



*Mimetic Mechanisms and Indigenous Vulnerability in Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria**

by Valérie Tosi

ABSTRACT: This article investigates Alexis Wright's novel *Carpentaria* (2006) through the lens of the mimetic theory developed by René Girard, which I combined with Jean Price-Mars' definition of "collective bovarism" and Umberto Eco's narrative semiotics. In my close reading of the novel, I explore how the author exposes the detrimental mimetic mechanisms hidden behind characters' behaviours and relationships to articulate a discourse on the risks of assimilation and the necessity for Aboriginal resistance to neocolonialism. I argue that in *Carpentaria* the emulation of the dominant society's values and beliefs by assimilated Indigenous characters results in the social disintegration and vulnerability of the Indigenous communities. Not only do mimetic mechanisms negatively affect the epistemic systems of Aboriginal characters in terms of preparedness to climate change, but they also undermine their social cohesion and physical survival. Furthermore, investigating the text at a semiotic level, I identified some thematic isotopies that Wright uses to emphasise the racial bias and dehumanising attitudes towards black people embedded in the neocolonial gaze. Prioritising the textual dimension of the novel, my approach focuses on how the sociocultural and physical vulnerability of the Indigenous characters is depicted at a philosophical, rhetorical and narratological level. My investigation focuses on four narrative places: the dump, the city, the Pricklebush and the ocean.

KEY WORDS: *Carpentaria*; Alexis Wright; vulnerability; mimetic theory; scapegoating



INTRODUCTION

Carpentaria (2006) is the second novel by Aboriginal writer Alexis Wright, author of *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *The Swan Book* (2013). Her literary production, which also includes the essays *Grog War* (1997), *Croire en l'incroyable* (2000), the memoir *Tracker* (2017) and the short story collection *Le pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel* (2002), focuses on the persisting legacies of colonisation within Aboriginal communities in Indigenous Australia. As a descendant from the *waanyi* people, who originally lived in the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Queensland, Wright also works as a land rights activist and researcher for Aboriginal land councils.

Winner of the Miles Franklin Award in 2007, *Carpentaria* focuses on themes that are further developed in *The Swan Book: slow violence*,¹ capitalist imperialism, pollution, climate change, environmental catastrophes, supernatural forces, and the power of dreaming. *Carpentaria* presents the interwoven narratives of the characters living in Desperance, a fictional town on the Gulf Country in the Northern Territory. With devastating satire, the novel centres on the conflicts between the local Aboriginal community and the white people who support a mining operation that has taken over the sacred aboriginal land. Desperance is spatially and socially divided into two parts: the wealthy white community inhabits the well-served urban area called Uptown, whereas the Aboriginal people are relegated to the wild Pricklebush. The Indigenous community itself is split into two rival groups, which are named after the two areas where they have settled on the outskirts of Uptown. The Westside population is headed by the resilient, bashful and traditionalist fisherman Normal Phantom, while the Eastside group is led by old Joseph Midnight. Normal sees Joseph as a sell-out, a traitor of his own people, since he traded off land to the white establishment. Not only is the Pricklebush community divided and banished to the fringes of the white people's world, but their lives are negatively affected by a lead mine built on their ancestral land, which was managed as *terra nullius*² by foreign investors. Although this monstrous industrial complex constitutes a threat to both life and the environment, Uptown's citizens support its dirty business and the Government's environmentally unfriendly policies.

¹ *Slow violence* is described by Rob Nixon as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed along time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon 2).

² *Terra nullius*—land belonging to nobody—is a Latin expression derived from the Roman expression *res nullius*—a thing belonging to no one—by analogy (see Benton and Strauman 2, qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 257). Coined in the nineteenth century, the term was commonly used to depict the colonists' attitude in Australia. As Ashcroft et al. suggest, "While it was not used as a formal legal justification for dispossession, it is now commonly used to describe the attitudes to Aboriginal property rights that underpinned the actions of individual colonists and local administrations in various colonies" (257).



