

Literary Realism to Post-Modernism (2110) LANG1006

Essay Two

Alexis Wright deploys the concept of ‘story’ in multiple senses. Consider the status of ‘story’ in her essays “What Happens When You Tell Somebody Else’s Story?” and “The Power and Purpose of Literature.” You may also wish to refer to her essay “A Self-Governing Literature” and her novel The Swan Book in responding to this question.

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By Rebecca Broadhead

Tutor: Lizzil Gay

Story is a term used contextually in Alexis Wrights' political works of fiction and non-fiction. In one instance it's constructive, in another, destructive. The outcomes of storytelling depend on whom is telling and what is told about Indigenous people who are in the subequatorial island of so-called Australia. This is where the issue could begin, at the locating of Indigenous peoples in regions and remote areas without acknowledging their overarching sense of place in nature, in multiple places and times. Settlers use the words "live on", "work at", which presupposes a subject-object relationship between person and land rather than a subject-subject relationship where land is respected as an equal. Alexis Wright is a Waanyi Nation woman of the lower southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria, but she speaks of her peoples having a larger centre of being in country itself, a sense of place that is ontologically different than a settler's. This distinction between settler and Indigenous relationship to place (and time) is central to the storytelling practices of both settlers and Indigenous peoples.

Indigenous stories are sacred and linked to place and law. Waanyi Country for Alexis Wright holds "highly important sacred story places...such as the home of Boodjamulla the Rainbow Serpent, and the Serpent that lives down in Duwadari waterhole in the Lawn Hill Gorge—the whole area is collectively known as Mumbaleeya, or Rainbow Serpent country. Boodjamulla has great powers, and this is respected in Waanyi laws because he created the deep gorge and now keeps the waterholes full of water to keep his body wet, and if he ever leaves, the waterholes will dry up." (Wright, 2020) From this perspective, land is infused with story and law and life itself springs from places and stories in country. These essences are held in a complex multiplicity that is outside the order of number, and have an intense temporal life of their own, that is not limited to one or more assemblages of concepts. Country is this immense complexity many people are a part of and belong. (Hill, 2021) Demonstrating the immensity of country, Wright says "some of the major story tracks of the spiritual ancestral beings and their laws cross great stretches of northern Australia, and link Waanyi with other Aboriginal language groups to Central Australia or beyond to southern Australia, or across the continent. The ancient story web is a complete and complex matrix of connectivity to the narratives and territories delineated by the ancestors, and this is what links all Aboriginal people together in the oldest living culture on Earth, and what provides the constancy, balance and consistency of who we are." (Wright, 2016) Walking on country, following elders footsteps, knowing all places and stories within it is the Indigenous way of life, the stories they tell make up the fabric of their being.

A very different kind of story has been and continues to be told by the Australian parliament and its media, and "the plot line has always been for one outcome, to erode Aboriginal belief in sovereignty, self-governance and land rights, even when it has gotten to the point where most Aboriginal people have been silenced." (Wright, 2016). The media, who claim to be independent, dominate the narration of Aboriginal stories in television, newspapers and social media. They promote intervention policy and assimilation by mainly consulting settler politicians which trains the population how to think about "Indigenous Affairs" and Australia as a "nation".

The Aboriginal affairs bureaucracy had the power to advise government on the funding and the style of programs delivered to Aboriginal communities during the 2007 implementation of intervention policies in the Northern Territory. The bureaucracy would fashion stories about what the Indigenous peoples lacked, how they were addicts, abusers and bludgers, and gave suggestions for improvement without deep consultation with the very people “in need” of such “intervention”. These policies were spouted and even promoted by the media. The discussion excluded the very people who were the subject of debates, apart from when “the minister for Aboriginal Affairs would sometimes point to a few people who supposedly supported the Intervention. That was the story. This was the story of chosen individuals, not the story of widespread consultation.” (Wright, 2016) And when, in various instances in the past where particular Aboriginal voices have been heard in the media—for example with land rights demonstrations and native title— Wright “would question to what degree we have been really heard rather than selectively and prejudicially chosen, like snapshots, to represent the whole Aboriginal point of view.” (Wright, 2016) Political storytelling is broadcasted on the nation’s stage, to portray Aboriginal Affairs from the the settler’s point of view, just as bureaucrats and lawyers communicated Aboriginal Affairs to the Australian public on behalf of Aboriginals, inevitably distorting the Aboriginal story.

