daughters – Janice, Patsy and Girlie – are now living at home, having returned from broken and sometimes violent marriages with a ‘string of children’. Norm is estranged from his son Will, who had always been his favourite. Kevin is his youngest, ‘the beautiful last child who had inherited all the brains’ (108) but had never recovered from a disastrous mining accident.

Two other knowledgeable elders and lawmen appear in the novel, one of whom is Joseph Midnight, the leader of a breakaway mob who invented the idea that they were the traditional owners to take advantage of the mine:

The Eastside camp was old Joseph Midnight’s mob exiled from Westside because they wanted to say that nobody else but they were the real traditional owners where Desperance had been built. That idea originated from Old Cyclone who was Joseph Midnight’s father. They even made up a name for themselves – *Wangabiya* . . . All of it was part of Joseph Midnight’s extortion racket with the government. This was what he got for agreeing to the mine. The government gave him a lot of money, a thousand dollars . . . This was what he got for his native title rights. (52–53)

Mozzie Fishman, the other senior lawman, leads a pilgrimage that follows ancient dreaming tracks in battered-up cars; when the reader first meets him, he is leading his ‘never-ending travelling cavalcade of religious zealots, which once again was heading home, bringing a major Law ceremony over the State border’ (119). He has long been an activist against the mine; his endless pilgrimage began after he spoke out against the arrival of the mine in Desperance:

Well! Nobody thought it was a joking matter because his talking caused talk everywhere, big talk, all over the country. Oh! Imagine how people felt when they turned on the radio and the television even, and there he was, speaking: talking on the radio about the mine. Even the television had his big face on it. Well! Big talk caused no sense but trouble which came along in full force. All the police flew into Desperance on an aeroplane for the day to pick up Mozzie Fishman, manhandled him forcefully to the edge of town, and chucked him out like he was nothing. (137)

While this an Aboriginal story, the characters are at the mercy of the deluded and self-serving inhabitants of Uptown, where the descendants of European settlers live. Desperance is overseen by the violently racist Mayor Bruiser, whose power and tyrannical hold over the town has been enabled and solidified by mining: Bruiser was ‘a hawker by trade until a change of luck due to a foray into the Australian stock market, after he picked up a hint late one night on the radio in the mining boom seventies. Next day, he piled his last quids in the stock exchange on a tin-pot mining company that struck it rich in Western Australia. So very quick, he was rich’ (34). The mine even allows the hapless police constable Truthful E’Strange to coerce Norm’s daughter Girlie into sex: ‘It would have been a different matter if the boys were around town. Their presence would have made him leave them alone . . . But with Inso and Danny working down at the mine, Truthful felt free to come around whenever he wanted’ (227).

Elias, the mysterious white amnesiac from the sea who becomes a close friend of Norm’s and who is first taken in by Uptown as the town’s saviour and then scapegoated (see Brewster), also finds himself working for the mine:

Norm remembered he had told Elias there was no point getting involved. But Elias let himself be bought off for a few lousy dollars. Just to guard the town from what? What next? Norm had asked him. Norm had told him many times what would happen once someone owned you . . . Norm said he knew things he could not say because of what the mine had done to his family. (98)

Even Father Danny, the Catholic priest who manages to convert no one, has his tyres slashed by mining workers for not obeying their commands. He confides to Will: ‘This used to be a safe place before you lot started arguing and mucking around with that bloody mine’ (191). He adds: ‘It’s gone too far this time Will, too far, this mine, using technology to control people. Very unwise. They cannot crush people just because they have the power to crush the landscape to smithereens’ (193). The mine clearly has long tentacles that reach into all corners of the town, transforming and dominating every aspect of the community:

Desperance had become a boom town with a more sophisticated outlook now, because it belonged totally to the big mine. When the mine came along with all its big equipment, big dollars from the bank – Well! Why not? Every bit of Uptown humanity went for it – lock, stock and barrel. The mine bought off the lot of them, including those

dogs over Eastside. They would be getting their just deserts, Westside told those traitors who ran down to the mine crawling on their stomachs for a job. They were all doing deals. (98)

