# Trauma, Aboriginality and Revisionary Imaginings in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster*

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Keywords: Alexis Wright; Janette Turner Hospital; *Carpentaria*; *Oyster*; trauma; Aboriginal; Australian literature

# Trauma, Aboriginality and Revisionary Imaginings in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster*

This article examines how Aboriginal conceptions of time and space in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* affect representations of personal, cultural and ecological trauma through privileging sites of wounding that embody Country. The four elements of air, water, earth and fire are central to understanding how each text navigates the complex relational matrices of Aboriginal traumas and respond to ongoing issues of genocide and dispossession that are part of Australia's tragic history. Elemental energies in these novels are connected to powerful spaces that pain inhabits and moves through, which provide insights into the significance of *Carpentaria* and *Oyster's* engagement with Aboriginality and trauma, particularly when situated within the context of legislature including the Native Title Act of 1993 and the Wik judgement of 1996. Elemental motifs perform a cyclical function that begins with deep connectedness to oceanic imagery in *Carpentaria*, then transitions to trauma inflicted on Country and culminates in a cathartic watery Armageddon. While *Oyster's* consideration of elemental traumatic space is primarily attributed to land, cartography and wounded bodies, the novel's narrative threads reach a similar apocalyptic denouement to *Carpentaria*. *Oyster's* cataclysmic fires of destruction are eclipsed by the regenerative potencies of water that rejuvenate Country and supplant horror with beauty.

Keywords: Alexis Wright; Janette Turner Hospital; *Carpentaria*; *Oyster*; Aboriginal trauma; Australian literature

## Introduction

This article undertakes a generative dialogue between Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006) and Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* (1996) in response to concerns with how western epistemologies communicate the trauma Indigenous Australians experience as a result of being forcefully removed from Country. My treatment of the term *Country*[1] acknowledges the abiding relationship between First Nations Australians and place[2] and aligns with Indigenous scholars Nerida Blair and Brooke Collins-Gearing's assertion that "Country embodies ecological systems that are so much part of Indigenous Knowings; it is not just limited to geographical space and place".[3] *Oyster* and *Carpentaria* provide insight into western attempts to respectfully engage Aboriginal ways of knowing and, in doing so, speak about the ongoing effects of colonisation in Australia. My analytical framing of these texts demonstrates that the traumas of Indigenous dispossession in *Carpentaria* and *Oyster* can only be imaginatively reconstituted through an enduring connection with Country. This reading of trauma across the texts is expressed through acknowledging the significance of co-becoming with Country, a notion that is actualised by dismantling binary oppositions of human and more-than-human[4] to embody a deeper

[1]By capitalising Country, which is what First Nations scholars use to express their relationship with a particular Country, I am distinguishing this use of the word from Australia as a nation state.

[2]Refer to Wright et al. who discuss how "patterns of kinship include everyone and everything *in a bounded relationship to each other in, through and as part of place/space/Country*" (460). Sarah Wright et al., "Co-becoming Bawaka: Towards a Relational Understanding of Place/Space," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no.4 (2006): 460.

[3] Nerida Blair and Brooke Collins-Gearing, "Reflective Practice: Ancient Wisdom and Practice—Australian Indigenous Reflections in Teacher Education Through Shared Storying," in *Reflective Theory and Practice in Teacher Education,* ed. Robyn Brandenburg et al., (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 64.

[4]My use of the term 'more-than-human' aligns with Harris' definition of this concept as "the earthly life-world of sentient and non-sentient agentic bodies which exist alongside, in relationship to and co-constituted with the human" (3). David Harris, "Urban Imaginaries, Homelessness, and the Literary City: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* and Janette Turner Hospital's *The Last Magician*," *JASAL: Journal of the Association of the Study of Australian Literature* 18, no.1 (2018): 3.

relational ontology that recognises the entanglement of these forms. In *Carpentaria* and *Oyster* Aboriginal spirituality is expressed as a holistic, dynamic state of existence where all elements, human and more-than-human, mutually co-exist. Such ontologies are positioned as being central to characters moving through trauma in order to achieve some form of restoration.

Discussing *Carpentaria* in conjunction with *Oyster* enables distinctions to be made regarding the ways white Australian and Aboriginal conceptualisations of space and time affect characters' engagement with trauma. For the purpose of this article, I define *trauma* as physical, somatic and psychic phenomena[5] that adversely affect human and more-than-human beings. My use of the word trauma is distinct from the term *wounding* which I use to express how trauma materially and psychically damages human and more-than-human bodies. Comparing the treatment of trauma across *Carpentaria* and *Oyster* provides an access point for examining how effectively Australia is responding to the ongoing effects of Aboriginal dispossession and cultural genocide. I argue that both texts engage with these discourses of trauma by respecting the sacredness of First Nations peoples' relationship with Country and acknowledging its ability to rejuvenate in response to ecological damage inscribed on place by colonial occupation. *Carpentaria* and *Oyster* express that absolution from trauma occurs when Aboriginal ways of knowing and being supplant the ecological voids created by white settlement, particularly within the context of mining. Historian and trauma theorist Dominick LaCapra maintains that narratives can enable individuals and cultures to "work through posttraumatic symptoms of the present in a manner that opens possible futures".[6] Generating a comparative dialogue between *Oyster* and *Carpentaria* makes these possible futures visible by foregrounding Aboriginal

[5]Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.
[6]Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 208.

epistemologies and ontologies that are enacted through Indigenous Australian characters who re-assert their never ceded sovereignty.

**The Significance of a Dialogue between *Carpentaria* and *Oyster***

Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* explores the traumatic experiences of Indigenous protagonist Normal Phantom and his family who live on the fringes of a fictional rural town named Desperance located in neo-colonial Australia. The novel's geographical setting is important because it has strong connections to northern Australia and the Gulf of Carpentaria, a place which Alexis Wright refers to as her "traditional homeland".[7] *Carpentaria* interweaves multiple narratives of Aboriginal trauma, including dispossession, police brutality and murder, to position Country as a space for actualising personal and ecological healing. I argue that it does so by privileging Aboriginal modes of narration that are cyclical rather than linear and deploying Mudrooroo's (Colin Johnson) *maban reality* that is "characterised by a firm grounding in the reality of the earth or country, together with an acceptance of the supernatural as a part of every-day reality".[8] While Maria Takolander criticises the deployment of a maban reality in magical realist novels because it does not emanate from any cultural belief system[9], Alison Ravenscroft cautions this "puts another kind of pressure on reading indigenous writing"[10]. Ravenscroft also argues that Takolander's aversion to "reading Indigenous-signed fiction ethnographically because…there is no 'ethnic authenticity' in its pages" is countered by the claim "that the danger might lie elsewhere, in white reading strategies that persist in