A demoralising and disempowering Aboriginal story in the mainstream media is told when it suits political parties to harness votes and tamper with Aboriginal policy. “It helps governments to control the modern Aboriginal story, to ensure the lid is kept on the ever-percolating shameful history of white settlement in this country—this would have meant dealing with the facts of history.” (Wright, 2016) One of the dominant stories about settler colonialism is that it happened in the past, and therefore cannot be altered. However, the effects of settler colonialism are still felt in the present, these lands still under occupation. Until Indigenous peoples determine their own lives, in private and in public, indeed all spheres of life, including their imagination, occupation is still occupying. “In its positive aspect, the logic of elimination marks a return whereby the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society. It is both as complex social formation and as continuity through time that I term settler colonization a structure rather than an event...” (Wolfe, 2006). The logic of linear time and chronology taught to children in schools, tells the fiction that Captain Cook discovered Australia and that the land was unowned and un-lived upon until settler invasion. Another version of history says that people did inhabit the continent for thousands of years and had their own way of life, until settler colonialists invaded, pillaged and plundered, but this saga happened 200 years ago, and therefore it cannot be apologised for or repaired in the present. This idea of colonisation having a beginning and end point is a story that perpetuates the harm done to indigenous peoples. From an Indigenous perspective, “All times are important to us. No time has ended and all worlds are possible ... 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.” (Wright, 2002). The irreconcilable differences between Indigenous and

settler on time is contributing to the torture of the Aboriginal mind in this country. The everlasting barrage of being told how Aboriginal history is, how Aboriginal reality shapes up, is inhumane treatment of any Indigenous individual, let alone group of living people or ancestors. And the effects of inhumanity is too well known. As Wright says, “We have been exposed for too long to this colonial contact history and to other people’s ideas and attempts to change us. We have learnt how to use the white man’s impersonal language and it means nothing to anyone when we speak.” (Wright, 2016) Even further, “one cannot help but feel that we are becoming, bit by bit, the indoctrinated fools of the rhetoric, where we start to believe the stories we continually hear other people tell about us, and take the opportunity to be liked, in order to survive the times.”

In her novel *The Swan Book*, the virus “thinks it is the only pure full-blood virus left in the land. Everything else is just half-caste. Worth nothing! Not even a property owner...Hard to believe a brain could get sucked into vomiting bad history over the beautiful sunburnt plains.” (Wright, 2013) The virus is a part of the Aboriginal psyche that has become out of touch with its cultural reality having undergone assimilation, resulting in a hatred for Indigenous life and a desire to acquiesce. The bush doctors in the prelude say the virus is “just one of those poor lost assimilated spirits that thought about things that had originated somewhere else on the planet and got bogged in my brain. Just like assimilation of the grog or flagon, or just any *kamukamu*, which was not theirs to cure.” The virus is homesickness, nostalgia, obsession with creating one nation and making the heterogenous homogenous through assimilation. The virus is the desire for transcendent truth in the face of world-shattering cataclysms that render ways of knowing or being as just one of many possibilities to know or be. The virus is mainly “Australia’s big psychotic conscience ravaging its way through Aboriginal minds.” (Hill, 2021) The virus is the disease of fundamentalism, as Wright suggests, “The doctors said it was a remarkable thing, an absolute miracle that nobody else had ended up with a virus like this freak lost in my head, after testing thousands of fundamentalists of one kind or another.” (Wright, 2013) Fundamentalism is “a religious movement characterised by a strict belief in the literal interpretation of religious texts.” ([dictionary.com](https://www.dictionary.com)) Christian fundamentalism has been defined by George Marsden as the demand for a strict adherence to certain theological doctrines, in reaction against Modernist theology. ([Wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org)) The virus is a form of conservatism which seeks to preserve transcendent and blanket, myopic ideas instead of holding multiple ideas at once on culture, people, art, science and philosophy. In all sense, it is the constriction of the perspective that conveniently serves one way of being and knowing. Possibly the worst outcome, is an Indigenous person who is possessed by the rhetoric of the colony being inactive, as displayed in character Warren Finch, who believes “All people liked to dance for a gift from God. The Warren Finch dance. He was the lost key. He was post-racial. Possibly even post-Indigenous. His sophistication had been far-flung and heaven-sent. Internationally Warren. Post-tyranny politics kind of man. True thing! He was long gone from cardboard box and packing crate humpies in the remote forgotten worlds like this swamp.” (Wright, 2013).