The narrator also gives a sense of how the arrival of the mine, and its strangeness, was perceived among the old people of Pricklebush, who were able to see more clearly than most the global nature of the enterprise:

[They] growled more now about how their words were being stolen by the bad people – *Spies from the mine going around in the bush*, horrible devils that the gigantic yellow mining equipment scraped out of the big open-cut holes. Everyone talked about seeing the spy agents scratching about in the bush. Eyewitnesses saw strange men near the river. They were seen everywhere, all wearing thin wires on their heads, driving around the dirt tracks, looking at nothing. People said they wanted to know what those strangers were up to in the bush. You want to know? They were picking up the sounds of who knows what, explained the old people . . .

Your words could end up being a thousand miles up in the sky riding on a satellite dish, zapping across the world on invisible beams. And then the beam flies on orbiting through space, straight to the boardrooms of rich multinational mining people in Holland, Germany, the USA, even ‘Mother’ England, or who knows where to listen to you, before you have even a chance to end your sentence . . . This was what they called belonging to the mining company who owned speed, and orbit too. (99)

Although the mine clearly influences the lives of all the characters in *Carpentaria* – human and non-human – the novel explores the effects of the mine most deeply in relation to the family of Normal Phantom, around whom a key debate circulates.

Time, country, survival

Norm is a lawman with considerable knowledge. His son Will is a radical political activist who is cut off from his father for being the lover of Hope, Joseph Midnight’s grand-daughter, and also for the role he played in sabotaging the mine. Through this painful father–son relationship, Wright sets up a generational debate about time and Country that perhaps mirrors debates happening in Indigenous communities across the country (Trigger ‘Mining’).

Wright has suggested the novel portrays ‘the world of Indigenous Australia as being in constant opposition between different spaces of time’ (‘On Writing

Carpentaria' 83). This idea plays out in the dispute between father and son that eddies around whether the mine is a mere event in the history of time, relative to all time and creation, or whether it is a radical break from what has gone before, a qualitatively different event that threatens the very survival of life. For Norm, the mine is just the latest intrusion of humans onto Country: 'He believed the world would look after itself, infatuatedly, against the odds, because it always did and because the white world cared little about people like Norm Phantom' (232). His resignation signals both his faith in Country to restore itself and his fear for his family in the face of colonial structures:

Norm knew there were people searching for Will, *shame of the family*. The government were after him too and you do not go around playing with the government – mucking them up. 'It was not dangerous,' Norm thundered, pushing Will out of the yard. 'It was plain stupid because nobody can change the government.' Norm had often heard some government politician talking about Will on the radio. He remembered listening to all the talking voices describing Will Phantom as a curse to the Gulf who had to be stopped, and Norm agreed. He empathised with the tone of the voices he heard over the radio talking about the trouble Will was causing to everyone in the Gulf, and in the state of Queensland, and the nation, by stopping business at the mine. 'They sound the same as me,' he said happily. 'We all want to kill the bugger.' (288–89)

For all his knowledge and wisdom, however, Norm's perspective seems to become an increasingly joyless and bitter acquiescence in the face of relentless suffering.

Will, on the other hand, views the mine as a significant and unprecedented threat that requires militant action and, if necessary, violent resistance. Will represents a new form of Indigenous activism that emerged in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, sometimes at odds with senior lawmen. He is sceptical and suspicious of the mining company, its motives and its processes from the start:

Everyone had been talking for hours about the mining company Gurfurrit . . . Sabotage playfully plagued his mind . . . He had to be careful whom he trusted. Allegiances were changing constantly and he knew the reason why. Over many months he had watch Gurfurrit play the game of innocence with bumbling front men who broke and won the hearts and minds of more and more of his own relatives and members of their communities, both sides of Desperance. Will did

not underestimate those innocent friendly meetings where the mining representatives claimed not to know what was required from Native Title claims. He believed the company knew government legislation and procedures related to Indigenous rights like the back of its hand. His mildest to wildest dreams were swamped with silks who provided piece by piece legal advice to the supposedly ignorant Joe Blow, the local mining negotiator, from as far away as New York. (291–92)

He sees the mining company as ruthless and disingenuous in pursuit of its aims. And as the narrative unfolds, this is shown to be true.