[7]Kerry O'Brien, "Alexis Wright Interview," *Hecate* 33, no.1 (2007): 215.
[8]Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson), *Milli Milli Wangka: The Indigenous Literature of Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997), 97.
[9]Maria Takolander, *Catching Butterflies: Bringing Magical Realism to Ground* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), 201.
[10]Alison Ravenscroft, "Dreaming of Others: *Carpentaria* and its Critics," *Cultural Studies Review* 16, no.2 (2010): 223.

producing other knowledges as already a kind of fiction"[11]. I argue that Mudrooroo's maban reality is deployed in *Carpentaria* to foreground oral storytelling as means of expressing Indigenous worldviews that are informed by the Aboriginal Dreaming[12]. These ways of knowing are embodied in characters such as Normal Phantom, an Indigenous elder of the Pricklebush people and a Maban Man, "holder of knowledge and culture, a person able to interact and know the world in a way very different from the rational".[13] Normal is one of several lawmen navigating both settler and cultural law in Wright's novel. Expressions of personal, cultural and ecological trauma are realised in *Carpentaria* through Normal's connection with Aboriginal spirituality, an alignment that is most powerfully actualised at the end of the novel when he summons ancestral spirits to destroy Desperance and restore Country to its pre-colonial state.

As will be discussed further, an abiding relationship between Indigenous Australian characters and place is central to *Carpentaria's* treatment of personal and ecological trauma. Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies in the novel manifest cyclic patterns of renewal by displacing "the historical linear temporality of nation".[14] This disruption of linearity is embodied through the Dreaming and ancestral spirits such as the serpent, who forged Country "long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time"[15], and the cyclone bird, "a spiritual messenger of the ancestral creation serpent".[16] This large black bird foreshadows the watery deluge that will take place as

[11]Alison Ravenscroft, "Dreaming of Others: *Carpentaria* and its Critics," *Cultural Studies Review* 16, no.2 (2010): 211.
[12]See also Bridgette Haylock, "Enlisting Rage and Speaking Place: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*," in *Traumatic Imprints: Performance, Art, Literature and Theoretical Practice*, ed. Catherine Barrette et al., (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2011): 95.
[13]Haylock, "Enlisting Rage and Speaking Place*",* 95.
[14]Laura Joseph, "Dreaming Phantoms and Golems: Elements of the Place Beyond Nation in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* Special Issue (2009): 6.
[15]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 1.
[16]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 465.

*Carpentaria* reaches its conclusion. While it is true that the underlying violence in the novel is "shown to be beyond individual actors' capacity to change"[17], it is connection with Country that ultimately empowers Indigenous Australian characters to work through their personal trauma and speak back to ecological destruction in the region of Desperance caused by mining.

In *Carpentaria* Normal Phantom's lineage of trauma is extended to his son, Will, a social activist who uses guerrilla tactics to sabotage the Gurffurit mine that has been constructed on the outskirts of Desperance and is destroying Country. Will's life is endangered when mining magnates associated with Gurffurit attempt to murder him, but this initiative is thwarted by Elias Smith, an amnesiac who is considered an outcast by the other white characters because he mysteriously emerged from the sea off the coast of Desperance. Elias is murdered as a result of protecting Will during an attempt to destroy the Gurffurit mine. This tragedy facilitates Normal's process of working through personal trauma associated with his failed marriage, police brutality and cultural displacement by reconnecting with Country when he transports Elias' body to its final resting place deep in the ocean.

*Carpentaria* underscores concerns that Australia's political responses to Aboriginal dispossession remain inherently flawed. Like *The Swan Book*, another novel written by Alexis Wright that addresses the nexus between Indigenous and ecological trauma, *Carpentaria* uses complex narrative voices to express ongoing effects of First Nations peoples' dislocation as a result of being forcefully removed from Country. Such voices are resonant in the twenty-first century because they emerge from the heart of violence done to land, peoples and cultures by tracing its cyclic proliferations throughout time.

[17]Honni Van Rijswisk, "Stories of the Nation's Continuing Past: Responsibility for Historical Injuries in Australian Law and Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*," *UNSW Law Journal* 35, no.2 (2012): 608.

These words are spoken via Indigenous characters conceived by an Indigenous author and address issues of Aboriginal sovereignty in a post-Mabo context. Post-Mabo refers to a period in Australian history succeeding the High Court's rejection of *terra nullius*, land empty of people, law and governance, as the basis for occupying Aboriginal sacred space during colonisation[18]. According to Irene Watson, while the High Court determined that "a system of rights in land existed and continued to exist in the Murray islands", ability to access Country was "at the lowest end of the property rights hierarchy" and "open to extinguishment by the state".[19] Watson believes this rule of extinguishment will continue to adversely impact the lives of Australian First Nations peoples "in a similar way to terra nullius of the past" because the native title industry "dresses itself in the cloak of the recognition of Indigenous people's rights to property",[20] but this occupation of land is secondary to white business. Susan Martin also acknowledges the ecological and cultural impacts of this post-Mabo reality in shaping understandings of Australian national identity. She argues that narratives of self and place "have remained very important in the negotiating of postsettlement culture".[21] This proposition is furthered in my analytical framing of *Carpentaria* by considering why desecrating Country is akin to wounding the self in Wright's novel and exploring how Indigenous Australian characters navigate trauma through their connection with Aboriginal spirituality. In response to the concern that First Nations peoples have received limited recompense as a result of the Mabo decision, due to ongoing dispossession of their traditional lands, my reading of

[18]Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 42.
[19]Watson, *Raw Law*, 37.
[20]Watson, *Raw Law*, 30.
[21]Susan Martin, "Writing a Native Garden? Environmental Language and Post-Mabo Literature in Australia," in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, ed. Elizabeth Deloughrey, Jill Didur, and Anthony Carrigan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 95.

*Carpentaria* foregrounds the importance of self-determination for Aboriginal people through their relationship with Country.

Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster* was written at a juncture in Australian history that reconfirmed the need to address ongoing issues of First Nations peoples' dispossession and trauma. Like *Carpentaria*, *Oyster* was published during the interim between Native Title in 1992 and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology speech to the stolen generation in 2008. Native Title was instigated in 1982 by Eddie Mabo and four other Meriam people of the Murray Islands in the Torres Strait who were legally acknowledged as the traditional custodians of their country a decade later and who contributed to dispelling the misconception of *terra nullius*, land belonging to no one.[22] Recognition of these pivotal events in Australian history situates *Oyster* in a milieu of significant cultural change, where land rights movements and government legislature facilitated a paradigm shift in nationally recognising why Country is integral to Aboriginal spirituality.