DETRIMENTAL MIMETIC MECHANISMS: IMITATION AND SCAPEGOATING

In *Carpentaria*, risk and vulnerability seem to be intimately connected with two mimetic mechanisms which manifest themselves in characters' behaviours, thoughts, and dialogues. These mechanisms are those of emulation and scapegoating, firstly applied to literary criticism in the 1960s by René Girard, whose mimetic theory was informed by Western canonical novels. In this article, I argue that Girard's mimetic theory could provide a suitable theoretical framework to read character interaction in contemporary Indigenous novels such as *Carpentaria*, which deals with the themes of colonial—and postcolonial—dispossession, marginalisation and assimilation of native people. In this new context of application of Girard's paradigm, imitation would occur when characters from a minority culture tend to replace the desire for the preservation of their customs, traditions, and episteme with the desire to reach their invaders' wealth and social status. Conversely, the scapegoat mechanism would manifest itself when characters from the dominant culture identify characters from the minority culture as a potential threat to their political, economic, and cultural supremacy.

In *Carpentaria*, Aboriginal characters are constantly regarded by their white opponents as either troublemakers or dangerous figures. Wright, who has long struggled for the sake of Aboriginal people as a land rights activist, argues that by writing her novel, she could "contribute something to disrupting the stagnating impulse that visualises the world of Aboriginal people as little more than program upon countless program for 'fixing up problems'" (Wright, *Writing* 81). Depicting those relational mimetic mechanisms which contribute to the perpetuation of the stereotyping, erosion and annihilation of the Indigenous identity in contemporary Australia, *Carpentaria* shows how physical, social and cultural vulnerability of Aboriginal peoples is intimately connected with forms of assimilation and scapegoating.

IMITATION

In his essay *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), René Girard argues that the modern novel displays characters who are victims of a mimetic desire. Mimetic desire, also called metaphysical desire, is a non-authentic desire which operates as a subconscious imitation of another's desire. This another is a model who designates the object of desire and who can be named 'a mediator' (Girard, *Deceit* 2). The subject is drawn to the object by the mediator (7) and not by a spontaneous interest or passion. When the mediator belongs to the world of the subject—that is the case of internal mediation (9)—he or she usually occupies a privileged social and economic position. What should be specified is that mimetic desire pertains to objects of attraction that are not physical things but rather intangible products of mimetic entanglement, such as wealth or social status. As Girard suggests, "The object is only a means to reach the mediator" (53), and



“Imitative desire is always the desire to be Another” (83). Furthermore, “By definition, metaphysical desire is never aimed at an accessible object” (209).

In *Carpentaria*, Wright describes forms of imitative behaviour which can be related to a configuration of mimetic desire typical of postcolonial realities. This peculiar kind of desire manifests itself in three narrative places: the city dump, Uptown and the ocean. The dump is a place which both attracts and frightens the Aboriginal community. On the one hand, it’s a pool of materials from which Aboriginal people can draw on to build and furnish their huts; on the other, it’s a place full of invisible threats. Angel, Normal Phantom’s wife, regularly goes to the dump in search of items. In her view, the dump is a sort of wonderland dotted with potentially precious objects:

Angel Day always claimed the spot where she forced Norm to continue building their house was the best place they had ever lived, because all she had to do was walk across the road to the rubbish dump, and there she could get anything her heart desired – *for free*. (Wright, *Carpentaria* 14, emphasis in original)