The reader comes to learn that Will Phantom has been hiding in Mozzie Fishman's convoy; he is on the run from police having tried to blow up the \$30 million pipeline that connected the mine and the export terminal in the Gulf. This had caused a significant national media frenzy, as does any threat to the mine in this narrative. Everyone was looking for Will 'who had disappeared from the Gulf after being accused by the State government, and the Federal government too, of sabotaging the development of the mining industry' (160). For Will, opposing the mine requires constant vigilance against its intrusions into every part of people's lives, minds, countries and dreams: 'Mining had changed the way people had to think about looking after themselves. If a man had to survive, he had to first think of what the mine was capable of doing to him' (386).

The novel holds a tension between these two opposing views, oscillating between them. This is best exemplified in Norm's memory of an argument with Will:

It was Will's voice Norm heard rushing back into his mind. His face, hard and defiant, snapped, 'One day, men will kill for this mine. Remember that.' Norm only saw the fury of an injured being. Moments before, a helicopter had buzzed over their heads. The shadows fell over the house, as though casting a bad spell on their relationship. Will had a contemptuous look on his face, full of what? Disappointment, or more: revulsion for a father who thought so little. 'So blind,' he had taunted, shaking his head. 'And so completely satisfied with the status quo.' Everyone knew about the security helicopters patrolling the district at regular intervals. All times of the day and night, the helicopters flew along their grids, throwing shadows across the Pricklebush. (306–07)

Later, Will's fears about the significant threat mining poses are confirmed as he comes to realise that the knowledge of Country he had been given by

Joseph Midnight could no longer be trusted, because the landscape had been so irrevocably altered:

So much for old man Joseph Midnight thinking the island was a safe place. Yet Will realised there was no point blaming the old man whose vision of the place was ancient. He knew his country in its stories, its histories, its sacred places better than the stranger now singing a love song to it. His time stretched over the millennia. How would Midnight know the speed in which everything had changed at the hands of the mining company? (387)

The whole oceanic world seemed to be occupied in the Gulf. It was a grey painter's palette of tankers exchanging mining equipment for mined ore that came to the coast, after the flesh of the earth had been shunted there by pipelines, tying up the country with new Dreaming tracks cutting through the old. (389)

As Will is returning home after two years on the road, the novel begins to build towards its multiple climaxes. When he nears Desperance, the 'sound of the groaning mine reminded him there would be a lot of things to be done now he was back home' (159). He spots Elias's corpse sitting up in a boat only to realise that Elias has been murdered and that the corpse is bait set by the mining company to ambush and capture him, but he is saved by a storm. After the storm passes, he collects the corpse 'before the psychopaths from the mine had another chance to tamper with his body. Mozzie had told him about the poison festering in the souls of the men who disturbed the earth' (176). He returns to Desperance with the body, leaving it with his father, before heading out to sea to find Hope and their son, Bala. Janice, Patsy and Girlie, meanwhile, see the body and think they need to get rid of it because Norm is already a suspected murderer. They start a fire, to Norm's great chagrin: 'Anybody with any sense burnt tyres at night-time like the mining company' (218). Norm sets off in a boat to bury Elias at sea.

From this point in the narrative, time is compressed and multiple things happen at once. On the night Norm leaves with Elias's body, Gordie is murdered and three young petrol-sniffing Aboriginal boys, two of whom are Mozzie Fishman and Angel Day's children, are picked up for the murder on no evidence. Mayor Bruiser calls a meeting and reminds the town that they need to act to quell the dissent Will Phantom represents:

So much trouble, fights and what have you, all because one person kept telling the world he did not want the mine to be built. The very

building they were sitting in front of, the beautiful new Council offices, had replaced the one they all reckoned he burnt down. Someone had to have done it. It could not have burnt down by itself. Happily for everyone, the good neighbour mine came to the rescue. It honoured its word: said it was going to donate a brand-new building when it got the green light on Native Title problems. They had Will Phantom to blame for that too. Well! It looked as though something like that was stirring its ugly head about race relations again. (326)