Like *Carpentaria*, *Oyster* acknowledges Australia's history of colonisation is one version of the past. Unlike Wright's novel, *Oyster* speaks from the periphery rather than centre of Aboriginal consciousness to examine difficulties associated with white characters responding to Indigenous trauma. Ethel is a Murri woman and the novel's principle Indigenous character. While Ethel is deeply connected to the history of her Country, Anja Muller identifies the indigenous Murris as "a silent oppositional force on the margins of the settlement" in *Oyster*.[23] Isabel Fraile Murlanch concurs with Muller's comments regarding this narrative perspective and notes that Aborigines mostly feature

[22]Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 37.

[23]Anja I Muller, "Travels in No-Man's-Land Closure and Transgression in Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster*," in *Being/s in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*, ed. Liselotte Glage (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 143.

in the text when in conflict with white characters and that they lack a sense of agency.[24] Bernadette Brennan identifies Ethel as "the Aboriginal memory and conscience of Outer Maroo",[25] yet white characters frequently marginalise her voice or speak on her behalf. This narrative position affects the representation of Aboriginal trauma through establishing a self-consciously unreliable storyteller in Jess Hyde who is also known as Old Silence because her speechlessness invites others' confessions. She is one of three survivors when Outer Maroo and Oyster's Reef are consumed by fire in the wake of their subjugators' lust for power. Jess narrates sections of *Oyster* and offers one of several perspectives on Aboriginal dispossession. Her experience with this type of trauma is problematic because it is expressed from an Anglo-centric vantage point and influenced by other personal manifestations of wounding that involve murder, rape and brainwashing, including Oyster's abuse of his cult members.

As a self-confessed outsider and survivor, Jess has a sense of affinity with the trauma inflicted on Ethel, one of the last members of the Murri people whose Country is ravaged by opal miners. Images of occupying and pillaging land are aligned with male domination and speak to female subjectivity in a patriarchal paradigm where women are objectified. Evidence of Aboriginal oppression in *Oyster* is traced back to the 1870s when opal miners established camps on Country and "sank the first shafts inside a bora ring".[26] This form of trauma, enacted on the geopolitical body of Country, is likened to feminised conceptions of Mother Nature and Mother Earth that engender a sense of shared sisterhood and establish connections between wounded women. It also furthers the novel's ecological concerns with colonisation, mining and desecrating sacred space,

[24]Isabel Fraile Murlanch, "Inside Out in the Land Down Under: Reading Trauma through Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster*," in *The Splintered Glass Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond*, ed. Barbara Arizti and Sonia Baleo-Allue (Amsderdam: Rodopi, 2011), 230.
[25]Bernadette Brennan, "Words of Water: Reading Otherness in *Tourmaline* and *Oyster*," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 3 (2004): 154.
[26]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 75.

referentially, using visceral imagery of impregnation and images of rape and conquest. According to Watson, this subjugation of Country must be contested because "the land is our mother" and "without ruwe [land] there is no self".[27] *Oyster's* narrative testifies to the effects of Aboriginal trauma by recognising Country's ability to regenerate in response to ecological damage inscribed by colonial occupation of place, particularly within the context of mining.[28] This representation of trauma is expressed in the novel through the fragmentary nature of narrative dislocation that resists ordering influences. Brennan maintains that *Oyster* is characterised by its "complex narrative structure" and "its refusal of linear time".[29] My reading of *Oyster* will demonstrate that this incredulity towards linearity is one of the most effective ways the novel speaks back to ongoing effects of Indigenous dispossession and acknowledges Country as integral to personal and ecological restoration. *Oyster* concludes with similar regenerative imagery to that of *Carpentaria* when fires caused by explosives destroy the opal mines and Aboriginal woman Ethel avows that Country will reclaim this sacred space.

**Engaging with the work of Aboriginal Scholars**

The fact that white vantage points pervade secondary criticism of *Oyster* and *Carpentaria* has shaped my exploration of how Aboriginal conceptions of time and space affect representations of trauma across these texts. This gap in the field informed the methodology underpinning this article and promoted awareness of how I am listening to

[27]Irene Watson, "Power of the Muldarbi, The Road to its Demise," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 1, no. 1 (1998): 32.

[28]See also Coyle who argues that when the opal mine is attacked, this act is "represented as an ecological narrative, associated with the Murri's relationship with the earth and their sacred spaces". Fiona Coyle, "A Third Space? Postcolonial Australia and the Fractal Landscape in *The Last Magician* and *Oyster*," in *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 127.

[29]Bernadette Brennan, "Words of Water: Reading Otherness in *Tourmaline* and *Oyster*," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 3 (2004): 154.

Aboriginal writers in a similar way to Turner Hospital's approach in *Oyster*: to hear the silences of Indigenous traumas and respectfully acknowledge the voices that emerge through these voids of pain. My own research, as a white woman, is problematised through engagement with this culturally specific form of trauma because I am writing about Indigenous dispossession from an external perspective. Identification of this issue led me to engage with Aboriginal ontologies and epistemologies concerning time and space. I used research published by Aboriginal scholars to inform my discussion of trauma because, while secondary criticism on *Oyster* and *Carpentaria* is primarily written from a white point of view, significant changes are being made to disciplines involving Indigenous literature. Such modifications involve considering how Aboriginal scholarship contributes to conceptualising time and space, as distinct from Western paradigms.[30] Aboriginal scholars, including Nerida Blair, Brooke Collins-Gearing, Ambelin Kwaymullina, Blaze Kwaymullina and Irene Watson, are responding to western academic viewpoints regarding space and time to negotiate understanding of their own heritage. This process is significant in acknowledging that white and Indigenous writers occupy a different space in their engagement with trauma.

Aboriginal ways of knowing are distinctive from their western counterparts because they are intuitive, dynamic, holistic and intimately connected to Country.[31] Indigenous knowledge systems engender a reciprocal relationship with Country because it is the

[30]Lera Boroditsky and Alice Gaby, "Remembrances of Times East: Absolute Spatial Representations of Time in an Australian Aboriginal Community," *Psychological Science* 21, no. 11 (2010): 1635; Philip Morrissey, "Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling*: Notes on its Themes and Philosophy," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no. 2 (2015): 3-4; Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 17.

