

“Everywhen” and the River’s Memory: Communal Time, Aboriginal Sovereignty, and the Work of Remembrance in Carpentaria

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Abstract

Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* (2006) stages a sovereign Aboriginal imagination that resists colonial chronologies and narrates Country as an animate archive. Reading the novel through the twin lenses of communal memory and Indigenous temporalities—often glossed as “everywhen”—this essay argues that Wright remaps narrative time to align with Aboriginal ways of being, law, and relation. The book’s polyphony, spiraling structure, and ceremonial returns figure memory as a communal practice embedded in place (Country), while its temporal aesthetics interrupt the linear, extractivist time of the mine, the state, and the settler archive. Placing *Carpentaria* in conversation with key Indigenous and allied thinkers—W. E. H. Stanner on “everywhen,” Deborah Bird Rose on Country’s liveliness, Irene Watson and Aileen Moreton-Robinson on sovereignty and epistemic decolonization, Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly on songlines, and Tyson Yunkaporta on pattern knowledge—I show how Wright’s novel builds a narrative law-ground (a literary “Law ground”) where memory is enacted, not stored, and time is kin, not a measure. *Carpentaria* thus becomes both a story and a sovereign mode of knowledge transmission.

Keywords: *Aboriginal temporality, Communal memory, Sovereignty, Everywhen, Indigenous storytelling*

Introduction: From River to Relation

Set in the fictional town of Desperance on the Gulf of Carpentaria, *Carpentaria* opens onto a world where tidal

rivers think and speak, winds carry news, and the ground remembers. Wright, a Waanyi writer from the southern Gulf highlands, has described her project as an attempt “to portray the world of Indigenous Australia as being in constant opposition between different spaces of time” and to imagine “the cultural mind as sovereign and in control” even while moving through the wreckage of colonialism (Wright, “On Writing Carpentaria”). The novel is epic in scope yet intimate in its grounding: a family, a town, a river, a mine. But it refuses to unfold according to the rules of realist historical narrative. Instead, it draws readers into what Stanner called the “everywhen” of the Dreaming, where ancestral presence is ongoing and history does not recede but remains active in Country (Stanner 202). Wright makes this temporal order palpable through recursive narration, polyphony, and refusal of closure (“Everywhen” and the River’s Memory).

To speak of communal memory in this context is not to invoke a static storehouse of recollections; it is to mark a mode of living in which remembering is a collective, place-based performance. In Wright’s hands, memory is inseparable from Country, ceremony, song, and law – what Watson names as First Nations law’s non-extinguishable quality, not granted by the Crown and not erasable by statute (Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples* 17). Communal memory is the work of relation: to each other, to nonhuman kin, and to the ancestors whose tracks and songs (songlines) hold knowledge systems coded into the earth (Neale and Kelly 61). *Carpentaria*’s form often overwhelms readers used to linear chronology. Its long sentences, unbroken paragraphs, and refusal of conventional chapter markers simulate tidal rhythms. This aesthetic choice is not decorative; it places the reader within the temporalities of Country itself (“Everywhen” and the River’s Memory). Stanner’s concept of “everywhen” is crucial: Dreaming time is not locked in the past but persists across generations as an ever-present framework of being (Stanner 203). When Norm Phantom or Mozzie Fishman recount ancestral stories, they are not “retelling” old myths but activating law in the present. Wright’s spiral structure, with stories circling back upon themselves, enacts this ontology.

The storm sequence offers a clear example. Each storm is not a discrete event but a return: the cyclone that devastated past generations comes back again, linking the living to ancestors and obligating them to re-establish balance with Country ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). Narrative time is therefore not progressive but recursive. It enacts what anthropologist Lynne Hume calls the Dreaming's "eternal present," a simultaneity of times accessed ritually and narratively (Hume 199). Critics sometimes liken this to magical realism, but Wright resists such comparisons, insisting her novel emerges from Aboriginal ontologies, not imported modes. Carmen Renes describes this as "Aboriginal realism," wherein the novel represents a world where rivers and winds have agency because that is how the world is experienced in Aboriginal epistemologies (Renes 75). The spiral, then, is not fantasy but realism on Aboriginal terms.