In one of the most tragic scenes in the novel, the terrified and confused boys commit suicide in custody, and Truthful takes his own life when he finds their small and vulnerable bodies. As the boys descend into the spiral of despair, the local white community gathers at the pub to fetishise the mine:

The men talked about the mine down the road. They discussed how the ore body was shaping up the latest chemical analysis. They talked about which part of the huge open cut mine was being operated on, how long the underground shaft would go before the mineral vein petered out. The extraction methods tailor-designed for the vein. The never-ending problems of pumping surface water from the pit, and the ground water tests. Could the aquifers be drying up? The talk could go into hours of general analysis, right through to the function of hundreds of kilometres of pipeline, the dewatering of the ore on the flood-prone coastline, and the barges operating with near mishaps while transferring the ore onto the big foreign tankers, which were a sight to see off the coastline. (339–40)

That same night, Norm's youngest son, Kevin, is picked up and brutally assaulted (an event I will explore in more detail towards the end of this article). Soon after, however, Will is captured by corporate mercenaries working for the mine and is brought back to the mine site in a helicopter; members of Mozzie Fishman's convoy who are intent on destroying the mine soon rescue him.

The mine is eventually annihilated by Mozzie Fishman and his convoy with the assistance of non-human agents. Fishman's men watch as the fire they set looks like it is 'going to peter out':

Our men looking from the hills continued staring at the little flame flickering there fizzing out. What could they do? It looked like defeat was imminent. And, that same old defeated look, two centuries full of it, began creeping back into their faces. But, it was too late now, they

had a taste of winning, so they projected their own sheer will power right across that spinifex plain, calling out with no shame, *Come on, come on*, willing the little flame not to fizzle, believing magic can happen even to poor buggers like themselves . . . The unbelievable miracle came flying by. A whirly wind . . . just as a matter of fact, sprung up from the hills themselves . . . It happened so fast when the fiery whirlwind shot into the bowsers and momentarily, lit them up like candles . . . the explosion was holy in its glory. All of it was gone. The whole mine. (410–11)

After the fire, ‘Fishman’s men agreed that only the greatness of the mighty ancestor had saved them’ (414), yet the destruction of the mine is narrated as a media spectacle, again reinforcing the centrality of mining to narratives of the nation and emphasising how Australians are encouraged to identify with mining as an economic saviour:

The multi-million dollar mine, from infancy to its working prime, was probed, described and paraded to network viewers. Interviews and footage of scenery went jig-jogging along in soap opera intensity, before shifting to pan, and viewers were encouraged to dissect what became of this showcase of the nation. (414)

As Mead notes, the:

novel’s thematic thread about the rapacious, neo-colonising exploitation of the mine and its dangerous disregard for the Law that governs culture, society and country, and the responsibility of humans for ancestral guardianship of the land, is satirically and parodically dramatized in Wright’s mediatised narrative, but its violence nevertheless comes as a shock. (43)

After a litany of deaths and injustices, Fishman offers the last words on the mine and why he orchestrated its destruction:

We never killed Truthful, and he never killed himself either, just like the boys never killed themselves. They were all killed by other hands, just like Gordie, and Elias. The mine made killers, Will, and now I’ve made the mine go away. May the great spirit show us some mercy one day, that is all I say. (431)

The mining company immediately begins an ultimately unsuccessful operation to capture the saboteurs, which is masterminded by a mining company executive, via mobile phone, from a boardroom in Manhattan, another reminder of the global forces bearing down on this small and remote community. But Will is saved by a massive cyclone that he suspects is Norm's 'payback to the town' (487) and which washes the town of Desperance out into the sea. The story ends with Norm Phantom, walking hand in hand with Bala, his grandson, while frogs are 'singing the land afresh' (438). Hope goes off in search of Will, who is floating on a teeming island of rubbish in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The reuniting of Will and Hope, these children of warring factions, might be just what is required for Aboriginal people to survive. The novel concludes with the suggestion that the mine and town ultimately mean little in a larger cosmological sense, but that does not take away from the suffering the mine has caused.