The emphasis on the expression “for free” suggests how a member of a dispossessed community forced to live in misery on the margins of the civilisation is likely to idolise the material products of a developed society. Angel is a victim of metaphysical desire since she is attracted by objects which are mere simulacra of the white people’s social welfare. What those items symbolise is the real goal inaccessible to her, namely the possibility of being integrated into a wealthy and close-knit community. As Alessandra Solomon suggests, Angel is “the most assimilated of the Pricklebush clan” (92), embodying a “prime example of government policies at work” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 16). In the dump, Angel finds two objects which can be interpreted as objects of internal mediation. The first is a clock, which “would allow her children to march off to school on time to do their school work” and through which “No one in the Phantom family would be guessing the time anymore from where the sun sat in the sky” (22). Angel sees the clock as a precious instrument which might help her family to conform to white people’s temporality and related sociocultural rules; she declares herself willing to abandon the Aboriginal practice of gauging the time through the observation of natural elements in favour of a rational time measurement system. Furthermore, as Carmelina Concilio points out, “The clock is one of the symbols of western civilisation in the colonies, for it signals the schedule of imported daily tasks and routines that regulate and discipline the life in the colony of both colonisers and colonised” (23). Wright underscores how non-Indigenous temporality is strictly connected with rules, timetables and duties that powerful people and institutions impose on subjugated subjects. In *Carpentaria*, she challenges this deterministic—and capitalistic—conceptualisation of time by developing a storyline which embraces all times. “Performing a continuous rejection of the historical time of the nation, *Carpentaria* is narrated according to the cyclical, eternal time, of ‘the ancestral serpent’” (Joseph 2008), with past, present and future existing simultaneously and influencing each other.



The second object Angel finds in the dump is a tiny statue of the Virgin Mary, which she believes will be able to bring her family the white people's fortune. Differently from other Aboriginal characters, who consider Christianisation as one of the main causes of past and present Indigenous misery, Angel firmly believes that Christian religion and believers' devotion are the key to owning "the luck of the white people" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 23). With subtle irony, the author depicts the cultural vulnerability of those Indigenous people who, since the first phases of colonisation, have been taken away from their land and forced to live in poverty by their white overlords and invaders. The political, social and economic marginality of many Aboriginal people in the colonial past resulted in them being misled to think that the adoption of the white people's system of knowledge and religion would be the only answer to the purported backwardness of the Indigenous world. Assimilation policies supported this process, presuming that Aboriginal people could enjoy the same standard of living as white Australians if they adopted European customs and beliefs, as the Minister for Territories Paul Hasluc maintained in a Commonwealth parliamentary debate in 1961:

The policy of assimilation, in the view of all Australian governments, means that all aborigines and part aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians. (Hasluc 1051)

However, due to a lack of a proper education and adequate material means, Aboriginal people were not able to cope with the ruthlessness of the dominant society. The loss of the Indigenous episteme, which had let them survive throughout history, was not compensated by their cultural and social emancipation. Consequently, they found themselves more destitute than ever on the margin of a neo-capitalist world which regarded their way of life as obsolete and their relocation on Australian territory as a problem to fix.

Fearing that she might be robbed of her treasures by other Indigenous garbage collectors, Angel declares herself "the traditional owner" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 24, 27) of the dump. In considering herself as a superior member of her community enlightened by the principles of the winning sociocultural model, she seems to be affected by what Girard identified as "bovarysm triumphant" or snobbism: "Snobbism is all the means used by a person to prevent the appearance of his true self in the field of his consciousness, in order to project continuously into a finer character in which he recognises himself" (Girard, *Deceit* 36). In her latest novel *The Swan Book*, Wright ridicules those Indigenous characters who proclaim themselves 'first-rate Aboriginal people' claiming for land sovereignty. This position emerges in embryo in *Carpentaria*, in which Wright shows how dispossession and assimilation may result in the creation of hierarchies and conflicts among Indigenous people. Angel's claims of ownership ignite a war of the poor which degenerates into arson and the social disintegration of the Indigenous community. This is an instance of how a bovaristic attitude combined with the adoption of a western social and economic principle such as property rights causes



environmental damage, social hatred and division in the fictional Indigenous community depicted by Wright.