[31]Nerida Blair and Brooke Collins-Gearing, "Reflective Practice: Ancient Wisdom and Practice—Australian Indigenous Reflections in Teacher Education Through Shared Storying," in *Reflective Theory and Practice in Teacher Education*, ed. Robyn Brandenburg et al., (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 63; Ambelin Kwaymullina and Blaze Kwaymullina, "Learning to read the signs: Law in an Indigenous reality," *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010): 196.

fabric of existence and the source from which all knowledge emanates. Creation, life and spirit are imbued within Country. Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina reinforce that "Aboriginal knowledge systems exist within the context of relationships and because all relationships interconnect, so does all knowledge".[32] Blair and Collins-Gearing also maintain that what people living in Australia "have in common is that they walk in Aboriginal Countrys every day. Countrys that, when respected, seen and read appropriately, when listened to and heard, when felt, teach us about our interconnectedness to everything around us".[33] The scholarship of Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina, Blair and Collins-Gearing reinforces that relationships between people and Country is central to Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies.

According to Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina, tensions between Aboriginal and western constructs of knowledge are attributed to a holistic versus reductionist worldview.[34] Western scholarly paradigms tend to classify knowledge into specific disciplines that privilege objectivity, but Indigenous philosophy makes no distinction between metaphysical and physical understandings of the world because everything is interrelated. These differences in experiencing and understanding reality are also predicated on the function of knowledge in Aboriginal and western epistemologies.[35] Progress and dominion underpin western ways of knowing because knowledge contributes to creating, maintaining, increasing or transferring control. This conception of knowledge is antithetical to Indigenous principles of knowing that embody the balance

[32]Ambelin Kwaymullina and Blaze Kwaymullina, "Learning to read the signs: Law in an Indigenous reality," *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010): 196.
[33]Nerida Blair and Brooke Collins-Gearing, "Reflective Practice: Ancient Wisdom and Practice—Australian Indigenous Reflections in Teacher Education Through Shared Storying," in *Reflective Theory and Practice in Teacher Education*, ed. Robyn Brandenburg et al., (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 63.
[34]Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina, "Learning to read the signs", 196-197.
[35]Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 11.

of all matter and spirit comprising the universe. Its function is to harmonise the relationship between people and Country rather than subjugate the earth.[36] These principles that acknowledge the unity of the human and more-than human have broadened my appreciation of why Indigenous Australians embody such remarkable epistemologies of time and space. Interaction with these ways of knowing has also shaped my understanding of how *Oyster* and *Carpentaria* express trauma. Both novels reveal diverse ways of knowing Country and its wounds by foregrounding perspectives that are often marginalised when read through a western lens. This is why Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies are central to understanding each text's treatment of time and space, through investigating how they privilege sites of trauma connected to and emanating from Country.

Acknowledging the dissimilarities between a reductionist and holistic view of the world contributes to an appreciation of the unique ways Indigenous writers speak about trauma. From a western vantage point, the process of colonisation subsumes Aboriginal ways of knowing rather than recognising their value as worldviews distinct from western epistemologies. Any attempts to comprehend Indigenous ways of being were displaced by violating Aboriginal sacred places, silencing Aboriginal voices and dismantling the intricate patterns of Aboriginal spirituality. This is why understanding different utterances of trauma in *Carpentaria* and *Oyster* is so exigent. Each text speaks to shifting constituents of Australian national identity. In doing so they perform a significant political, cultural and even ethical role as trauma narratives that "highlight postcolonial concerns with rearticulating the lives and voices of marginal people".[37] Furthermore, these texts function as a lens through which the reader is provided a glimpse into the

[36]Deborah Bird Rose, "On history, trees and ethical proximity," *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 2 (2008): 166-167; Watson, *Raw Law, 17.*

[37]Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (University of Virginia: The University of Virginia Press, 2002), x.

psychological, social and historical traumas that characterise much of western consciousness, but through Indigenous vernaculars that re-envision Australia's history and potential future. In the following section I examine what these visionary imaginings in *Carpentaria* and *Oyster* signify and how they contribute to a renewed understanding of Australia's national history, identity and future, as informed by the text's treatment of Aboriginal traumas.

### *Carpentaria*: Renegotiating the Construction of Australian History

*Carpentaria's* representation of time and space through the lens of Aboriginal trauma is integral to recognising the ways Australian history has been constructed from a white vantage point. The novel's treatment of Indigenous trauma also unearths the need to challenge this mono-cultural perspective of Australian history by diversifying assumed notions of nationhood. *Carpentaria* is as much about white conceptualisations of Country and trauma as it is about Aboriginality. Localised Indigenous representations in the text contribute to more discursive national concerns regarding how white consciousness is dealing with Aboriginal trauma. Alexis Wright identifies the purpose of her novel as a response to ongoing traumas of colonisation in Australia that necessitates understanding "how to re-imagine a larger space than the ones we have been forced to enclose within the imagined borders that have been forced upon us".[38] These post-colonial discourses are immediately foregrounded in *Carpentaria* through the misconception that Australia's history was established by British colonisation and that it can be understood empirically: "a nation chants, but we know your story".[39] The "little black girls"[40] referred to at the beginning of the novel introduce the notion of storytelling as a vehicle that invites

[38]Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," *Heat* 13 (2010): 82.
[39]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 1.
[40]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 1.

rumination on Australia's current climate of trauma as the nation continues to work through the damaging impact of Aboriginal dispossession. It is a cultural milieu embodied by "human fallout"[41] and situated at the beginning of Armageddon.

In Chapter 1, *Carpentaria* engenders awareness of a country being massacred and a time and space that predates colonisation. Aboriginal modes of narration that privilege non-linearity are used to develop this temporal flux that is introduced through the motif of Songlines, where the iconic Christian peal of bells is subsumed by hypnotic Dreaming stories of the ancestral serpent created "long before man was a creature who could contemplate the next moment in time".[42] *Carpentaria* uses these elemental and temporal disruptions to invert western assumptions underpinning hegemony, time and space. The text dismantles the dominant colonial gaze of Australian history and exposes how it has been constructed according to particular western notions of time and space. Acknowledging the primacy of the Dreaming in Aboriginal ontology facilitates an intersubjective dialogue between white Australians and First Nations peoples that invites the reader to reconceptualise Australian history from a Gulf perspective. It also empowers Country to speak and be heard in a manner that contests western ways of knowing and offers understanding of Aboriginal traumas that are marginalised in hegemonic accounts of Australian history.