The novel does not come down on either side of the argument between Will and Norm. Rather it flows between dwelling in vast timelessness, and the immediacy of present concerns. As Wright asserts: 'The world I try to inhabit in my writing is like looking at the ancestral tracks spanning our traditional country which, if I look at the land, combines all stories, all realities from the ancient to the new, and makes it one – like all the strands in a long rope.' ('Politics of Writing' 20) The hopeful conclusion suggests that perhaps Norm was right all along; the power of more than human forces of change and renewal will always overwhelm mere human endeavour in order to sustain life. Yet, Will is the character portrayed most sympathetically in the novel, and his vision of the rapaciousness of the mining company and its propensity for devastation is also borne out by the narrative.

'Nobody came to terms with what happened to Kevin'

Between this debate, however, is the figure of Kevin, who has been all but neglected in critical commentary on the novel and whose arc eludes and exceeds the novel's wider oscillations. Kevin is the most tragic casualty of the mine and a profoundly devastating metaphor for the consequences of mining on the minds and bodies of Aboriginal people. Kevin, the youngest son of Norm and Angel Day, and Will's younger brother, was an unusually gifted young man: '*Kevin could have been the brains of the family*, everyone kept making their business of coming around and saying to Norm after the accident in the mine' (104). His is a story of lost potential and bitter consequences.

Prior to the accident, Kevin was the hope of the family:

None smarter than your Kevin, the white people used to say all the

time . . . [Norm] said the family already knew how smart Kevin was. That was the reason why he was going to school. *He has to amount to something*, the teachers wailed, biting their tongues, trying to make the family understand that Aboriginal people needed to succeed, and to succeed, they needed to be educated. (105)

Norm wondered ‘why the teachers had failed to capture his imagination by just telling him straight that, like them, he could have a good life with lots of money’ (105), and Kevin grumbles about ‘uselessly trying to do essays about books talking about *them* white people’s lives’ (105). It is clear that state institutions have little to offer a person of Kevin’s talents in culturally appropriate ways, and the education he receives serves only to alienate him from his community: ‘I don’t even feel like I belong here anymore,’ he complains (105). In spite of his intelligence, when Kevin finishes school there is nothing for him to do:

He grew into the role of being the unchallenged brains trust of the family. He and Norm sat around for hours discussing television news, the political state of the nation, the way the country stuffed up the wool industry, who was who in the wars in countries nobody else in the family knew existed or were interested in. (106).

But there is always work in the mines, and ‘gradually all his school mates were recruited into the road gangs working on the yellow roads’:

There was plenty of work. Too much work. A perpetual round of work, repairing flood-damaged roads hacked to pieces by road transports carrying heavy machinery and grinding their way up to the mine, then loaded, returning to the coast, hauling the country away to pour into ships destined for overseas refineries. (107)

So, Kevin, a slight and uncoordinated child, with nothing on offer to match his capacities, goes to work in the mine: ‘Kevin went down the mine for the money and the bosses took him on because how would they know? They did not even pretend to know who fronted up for work from Pricklebush’ (107). The consequences are immediate:

It took only one day. He went down the mine on the day he got the job and came out burnt and broken like barbecued spare ribs. The boy they dragged out of the crush had been rendered an idiot and it was plain as day that no prayers would undo the damage. (109)

After the accident, Kevin becomes a different person – fighting and drinking, living in a ‘world that had overwhelmed his brain’ (117). Trapped in a body and mind not his own, Kevin exists as the novel’s clearest metaphor for the destructive impacts of mining: ‘Nobody knew Kevin’s world anymore’ (219), and he ‘became lost in this other nightmarish realm’ (219). Kevin becomes a site as conflicted as the mine itself: ‘Questions about Kevin caused arguments’ (108). He also bears the brunt of his own family’s anger and frustration at the circumstances of powerlessness and violence in which they find themselves; he is regularly beaten by his own sisters, who have enough problems of their own. Kevin is thus attacked by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal characters, for whom tormenting him is almost a sport.