Indigenous storytelling is a form of sovereignty and a pathway forward, backwards and sideways through time and place. Wright “began her writing life by being taught by elders in Central and northern Australia who claimed that we have always governed ourselves.” (Wright, 2020) She says these people were master story makers and story keepers, and taught her the joy of reading and writing, “even though the books they read were the epic stories held in vast areas of land and desert country where they travelled through stories networking seemingly unremarkable landscapes. But they always intimately knew where they were in their country through story.” (Wright, 2020) In Wright’s works, she says she “began to understand more fully how the powerful spirits of our ancestral homeland were imbued in the soul of our people, who are country itself. This was where true sovereign governance lay, with the ancestors. We are governed by the stories of the ancestral spirits of place in our traditional country.” (Wright, 2020). She has realised “we have always governed ourselves through the ancestral stories that form our own constitution of sacred laws for this country.” (Wright, 2020) Through the process of collectively remembering, reclaiming, retelling and rewriting ones knowledge of oneself as Aboriginal, these peoples that have been the recipient of failed policies that still govern their lives, can wrestle their way to having clear Aboriginal vision held and broadly supported within the space of Australian and world rhetoric. Wright speaks of a ten year battle against Vestey’s, a British pastoral company in the Northern Territory in 1966. 200 Gurindji, the traditional landowners, walked off the cattle station they worked on due to harsh treatment from management. The man who lead the walk-off was Vincent Lingiari, and at that time he said: ‘We can’t go back to that Vestey’s, Vestey’s been treating me like a *walagu* (dog). Make mefella worry.’ Wright adds: “The Gurindji kept telling their story straight, and eventually they achieved land rights over part of their traditional lands.” (Wright, 2018)

Wright acknowledges the need for global attendance to Indigenous sovereignty through story. As she says, “Writers are a combined force who influence each other through our works to negate frontiers,” and they “carry each other across the frontiers of imagination the more we find and read each other’s works across the world...we must find ways to extend the emotional human map of the world to include the interconnected cycles of all life that help this planet to breathe. This is the foundation on which to build a self-governing world literature.” (Wright, 2020) In her own work on *The Swan Book*, she describes following swans all over the world, and through story, poem and epic to find ways to tell the story: “Pablo Neruda’s story of the sick swan with its long neck draped around his own neck is etched on my mind, as is Charles Baudelaire’s ‘Le Cygne’, the dirt-engrained swan of Paris, dragging its white plumage over the uneven ground.” (Wright, 2020) Her reference to art from all over the world invite readers to participate in self-governing world literature, as her work reminds all of the beginning and end times of all world tales. Wright’s questions about Australian literature, “are often about how we dig from this country’s blood-stained earth.” (Wright, 2018) Storytelling of place in the Indigenous context is layered with colonial legacy, a storytelling war is still happening that began two centuries ago with British colonisation, but stories of colonisation, as well as stories of sovereignty and spirit have a

place in world literature. As the settler mind experiences more Indigenous stories of place, time and ancestor, they will begin to recognise some of what actually passes in the psychic intelligence system of Oceanic Indigenous peoples.

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