Past, present and future continue to coalesce as *Carpentaria's* protagonist, Normal Phantom, reflects on his family's history and how "there was no tangible evidence of their existence" in the region of Desperance.[43] This documented version of history is supplanted by "the serpent's covenant [that] permeates everything" including "the nation

[41]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 1.
[42]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 1.
[43] Wright, *Carpentaria*, 10.

that claims to know everything except the exact date its world will end".[44] In this way, *Carpentaria* renegotiates Australia's cultural matrix by demonstrating that history is more than just moments in time that have passed. Traumas of the past are always mobilised in some way. Their remnants may metamorphose into unrecognisable forms, but their presence resides in the ebb and flow of time. *Carpentaria* expresses that when Country's traumas are known and experienced, energies of the Songlines and the Dreaming are re-awakened to restore place; "anyone can find hope in the stories"[45] because they "[sing] the country afresh".[46] The rhythm and momentum of the text's layered narratives are haunting and beautiful. The temporal flux, motifs of music, mythology of the Dreaming, and the boundaries between reality and the metaphysical fuse and coalesce; they are constantly changing. Reading the novel creates an otherworldly experience, but it is not confined to the abstractions of language. There are tangible applications of *Carpentaria's* engagement with trauma because the novel raises awareness of First Nations peoples' dispossession as past and present lived experiences that destabilise western metanarratives of colonisation by promoting the power and agency of Country. My reading of the text acknowledges the distinctiveness of Indigenous Australian trauma as part of a national body that labours under the violent history of colonisation. In doing so, it also demonstrates how *Carpentaria* evokes a mandate to take responsibility for these grievances through offering an understanding of Aboriginal suffering.

An inter-subjective dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal epistemology in *Carpentaria* evokes reconsideration of the way Australian history has been constructed from a white point of view. The narrative strategies employed in the text enable a white

[44]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 11.
[45]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 12.
[46]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 519.

perspective and an outside the Gulf perspective to access traumas that documented history or native title cannot necessarily facilitate. The text's treatment of time and space challenges the notion of linear topography through its subjective decolonisation of place and parody of colonial occupation. Western-centric purviews of land are displaced by Aboriginal spirituality and an Indigenous worldview encapsulating "a story that is not just told about, but also arises from, country".[47] The novel's elemental imagery evokes a sense of witty self-reflexivity when a dust storm interrupts the re-naming ceremony of Desperance's local river. This body of water's nomenclature is changed to Normal in pursuit of accommodating "meaningful coexistence"[48] between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, even though "the river only had one name from the beginning of time" and "was called *Wangala*".[49] The river is reinscribed with a western title synonymous with homogenisation which reinforces Steve Himmer's concern that "by naming, non-indigenous Australians come to know their own landscape, and through that naming they come to own it".[50] The river is also identified with Normal Phantom and this association signifies *Carpentaria's* ability to use facetious humour as a form of undermining colonial values of conquest.

*Carpentaria's* satirical commentary of white possession is furthered through describing the individual responsible for renaming *Wangala* as "someone of no consequence"[51] who makes the decision on a whim. The dust storm provides an unruly air element that temporarily thwarts this process of renaming the river and provides an

[47]Kate Rigby, "The Poetics of Decolonization: Reading *Carpentaria* in a Feminist Ecocritical Frame," in *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism*, ed. Greta Gaard, Simon C. Estok, and Serpil Oppermann (New York: Routledge, 2013), 132.
[48]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 8.
[49]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 10.
[50]Steve Himmer, "Land of Heart's Desire: Inscribing the Australian Landscape," *Journal of Ecocriticism* 1, no. 1 (2009): 47.
[51]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 8.

incisive subtext concerning human intervention that attempts to occupy sacred space. While this elemental protest appears ephemeral, there are several junctures at which the text continues to challenge western notions of time and space, including the incident where "time stopped ticking, because there was too much moisture in the air" and "the mechanical workings of dozens of watches and clocks…ended up jiggered, and afterwards, were only fit to be thrown down on the rubbish dump".[52] Textual instances such as these demonstrate how Country eclipses time, as a controlled measurement of the temporal, and displaces its linearity in favour of cyclic patterns that transition through life. These events also reinforce differences between western conceptions of space, as a vessel to be occupied then depleted of its resources, and Aboriginal paradigms that espouse place as being intimately connected to cultural practices and beliefs.

### *Carpentaria*: Privileging Sites of Trauma that Embody Country

One of the most significant ways that Aboriginal conceptualisations of space and time affect representations of trauma in *Carpentaria* is through its utilisation of Mudrooroo's maban reality that embodies a confluence of "the reality of the earth or country" and "an acceptance of the supernatural as part of every-day reality".[53] This expression of maban reality is apparent in *Carpentaria* when Normal Phantom embarks on a pilgrimage to the heart of the ocean where the gropers dwell. Elias' death and the metaphysical calling Normal receives to revisit his friend's rightful place of rest facilitate this journey. Normal's voyage is precipitated by a "memory which had come flooding back to him as he sat at the kitchen table, ready to destroy the world around him. The memory fought off the devils until Norm saw what Elias had wanted. Elias had come back to tell Norm to

[52]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 44.
[53]Mudrooroo (Colin Johnson), *Milli Milli Wangka: The Indigenous Literature of Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1997), 97.

take him home".[54] This process of restoration is problematic because its success is contingent on Normal's ability to confront his own trauma. What Normal comes to realise in these moments of reflection is that trauma can only be processed by confronting self and embodying experiences that evoke suffering: his failed marriage, the violence endured by his Country and people, police abusing his family, and the murder of his close friend, Elias.

Normal Phantom's voyage into the ocean significantly contributes to his understanding of self as part of Country. Such insights occur as a result of Normal directly engaging with personal trauma. In her review of *Carpentaria*, Michelle Grossman argues that oceanic space in the novel is central to this process of identity formation because it is where Aboriginal characters "are most truly at home, deeply themselves and meaningfully linked with their world".[55] Several personal epiphanies occur for Normal that contribute to his sense of belonging to place when he reconnects with Country. These moments of revelation are made visible by privileging Aboriginal modes of narration that express time as cyclical rather than linear and deploying maban imagery.The space and time that Normal moves through belongs "to the luminescence of the ocean…to the open skies, and…to the spirits who had always haunted this world".[56] Through seeing "the wind and storms held in the arms of saltwater spirits, which had always been there", Normal embraces the timelessness of Country and his own being to recognise his ancestors' wounds as he journeys "to the graveyard of the men of the sea".[57] Acknowledging that he is part of Country, Normal moves through his own trauma of loss and reaches a state of acceptance after more than two weeks at sea: "then, knowing the

[54]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 236.
[55]Michelle Grossman, "Risk, Rogeuery and Revelation," review of *Carpentaria*, by Alexis Wright, *Australian Literary Review*, October 4, 2006, 10.
[56]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 240.
[57]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 245.

place where the gropers lived was drawing closer, he stopped worrying up the storms as he journeyed through the flat seas, realising all these obsessions of what was not right, were metaphors for his failed marriage".[58] This experience enables Normal to acknowledge that his own trauma is more deeply understood when he re-connects with these spaces of Country where the ancestral beings dwell.