The character of Kevin Phantom all but disappears from the novel after a brutal racist attack. A group of men wearing white hoods beat him viciously with cricket bats and knives before dragging him behind a car. He is flown by the flying doctor service to a hospital down south and does not return. There is no attempt to hold anyone responsible for the beating of Kevin, and it later becomes clear that the assault on Kevin was a vengeance attack:

It was an eye for an eye. A black for a white. It was just starting. The fathers of those louts who bashed Kevin were openly boasting to Uptown about putting a nigger down for Gordie. Kevin was paying for the memories, for being smart once, from a family with airs about themselves, for Will Phantom. *Open Slather, open slather . . .* (356)

Consequently, Kevin’s body becomes the site on which the structures of extractive capitalism, racism and colonialism intersect and cause trouble for Indigenous peoples:

Thinking about trouble always made Norm think of Kevin, and thinking of Kevin made him think of fear, and then he would think of his grandfather’s stories [of massacre] to the bird. Kevin was not one you would bother yourself telling the family’s history to anymore. (109)

Although the novel ends on a note of hope and renewal, it is clear that ‘nobody came to terms with what happened to Kevin’ (109). Indeed, the novel itself is not able to come to terms with Kevin, whose unresolved trajectory interrupts the novel’s rhythmic movement between timescapes and casts a long shadow over the narrative.

The contemporary relevance of *Carpentaria*

In 2020, *Carpentaria* and its concerns are more relevant than ever. The unexpected return of a pro-mining Liberal-National coalition government in the May 2019 Federal election can be partly attributable to the proposed Adani coal mine in central Queensland. (This was so despite popular projections about this election being a ‘climate election’). The mine emerged as one of the key election issues not least because of the sustained propaganda campaign from NewsCorp, which maintains a media monopoly in Queensland and led the charge in favour of the mine and climate denialism in general. Crony capitalism and vested interests were victorious; mining, and the mantra of jobs and growth, seemed to have outweighed global ecological disaster. If this mine goes ahead, it will be one of the largest mines in the world – certainly the largest in Australia. Subsidised by taxpayers, and with fast-tracked approvals, exemptions from environmental regulations and access to unlimited water from the Great Artesian Basin, it will leave a number of species vulnerable to extinction. When fully operational, it will generate greenhouse gases equivalent to 4.49 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide (De Gabriele et al.). As independent energy economist Tim Buckley has warned:

With the re-election of the Coalition government, the last major Federal legal and approval barriers to opening up the Galilee Basin are largely resolved. The Queensland Government is being leant on by coal lobbyists, Adani and the Federal Government to ignore all credible scientific review of the facts surrounding this project and its effect on the world’s climate.

In the background, traditional owners – the Wangan and Jagalingou – have been fighting through the courts for an Indigenous Land Use Agreement under which native title over the area would be extinguished for Adani to build its Carmichael coal mine. Adani claims that in 2016, the Wangan and Jagalingou people voted 294 to 1 in favour of the agreement, but the people bringing the court action have argued that:

all along, the native title system has been allowed to play to sectional interests within the Aboriginal community. Only those who put their hands up to mining deals are favoured and promoted but when we say no to the opening up of the Galilee Basin, our traditional country, we are obstructed at every turn. (Wangan and Jagalingou Family Council)

I have been working on these reflections on Wright’s masterpiece for some years. In the weekend before I finally submitted this essay, the Juukan Gorge

caves in Western Australia, a sacred site for the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura peoples that had evidence of continual human occupation for 46,000 years, was blown up by Rio Tinto to expand their Brockman 4 iron ore mine. In this heartbreaking context, ‘mobilizing indigenous ecological knowledge via traditional narratives could not be a more important political use for a work of literature’ (Devlin-Glass 83). One can only hope that narratives such as *Carpentaria* help us to reconceive Australian culture – with Aboriginal understandings of human relations to place, and the interconnectedness of spiritual, political and ecological knowledge at its centre – before it is too late.

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