Communal memory in Carpentaria is inseparable from the Country. The Phantom family's relationship with the land—fishing, listening to winds, attending to seasons—anchors memory in practice. Norm Phantom's authority derives from his capacity to narrate and enact Country's stories, shared and renewed communally ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). Songlines are central. Neale and Kelly describe songlines as "a memory code for everything you need to know to survive in Australia" (78). Wright embeds this into her narrative: Will Phantom's travels retrace ancestral pathways, and Mozzie Fishman's journeys become mobile ceremonies that refresh memory. To remember is to move, sing, and gather; the novel dramatizes this pedagogy ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). Yunkaporta explains that Indigenous knowledge is carried in patterns, not abstract categories (112). In Carpentaria, repeated returns to the river, cyclical storms, and shifting family focus all form a knowledge pattern. The novel itself becomes a mnemonic device, a textual songline carrying knowledge forward. This communal memory contrasts with settler modes housed in archives, monuments, and texts. Wright's novel refuses such static storage, instead emphasizing embodied enactment. Moreton-Robinson critiques white possessiveness—the drive to own and control knowledge (The White Possessive 28).

Wright resists this by presenting knowledge as performative and inalienable. Humor and gossip also serve memory's work. Oral traditions use humor to make stories memorable, and Wright's prose mimics this (Renes 80). The community remembers not just through solemnity but through laughter, exaggeration, and play.

Time Wars: Extractive Chronologies vs. Indigenous Durations

The conflict at the novel's heart is not only between Aboriginal families and settler institutions but between two temporal regimes ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). The Gurfurrit mine embodies settler-colonial time: linear, extractive, profit-oriented. Its schedules assume land is an inert matter awaiting exploitation. This contrasts violently with the river's cyclical memory and ceremonial time. Watson insists Aboriginal law is non-extinguishable, regardless of colonial statutes (Aboriginal Peoples 25). In Carpentaria, this persistence appears as temporal resilience: Country remembers even when governments declare otherwise.

Rose describes Aboriginal time as multispecies, where humans synchronize with nonhuman kin (Rose 56). In Wright's novel, such rhythms remain authoritative. When the mine destroys habitats, it disrupts both ecology and memory. The mine's forward-only temporality insists on "progress," erasing the past. Yet storms and tides continually undermine operations, showing that ecological cycles exceed industrial calendars ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). This clash of times is profoundly political: settler institutions attempt to monopolize the future, but Aboriginal temporalities insist on recurrence and balance. Another major theme is the opposition between communal memory and the settler archive. Police records, court documents, and media frame Aboriginal life as criminal or pitiable. These institutions embody what Moreton-Robinson calls "possessive logics" (Talkin' Up to the White Woman 34).

Wright counters this by giving authority to voices excluded from such archives. Angel Day's gossip, Elias Smith's recollections, Mozzie's journeys—all function as counter-

archives ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). Neale and Kelly emphasize that songlines serve as both archive and map: storing knowledge in landscape and ensuring it is passed on through performance (91). Carpentaria works the same way. Its narrative performs memory anew in each reading, resisting the fixity of records. Thus, Wright's novel challenges archival epistemology by being long, digressive, and resistant to summary. These qualities frustrate settler readers but train audiences to listen, wait, and reread – mimicking communal memory practice.

Form as Ceremony: Polyphony, Humor, and Communal Memory

The novel's form is ceremonial. Its polyphonic structure resembles a gathering where multiple storytellers contribute, modeling memory as collective performance ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). Humor is crucial. Aboriginal storytelling often uses satire to disarm authority. In Carpentaria, ridicule of elites undermines settler seriousness. Humor becomes a strategy of survival, affirming life through wit (Renes 82). Renes suggests that Wright's "Aboriginal realism" refuses to separate myth from fact (77). This realism sustains communal memory: tall tales are not false but another truth mode.

Education practices echo this. Teachers emphasize reading the novel slowly, sometimes aloud, to capture its rhythms (Reading Australia). In classrooms, reading becomes a communal event, echoing oral traditions. Thus, form itself becomes pedagogy. If memory and time are communal and cyclical, sovereignty in Carpentaria is enacted through the Country itself. Watson insists that Aboriginal sovereignty persists as law grounded in Country (Aboriginal Peoples 29). Wright depicts land enforcing sovereignty: rivers speak, storms return, landscapes demand respect. These are not metaphors but manifestations of jurisdiction ("Everywhen" and the River's Memory). Moreton-Robinson critiques settler notions of sovereignty that frame Indigenous peoples as postcolonial subjects seeking recognition (The White Possessive 38). Wright stages the opposite: sovereignty is already enacted through relation with Country. The mine represents settler

attempts to override jurisdiction, imposing its own timelines. But Wright shows the limits of such imposition: natural forces continually reassert themselves. Aesthetically, Wright asserts sovereignty by refusing settler narrative conventions, instead privileging Aboriginal temporalities.