In Wright's novel, another place in which internal mediation manifests itself is Uptown, the white part of Desperance where all the political, economic and social decisions are taken into effectiveness. Cilla Mooch, an indigenous municipal employee who has been civilised by white people, is the typical embodiment of internal mediation. He wants "to shape himself into a white mould" and describes the Aboriginal settlements on the outskirts of Desperance as "an infestation of black-heads" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 37). His attitude towards his own people could be described as an example of *Bovarysme des collectivités*, an expression coined by Jules de Gaultier in his essay *Le Bovarysme*:

Pour le groupe, pour la collectivité, de quelque nature qu'elle soit, ce fait de Bovarysme se réalise aussitôt qu'un certain nombre des individus qui le composent subit la fascination d'une coutume étrangère au lieu de subir la suggestion de la coutume propre à son groupe. (De Gaultier 96)³

De Gaultier identified "une complète désagrégation" as one of the worst consequences of this social form of emulation and considered "le plus néfaste la menace que comporte pour une société ancienne et déjà constituée la fascination du modèle étranger"⁴ (96, 110).

In the 1920s the expression *Bovarysme des collectivités* was drawn on by the Haitian ethnographer Jean Price-Mars to describe the ideological attitude which made the Haitian elite reject their African origin in favour of French models. In his essay *So Spoke the Uncle*, Price-Mars identified his own people's "fashion of utilizing the laws of imitation in order to make ourselves model borrowers, the pathological deviation which we have inflicted through collective bovarism by conceiving of ourselves as other than we are" (9).

Notwithstanding the social dimension implied by the concept of "collective bovarism" developed by Price-Mars, what is more relevant for our discourse is that it gives the term bovarism a political meaning and relates it to the colonial experience. Drawing on Price-Mars's considerations, I argue that Chilla Mooch can be identified as a character who suffers from collective bovarism. Disavowing his own identity as member of the Aboriginal community, he adopts the white mediator's worldview, looking at Indigenous people with paternalism and disdain. However, Wright parodies this kind of emulation through Normal Phantom's voice. Normal highlights the inability of Chilla to speak a fluent English and calls him "fuzzy wuzzy" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 37), a term which refers to the curled hair of black natives.

³ "When it comes to the group, the community, whatever their nature may be, this bovarism manifests itself when a certain number of individuals are fascinated by foreign customs rather than by their own group's customs".

⁴ "the fascination for a foreign model as the most inauspicious threat to an ancient and established society".



At the end of the novel, a Tropical cyclone hits the town of Desperance, causing a tsunami which results in flooding. While escaping, Will Phantom has a vision of an ancestral spirit who reminds him of the importance of preserving the tribal Indigenous episteme:

Remember the real people of the Gulf, those poor black souls living on heartbreak and worries in the Pricklebush because they know all about cyclones, unlike those copycat Uptown dolce vita type of people sitting in comfortable armchairs expecting to acquire their ancestral ties with the sea by sitting on their posteriors watching television programs [...] (478).

The ancestor's discourse involves a reversal of the mimetic mechanisms identified so far, since she describes white characters as ridiculous emulators of the Indigenous way of conceptualising the world. In fact, they rely on the media for acquiring the knowledge necessary to survive in a world threatened by climate change and unpredictable environmental catastrophes. After surviving the tsunami, Will finds himself on a garbage island made of plastic bottles and other waste materials. As Maria Takolander suggests, "Will, like Noah, that other Adamic character from Genesis, is described as a 'practical man in a practical man's paradise'". Furthermore, "Will's predicament as a solitary castaway is also resonant of Robinson Crusoe's" (Takolander 184). Ruling over a dystopian and primordial reality, Will actually imitates the behaviour of Defoe's hero, committing himself to practical activities, space measurements and thinking he can endlessly rely on a generous nature for subsistence. However, Takolander also quotes Demelza Hall's interpretation of *Carpentaria's* floating island as a space where postcolonial questions "about home, nation and identity are negotiated" (Takolander 184; Hall 24). Taking a cue from this consideration, I argue that what the author depicts in the last part of her novel is a failure of the application of Crusoe's anthropocentric and calculating logic to a contemporary world subject to climate change and biopower. After spending an indefinite amount of time on the garbage island, Will has to cope with the fact that he belongs to a generation who has lost the tribal episteme necessary to survive extreme environmental conditions. In a nutshell, he doesn't possess his father's mental maps, which could help him to orientate and sail back home. Entrapped in a claustrophobic microcosm, he realises that the image of the solitary hero struggling for survival, which is a bovaristic form of mimetic entanglement, doesn't fit him and that he needs an external aid to rely on. His new awareness is then accompanied by a redefinition of self-identity. In fact, he asks himself whether the future discoverers of the island would call the sole inhabitant on his sinking oasis a 'native'. As Takolander suggests, reflecting on his condition, he casts doubt on the semantic value of the term *native*, which was coined by colonisers and used until the 1980s with prejudicial implications (Takolander 184). *Native* was a noun originally used as a key organising principle of colonisation in settler colonies; it was a generalising label that erased cultural differences placing every Indigenous world—no matter its territorial and cultural peculiarity—at the antipodes of Western civilisation. According to Christopher Joon-Hai Lee, "Geographic origins and Indigenous culture had less bearing on the term's prosaic definition" (Lee 464). The category of 'native' was applied basically to