Another significant occurrence in *Carpentaria* that draws upon maban reality to foreground Aboriginal modes of narration is the cyclonic force that amasses an island of rubbish. This climatic moment in the novel also speaks to the nexus between personal and ecological trauma because it empowers Will Phantom to understand his own experiences of dispossession within the context of Country that has been depleted as a result of white settlement. According to Laura Joseph, this incident creates "an ancient regeneration far older than nation, mobilized by Wright to literally and metaphorically undo the form of nation through the creation of new islands".[59] Will Phantom is provided several epiphanies during this transfiguring process as gulf waters flood Desperance. He recognises, and comes to accept, connection to the pre-colonial trauma of his people. As the winds howl and the corporeal space Will inhabits is torn asunder, he accepts the burden of "knowing"[60] and the cultural legacy bequeathed to him. He becomes sentient of the beauty and agony of wounded Country, as spirit waves are rolled in by ancestral sea water creatures and the ancestral serpent responds with "hostile growls" that signify "the old war of the ancestors making cyclones grow to use against one another".[61] Indigenous traumas of past and present, individual and collective coalesce in these

[58]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 247.
[59]Laura Joseph, "Dreaming Phantoms and Golems: Elements of the Place Beyond Nation in *Carpentaria* and *Dreamhunter*," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* Special Issue (2009): 6.
[60]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 461.
[61]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 470.

moments of tumultuous ruin, as space is destroyed to provide cultural, ecological and spiritual renewal. Beneath the aesthetics of language and *Carpentaria's* elemental imagery, the text communicates the significance of living, protecting and understanding Country. Readers are potentially affected by this discovery and incited to take responsibility for past traumas that converge with present suffering. They are positioned to hear the voices of wounded Country and acknowledge another version of history that shifts Australia's mono-cultural gaze of nationhood, established during colonisation, to privilege an Indigenous perspective.

Several cathartic moments occur in *Carpentaria* before the space that trauma occupies can be transformed. This transfiguration of suffering is represented through a co-becoming of man and Country, as the wind roars "like an open-mouthed animal in pain"[62] and Will embraces the "wild night of deafening madness".[63] Interior and exterior spaces of trauma converge when Will conceives of pain at its most primal level, a space where the spirit seeks to be reunited with the origins of its conception. Will's defining moment of working through personal trauma is intertwined with reclaiming cultural knowledge and is reflected in his natural inclination "to walk outside into the deluge to escape a world that seemed to be falling in on him" and dismantle "the bare shell of his being so that he could walk away free from thoughts that were so oppressive".[64] These burdensome thoughts necessitate a revisionary imagining of Aboriginal trauma, reinforced through Will's reflection on elemental energies: "It was at this point he realised how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rerolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done in this part of the world into

[62]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 474.
[63]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 476.
[64]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 476.

something more of their own making".[65] This is one of the most profound revelations in the text, where *Carpentaria* renegotiates and redefines nation space to illuminate how Country responds to trauma by reclaiming the spiritual significance of belonging to place. Western humanity's unnatural impositions, manifest in mining and colonial conquest of space throughout the text, are abrogated. Natural rhythms are reestablished in their stead as a phenomenon of power, anterior to the traumas of colonisation: "the bulwark of the spirits rose from the waters, and he saw nothing monstrous or hideous in this new creation taking shape, moving, rolling, changing appearance, and beauty in its strident crashing back into the water".[66] *Carpentaria* uses these references to the Dreaming and expressions of maban reality as a reminder that Australia's history of trauma is founded upon an ancient culture with profound spiritual connections to Country. Characters reconnecting with Aboriginal spirituality and accepting the transformative beauty of its ancestral beings is required to ameliorate these wounds inscribed on place.

These moments of epiphany in *Carpentaria* challenge a singular construction of history and signify how the text's narratives of Aboriginal trauma evoke deeper awareness of these culturally distinct phenomena through the realm of abstraction. The novel establishes connections between sites of Aboriginal trauma and national engagement with issues of reconciliation in a post-Mabo reality to promote acknowledgement and acceptance of responsibility for these past grievances. It engenders an awakening to the truth that we are all intertwined in this trauma because it reveals the embedded wounds of Country in a post-colonial context. The novel provides an antechamber that exists in the liminal space between two defining chapters of Australia's emergent national identity then beckons us to cross this threshold. It also evokes an

[65]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria*, (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 491-492.
[66]Wright, *Carpentaria*, 492.

imperative to actualise Aboriginal epistemologies imbued in pivotal land rights movements, including Wik and Mabo, so they are resonant in the twenty-first century and speak to the unity of all corporeal and metaphysical elements that inform these Indigenous paradigms.

### *Oyster*: Privileging Sites of Trauma that Embody Country

Like *Carpentaria, Oyster* demonstrates that when Country is wounded it responds to past and present traumas by modifying colonised space to reclaim Indigenous sovereignty. This notion of listening to the stories of Country and transforming traumatic space is nuanced through *Oyster's* deployment of multiple narrative perspectives and complex voices that shape the representation of Aboriginal trauma, particularly when white characters witness and speak about Indigenous dispossession. Expressions of trauma in *Oyster* are complicated by shifts in narrative points of view and traditional boundaries of space and time that coalesce and implode from the centre of Aboriginal dispossession, as narrator Jess admits: "I find it difficult, out here among the breakaways, out here in the country of mirages and salt pans and lost languages, to separate the notions of space and time and sound. They seem interchangeable. The words for them seem arbitrary, but also slippery and fluid".[67] This is the provenance of a wound that encompasses individuals, kinship groups and the heartland of Australia's traumatised past, but remains unfathomable to those unwilling to hear the counterpoints of silence where pain is made audible and where the Songlines carry their own sense of space and time. Jessica Gildersleeve categorises Turner Hospital's literature as part of a collection of narratives that engender "responsible reading, in which the reader is called into dialogue with a text

[67]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 149.

through postmodern strategies of decentering".[68] This approach to representing Aboriginality is significant in *Oyster* because it provides scope for recognising other's suffering and contributes to "a reparative project in societies scarred by a history of trauma".[69] Motifs of silence that emerge through the text provide a means of exploring the complex morasses of trauma and their intersection with Aboriginality because the textual gaps and silences are laden with meaning: "there *is* a sound that silence makes in the inner ear and under conscious memory…a sound like a heartbeat, like a drumbeat, like the feet of dancers in a corroboree, like time passing, like the wind blowing across thousands of miles of bare rock".[70] Through this auditory imagery, *Oyster* expresses an ontological state where the Songlines re-imagine Country in ways that embody then eclipse its trauma.