Carpentaria also anticipates climate discourse. By emphasizing the agency of storms, rivers, and animals, Wright presents an ecological worldview in which survival depends on respecting cycles (“Everywhen” and the River’s Memory). Rose describes how caring for Country is inseparable from remembering law (65). In Wright’s novel, ecological crises are also crises of memory. When the mine disrupts habitats, it erases mnemonic systems embedded in them. Neale and Kelly highlight how songlines encode ecological knowledge (108). Wright shows how communal memory sustains this, ensuring transmission through ceremony. Yunkaporta reinforces this: survival depends on recognizing relational patterns (134). The novel’s refusal of closure mirrors ecological processes and insists repair is ongoing. Communal memory ensures devastations are remembered, but also enables futures rooted in law and relation.

Conclusion: Reading as Relation

Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria* asks readers not simply to learn about Aboriginal time and memory in a detached or anthropological sense, but to experience them through the very act of reading. The novel’s structure is deliberately crafted to estrange readers from conventional Western narrative expectations—linear plots, chronological development, and clear distinctions between past and present—and instead to immerse them in what W.E.H. Stanner once called “everywhen,” the Aboriginal sense of time that is simultaneously past, present, and future. Wright achieves this immersion by drawing readers into spirals, recursions, and polyphonies that enact the rhythms of Aboriginal storytelling traditions. The novel’s spiraling form exemplifies Indigenous temporalities by refusing a singular entry point or conclusive end. Instead of unfolding as a sequence of discrete events, the narrative circles back on itself, repeating motifs, revisiting scenes, and layering ancestral presences with contemporary

political conflicts. For instance, the serpent—both a creation ancestor and a force still shaping Country—moves in and out of the narrative at unpredictable intervals. This repetition is not redundant but pedagogical: it teaches readers that time in Aboriginal cosmology is not linear progression but continual return and renewal. By placing myth alongside the everyday struggles of the Pricklebush people, Wright shows that Dreaming is not consigned to a mythical past but remains active in the present.

Similarly, the novel's polyphonic voices expand the field of memory and time. Wright does not present a single authoritative narrator; instead, she orchestrates a chorus of voices—ancestral, communal, ecological, and individual—that overlap and interrupt one another. These voices resist containment within settler genres of history or ethnography. Instead, they enact memory as a living practice, one that belongs not to individuals but to communities and their Country. In Aboriginal oral traditions, storytelling is not merely about recalling facts; it is an ongoing re-enactment of law and knowledge, binding people, land, and ancestors together. Wright brings this tradition into the novel form, so that reading itself becomes a participatory act in keeping memory alive. Foregrounding these Aboriginal temporalities is not a neutral aesthetic choice—it is a direct challenge to extractive chronologies and settler archives. Colonial historiography in Australia has long been organized around linear progress narratives: the movement from “terra nullius” to colonization, settlement, and modernization. Within that frame, Aboriginal peoples were often represented as vanishing relics of a premodern past. Wright refuses this erasure by narrating a world in which ancestral presences, community struggles, and ecological cycles coexist. Her cyclical time undermines the colonial fantasy of progress that justifies mining companies' extraction of land and resources in the Gulf country. By emphasizing ecological rhythms such as tides, cyclones, and seasonal renewal, Wright situates Aboriginal time within the living pulse of Country rather than within settler calendars of exploitation.

In doing so, Wright also contests the authority of the settler archive. Archives, as colonial institutions, have historically reduced Aboriginal memory to written records, anthropological notes, or state documents – forms that separate knowledge from Country and community. *Carpentaria* offers a counter-archive: one that is embodied, oral, and ecological. Its communal storytelling foregrounds the sovereignty of Indigenous epistemologies, demonstrating that memory persists not because it is validated by external recognition but because it is enacted daily through relation to land, law, and story. This emphasis on communal memory carries profound political implications. In settler frameworks, sovereignty is typically imagined as something conferred or recognized by external authorities, such as the Crown or the state. Wright reorients sovereignty as something intrinsic and enacted through lived relation to Country. By centering communal memory, she shows that sovereignty is not a legal status to be granted or withheld but a cultural fact that has always existed. The Pricklebush people's survival, their ongoing storytelling, and their maintenance of relationships with ancestors and land are themselves enactments of sovereign being. *Carpentaria* is not simply a novel to be analyzed for its themes; it is itself a ceremonial act of storytelling that enacts Aboriginal ways of knowing. Its spirals reflect the cycles of Country, its polyphonies echo the collective voices of the community, and its temporalities refuse settler logics of disappearance. By doing so, Wright affirms the continuity of Aboriginal sovereignty and challenges readers to rethink what it means to inhabit time, memory, and story on this land.

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