black people that lived in a condition of purported sociocultural backwardness and had to be civilised by white settlers. In his reflections, Will does not relate the term 'native' to his racial identity but to his being the keeper of the floating island he inhabits. In other words, he turns a racial label into a term linked to care of the land and Indigenous sovereignty.

Furthermore, from his outpost, Will sees "boats trading in human traffic", crowded with people who "only had eyes for a safer place from wherever they had come" (Wright, *Carpentaria* 501). In this passage, Aboriginal trauma and diaspora are linked to the tragedies of other human beings. Will recognises a common fragility which associates his own condition to the fate of other outcasts and realises that Aboriginal people are just one of the victims of global power imbalance and ongoing neo-imperialistic forms of colonisation.

SCAPEGOATING

In *Carpentaria*, the unexpected and unresolved murder of Uptown's watchman Gordie results in social panic and chaos. However, this tragic event is just the last straw since Uptown is in the middle of a broader political, cultural and environmental crisis. First of all, the central government of Canberra ignores the issues of the Gulf Country, where local politicians are either absent or incompetent. The main problem related to the administration of Desperance is that the town is unmapped, which casts doubts on who the legitimate owners of the land are as well as on the validity of the white people's territorial rights. Furthermore, the official register of the town containing the history of Desperance is destroyed by an arson attack. Secondly, the Gulf country is constantly threatened by illegal immigration which is perceived as a dangerous form of invasion. Thirdly, Desperance is hugely polluted because of the activity of a lead mine and several cargo ships which dump toxic waste and plastic materials into the sea. This scenario is further complicated by a social plague: the white community of Uptown feels threatened by petrol sniffers, aboriginal youths who sniff petrol vapours and go around the town outraging the public decency.

In her novel, Wright develops a social theme which inflamed the public debate on addiction to petrol fumes among Aboriginal children at the turn of the 21st century. First observed in the 1970s, petrol sniffing reached epidemic proportions across remote Aboriginal Australia in the early 2000s and it was related to social and cultural factors:

The causes of petrol sniffing are multiple and relate to each other in complex ways. Many are specific to individual communities and include: the cultural, family and social disruption that has resulted from dispossession and colonization; boredom and frustration; individual psychosocial factors, such as family breakdown and neglect; social isolation; peer group pressure; low self-esteem and the need for identity; lack of employment options; poverty; a statement of non-conformity; and an attraction to excitement and pleasure. (Mundy 7)



Uptown resembles one of those problematic socio-political contexts that Girard associates with the development of scapegoat mechanisms. In *The Scapegoat* (1982), he maintains that collective persecutions “usually take place in times of crisis” (Girard, *Scapegoat* 9) and that “rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which costs them nothing, or other people that seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons. The suspects are accused of a particular category of crimes” (10). Girard identifies the intended victims of collective persecutions as social marginal groups or individuals, since “Ethnic and religious minorities tend to polarise the majorities against themselves” (17). This form of polarisation is supported by mimetic mechanisms related to the stereotyping of the scapegoats:

Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful for the whole society. The stereotypical accusation justifies and facilitates this belief by ostensibly acting the role of mediator (15).