Processes of listening to and reimagining wounds of Country in *Oyster* are communicated via motifs of absence that recognise and respond to traumas that have shaped nationhood. The novel's gaps and silences establish a lived space that animates traumas originated during Australia's history of colonisation. Their presence continues to be felt in the voids created by dispossession and genocide. Country is infused with a spiritual dimension that challenges western notions of time and urges the witness to imbue the silences with meaning, to recognise and respond to traumas of the past that continue to inform the present: "absences in their ghostly thousands thrum against the skin of red clay like a pulse. They are all gone into lost centuries, gone into the dark history of Inner Maroo…gone".[71] What emerges through these textual voids is a mandate to acknowledge the ongoing effects of trauma inflicted on Country and cultural bodies. This subtext

[68]Jessica Gildersleeve, "Trauma, Memory and Landscape in Queensland: Women's Writing 'a New alphabet of Moss and Water'," *Queensland Review* 19, no. 2 (2012): 208.
[69]Gildersleeve, "Trauma, Memory and Landscape in Queensland", 208.
[70]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 150.
[71]Turner Hospital, *Oyster*, 151.

acquires a sense of urgency considering *Oyster* was published within a decade of Australia's bicentenary and is contemporaneous to government legislation, including the Mabo and Wik cases that are pivotal to addressing land rights issues. The text speaks to Australia's process of renegotiating national identity, as informed by Indigenous traumas of the past and present. The suffering of Country continues to pulse beneath the surface of its violent history and, while these traumas are not always acknowledged in western ways of knowing, their presence evokes a disquieting milieu of change.

*Oyster* explores how processes of modifying colonial paradigms of Australian national identity to include Indigenous traumas can be actualised by challenging western assumptions of time and space that are incongruous with Aboriginal ways of knowing. Jess has a cautionary narrative to communicate, but she admits: "I am as troubled by the telling as by the tale".[72] Perhaps this is because she recognises the magnitude of recording events that precede "the day the foreigners arrived",[73] a phrase laden with dual signification. It refers to the time when cult leader, Oyster, infiltrates Outer Maroo, but also more discursively to the British encroaching upon Indigenous sacred space. According to Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina, western epistemologies traditionally conceptualise space as "knowable, measurable and susceptible to hierarchical order".[74] Value ascribed to the natural world is contingent on its use and occupation by colonial forces. Geographical landscapes are defined as physical rather than metaphysical spaces where humans construct knowledge of place. This relationship with land negates the possibility that space encompasses its own knowledge and animates systems of meaning.

Indigenous ways of knowing resist western paradigms of space that espouse egocentric perceptions of land because they are connected to the mythos of *terra nullius*.

[72]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 41.
[73]Turner Hospital, *Oyster*, 41.
[74]Ambelin Kwaymullina and Blaze Kwaymullina, "Learning to read the signs: Law in an Indigenous reality," *Journal of Australian Studies* 34, no. 2 (2010): 200.

British colonists occupied land because they found no preexisting evidence of ownership or inhabitance of place. This process of settlement displaces an Indigenous conception of Country as the source of life and consciousness and reinforces the need to counteract such limiting ways of thinking by promoting "an intercorporeal subjectivity between humans…and the earth".[75] It also requires renegotiation of colonised space to revive Aboriginal ways of knowing and mobilise Aboriginal ways of being. As Jess reflects on territorial occupation of Outer Maroo, she appreciates that it is situated in a cultural locus beyond western knowledge of space and time:

> Consider Ethel. She sits there, cross-legged in the red dust at the edge of the bora rings, smiling to herself, rocking gently backwards and forwards as though she hears singing and the rhythmic stamping of feet in the gidgee boughs. She has been putting the scattered rocks back where they belong, filling gaps in the circles and centuries. They have been here, the bora rings, for over twenty thousand years, it is believed; it is only in the past hundred, a hiccup in time, that indifferent graziers and the treads of their four wheel drives have scattered the stones and have imprinted zippered scars across their sacred clay skin.[76]

This vignette contains layers of meaning that unfurl during the process of renegotiating traditional boundaries of space and time in response to acts of dispossession. The bora rings signify how Country is infused with stories that can be accessed and shared when there is willingness to listen to Aboriginal ways of Knowing.[77] The bora rings also reflect Aboriginal consciousness of place destroyed and how Murri woman Ethel, who hears the

[75]Philip Morrissey, "Bill Neidjie's *Story About Feeling*: Notes on its Themes and Philosophy," *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no. 2 (2015): 3.
[76]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 41-42.
[77]Nerida Blair and Brooke Collins-Gearing, "Reflective Practice: Ancient Wisdom and Practice—Australian Indigenous Reflections in Teacher Education Through Shared Storying," in *Reflective Theory and Practice in Teacher Education*, ed. Robyn Brandenburg et al., (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 65.

bora rings' spirit resound throughout time, counterbalances this desecration of Country by recognising that it "[talks] to us without a voice".[78]

*Oyster* uses the bora rings to listen to the narratives of wounded Country and invert assumptions of *inside* and *outside* that inform western conceptions of space that disrupt Aboriginal ways of being. Ethel sits "cross legged in the red dust at the edge of the bora rings",[79] but she is connected to the concentric circles of these places that transcend time and are imbued with her ancestors' presences. Ethel's acceptance of time and space as continual and confluent entities is complicated by Jess' narrative perspective, a vantage point aligned with western epistemologies. Despite acceding that Australia's history surpasses colonisation, Jess constantly tries to make sense of the temporal. This process is bewildering because she attempts to understand traumatic events of the past by constructing a linear framework of time, but realises the task is impossible. Instead, Jess commences her narrative in an unorthodox manner "with the beginning of the end, one week ago" even though "the end began long before that".[80] Her method of working through pain is commensurate with trauma fiction, where "temporality and chronology collapse".[81] This complex narrative structure naturally accommodates an Indigenous worldview that conceives of time as cyclical, rather than linear, and reinforces the interrelatedness of cosmological elements. It also provides characters in *Oyster* opportunities to navigate Aboriginal dispossession in a text that acknowledges the difficulties involved in white engagement with this type of trauma.