In a similar way to Girard’s persecutors, the mayor of Uptown incites the white citizens to put the blame for the murder of Gordie on the young Aboriginal petrol sniffers who live in car bodies outside Uptown, simply arguing that “you do not get this kind of trouble from the sons of Uptown” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 330). Those children are seen by Uptown’s population as “disgusting skin and bone creatures who looked like nobody fed them” (327) and their ragged appearance combined with the colour of their skin further justifies the charges against them. As a representative of a community in a situation of crisis, the mayor directs social hatred and panic against the weakest subjects, whom he identifies as the main threat to the safety of the dominant social group. He acts as a mediator of social hatred and his ability to contaminate the crowd with his prejudicial ideology can be read as a form of the mimetic contagion. The mob, in turn, incites the mayor, invoking the medieval punishment “hanged, drawn and quartered” (329), which Uptown’s citizens would like to see applied to the suspected murderers.

In Wright’s novel, not only are young Aboriginal characters exposed to the threat of family disruption, but they can also become the vectors of family breakdowns. Kevin, the youngest son of the Westside leader Normal Phantom, is one of the victims of those mimetic mechanisms which threaten the family and social integrity of the Pricklebush people. After being mentally damaged by an incident in the mine where he was illegally employed, he becomes a skinhead and starts walking around the house wearing a t-shirt with a swastika printed on it. He ridiculously impersonates a Nazi-hero bent on destroying his Eastside cousins, whom he considers responsible for his miserable condition. What he actually does is make a scapegoat of his relatives for the wrongdoings of others, namely the owners of the mine company, who employed Aboriginal diggers without safeguarding their working conditions.



The only Aboriginal character who is able to rebel against the prevarication of Uptown over the Pricklebush settlement is Will Phantom. Will is a keeper of authentic desire because he

strove not to be caught up in the butterfly net of thoughts which monopolised, hypnotised, and tantalised the eyes of the world, especially Pricklebush. He knew one thing and in this, he remained steadfast. He didn't want to grow old saying his role in life was to be a watcher in the long grass of Uptown (462).

The butterfly net Will is afraid of recalls how the Aboriginal people "have been forced to enclose within the imagined borders that have been forced upon us" (Wright, *Writing* 82). Those spaces are prisons of the mind Wright identifies with "current forms of oppression and relentless ongoing colonisation". The aim of the author is "to reach above the extremities of our capture" (81) giving voice to characters who have authentic ideas and desires.

However, Aboriginal subjects pursuing authentic desires are considered a threat to the dominant economic and sociocultural system, since they unveil the power imbalance and injustice which lay at the base of that system. Therefore, when facing a supporter of authentic desire, internal mediators turn into opponents. In Wright's novel the opponents are the authorities of Desperance: the mayor, the mine workers and the police, who represent on a smaller scale the institutions of western societies, namely governments, capitalistic enterprises and armies.

SEMANTIC ISOTOPIES AND INDIGENOUS VULNERABILITY

Semantic isotopies were described by Eco as reiterated terms, images and concepts which, through semantic coherence, lead to a determined interpretation of a text:

Indeed, isotopy refers almost always to constancy in going in a direction that a text exhibits when submitted to rules of interpretative coherence, even if the rule of coherence changes according to whether what is wanted is to individuate discursive or narrative isotopies, to disambiguate definite descriptions or sentences and produce coreferences, to decide what things certain individuals do, or to establish how many different stories the same deed by the same individuals can generate. (Eco 153)

Applying the concept of semantic isotopy to *Carpentaria*, we can ascertain the presence of a considerable range of onomastics, metaphors and comparisons which belong to the following semantic fields: predator-prey, master-slave, lie, violence, animal, monster, alien and waste. While Aboriginal characters are mainly portrayed as weak, harmless and hunted subjects, white characters connote power, threat and violence. For example, the name of the Uptown's policeman, Truthful, openly contrasts with the lies he conceals, such as his abuse of aboriginal girls. Another instance is the mayor Bruiser, whose name recalls the physical results of an act of violence, while his



“exposed brown teeth” resemble “those of a savage dog” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 334). To express how the white characters see the Indigenous ones and how the Aboriginal characters perceive themselves in situations of terror and violence, the author often uses terms and images belonging to the semantic fields of monster, alien, animal and waste.