Jess' encounters with Indigenous trauma also reveal a convergence of characters who inhabit the centre and margins in colonial discourse. White possession and occupation of

[78]Max Dulumunmun Harrison, *My People's Dreaming* (Sydney: Harper Collins Publishers, 2013), 7.
[79]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 41.
[80]Turner Hospital, *Oyster*, 45.
[81]Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 3.

space traditionally position Aboriginal experiences with trauma on the periphery of western consciousness because they are conceived as aberrant enigmas from this vantage point. *Oyster* modifies such misapprehensions of Aboriginality whilst acknowledging that Australia is still attempting to reconcile how Indigenous trauma contributes to its national identity: "Inner Maroo is down there among the bora rings, a square-pegged system of lost round holes within the wrong circles".[82] The text's nomenclature associated with geographical spaces is poignant because it references ancient origins of Aboriginal spirituality that is imbued within Country and deeply connected to place. Inner Maroo represents a space from which suffering emerges and a trauma that remains unfathomable to colonial paradigms of conquest that continue to envisage Indigenous worldviews from a mono-cultural perspective. *Oyster's* treatment of Aboriginal trauma is powerful because it conflates boundaries of space that underpin several dichotomies: outsider versus insider, victim versus perpetrator, and Indigenous epistemologies versus non-indigenous. What emerges through the coalescence of these initially competing realities is recognition that Country is connected to all wounded bodies: from national geopolitical bodies of colonial paradigms that espouse whiteness as privilege, to communal bodies that fear intruders, to the human form and psyche where trauma inscribes its imprint. Reading *Oyster* through this lens dismantles such binary oppositions and, in doing so, unearths what exists at the centre of Aboriginal consciousness: affinity with Country. The text also divulges a restorative repository of Indigenous knowledge upon which Australia's history of colonisation is constructed and that reimagines nationhood through reclaiming sacred space.

In renegotiating relationships between outsiders and insiders, victims and perpetrators of wounding, *Oyster* positions characters to inhabit a space where the centre

[82]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 151.

and margins of trauma invert then implode. The text promotes ecological awareness of how violence affects the heartland of Country and its peoples. While Jess speaks on behalf of the Murri people and her narrative perspective is sympathetic to their suffering, she exists in the expansive divide between Inner and Outer Maroo where, according to Ethel, the days have been numbered: "last week, last month, last year, she communicated with them. She knew what was coming. This town's been sung, Jess, she warned me. The writing was on the walls of the breakaways, she reckoned".[83] Acts of atrocity endured by Indigenous Australians extend to concerns with cultural genocide that resonate nationally. Murlanch reflects on this nexus between private and cultural trauma through her observation that, "nothing can be more intimate to a person than his or her own wounds, or to a country than its first inhabitants".[84] She addresses this argument by considering how white Australians tend to "do away with surviving Aborigines or push them away from sights and therefore consciousness" which, paradoxically, positions Aborigines "in the very heart of the country….a symbolic reminder that, unless we attend to our traumas, they will remain there, radiating out from our hearts and showing through our silences".[85] *Oyster's* treatment of Aboriginality engages polemics regarding Australia's adaptation to modernity and how successfully we are moving towards reconciliation in the wake of trauma. In order for this process to succeed, there must be willingness to occupy a space that eclipses homogenous approaches to understanding Australia's traumatised past as predicated on its convict origins. Epistemologies must be modified to recognise that trauma inflicted on Country has relational consequences between and within cultures; that destroying Country raises ecological, moral and spiritual concerns: "the Old People say:

[83]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 152.
[84]Isabel Fraile Murlanch, "Inside Out in the Land Down Under: Reading Trauma through Janette Turner Hospital's *Oyster*," in *The Splintered Glass Facets of Trauma in the Post-Colony and Beyond*, ed. Barbara Arizti and Sonia Baleo-Allue (Amsderdam: Rodopi, 2011), 234.
[85]Fraile Murlanch, "Inside Out in the Land Down Under", 235.

you cannot mutilate your mother without repercussions".[86] Through imparting her testimony of Aboriginal suffering to Jess, Ethel expresses that trauma enacted on Country is etched on all of our bodies. The wound burgeons until the silences are met with a voice that names the unspeakable and seeks a reparative pathway forward.

**Conclusion**

*Carpentaria* and *Oyster* deploy complex narrative modes that position characters to witness trauma and experience its unknowingness, to listen to the voices of those who embody Country as sacred space and "to know that country lives in a complex web of mobilised entities, knowledges, energies, patterns, and cycles, all breathing, living, feeling".[87] Both texts conclude with imagined possibilities of nationhood that renegotiate dominant notions of time and space to challenge antiquated paradigms of Australian national identity through animating epistemologies at the heart of Aboriginal consciousness. In *Carpentaria*, these ways of knowing embody Songlines whose pathways trace the beautiful interior of First Nations cultures. Bala, the child of hope, emerges from the wake of his people's suffering to breach long-lasting divides and cauterise the wounds of tribal warfare. *Carpentaria's* final moments foreshadow a future where pain is released through the hypnotic cadences of Country and pulses with the breath of its ancestors: "it was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh".[88] *Oyster* concludes with similar regenerative imagery as Ethel is empowered to see beyond the blazing destruction of Outer Maroo. She recognises cathartic possibilities for a renewed vision of Australian national identity,

[86]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 381.
[87]Brooke Collins-Gearing, "Listening to the Stories Woven Around Us," *Westerly* 64, no. 1 (2019): 25.
[88]Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (University of Western Sydney: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2006), 519.

a vision informed by working through the traumas of its history and consolidating epistemologies that emanate from the nucleus of Aboriginal spirituality: "Gonna rain…Rain on the way. I know these things".[89] Expressions of trauma in *Oyster* privilege Aboriginal epistemologies and ontologies regarding space and time in order to contest western-centric ideologies of possession and desire. Western conceptualisations of place as a site of occupation is supplanted by Country's capacity to appease trauma by recognising and respecting these hallowed spaces.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

[89]Janette Turner Hospital, *Oyster* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 1996), 431.