The semantic isotopies which characterise Aboriginal petrol sniffers in *Carpentaria* pertain to such semantic fields. Firstly, they are described as skinny people “looking like zombies” (327). Then, when they are blamed for Gordie’s murder, the raging mob calls them “mongrels” (330); coherently, Bruiser describes Angel, the mother of one of the boys, as an animal unable to stop procreating, saying that “she goes and has them one after the other” (330). The three boys are put in jail and are so brutally beaten by Bruiser that they themselves start to think they are “not humans” (312). Kept in a Kafkaesque atmosphere in which “the waiting for justice seemed to be becoming the punishment itself” (312), they imagine themselves as “lizards in a zoo” (313). In addition, the policeman who is on the scene during the beating describes the tortured childish bodies as a “sickening image of cattle being slaughtered” (334). Through peculiar lexical choices, Wright shows how racial hatred gradually and increasingly obliterates the humanity of the Indigenous characters chosen as scapegoats, turning a blameworthy criminal act into something acceptable like the mechanical killing of livestock.

The Pricklebush connotes inhospitality and danger. There is a climax in the negative representation of this place, which is first described as a “foreign infestation on the edge of Desperance” and then as a “human dumping ground” (4). The semantic fields of animals and waste are revealed to be predominant in the characterisation of Aboriginal people and places. In particular, the representation of Aboriginal characters as human waste recurs throughout the novel. The passivity and fragility of their condition are emphasised by the repeated use of the verb ‘to dump’ to describe their being moved from one place to another. This verb with negative connotations sums up the story of the forced relocation of Aboriginal families to the margins of the civilisation by English settlers who claimed property rights on pastoral territories:

The descendants of the pioneer families, who claimed ownership of the town, said the Aboriginal was really not part of the town at all. Sure, they worked the dunny cart in the old days, carted the rubbish and swept the street. *Furthermore*, they said, *the Aboriginal was dumped here by the pastoralists, because they refused to pay the blackfella equal wages, even when it came in. Right on the edge of somebody else’s town, didn’t they?* Dumped the lot of them without any sign of lock, stock or barrel. (4, emphasis in original)

Wright provocatively presents the white characters’ distorted version of the history of Aboriginal Australia to underline how the dominant society labelled and marginalised the minority groups. The use of the verb ‘to dump’ related to Aboriginal characters appears in another passage, where an Aboriginal boy recounts an episode of sexual abuse against Aboriginal youths, which ended up with boys and girls being dumped on the road like rubbish: “The boys were dumped first. The young girls were dumped miles out of town for a bit of fun” (450).



Aboriginal characters are also perceived as human prey: women are described as powerless victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by the police and the mayor, whereas children are described as harmless pets threatened by violent masters, like the Phantom kids, who, terrified by Uptown cops, “cringed like the dogs, with their backs flat against the walls, trying to attain a powerless invisibility” (197). Visibility and vulnerability are closely related throughout the novel, which also evokes the tragedy of the *Stolen Generations*.⁵ Uptown’s white bartender Lloyd rejects his mixed-descent son “as the ‘abominable’ taboo product” (Renes 53) of his relationship with an Indigenous young woman. The poor girl tries to make the baby’s dark skin invisible by wrapping him up in every season, and locks herself in a dark room hoping that her skin will become lighter. Although the child is not taken away from his mother’s family, he is object of racist discourses that remind us of the eugenic policy of the *Stolen Generations*. Even the boy’s uncle, in order to please Uptown’s white citizens, speaks about “miscegenation” and “interbreeding” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 331), maintaining that Aboriginal women often try to improve the Indigenous race by obtaining white semen through deception. The son born from such deception is called “a snake” (331) and “[a] funny sort of material to be mixing up in the gene pool” (332). Once again, Indigenous people are characterised in terms pertaining to the realms of animals and freaks.

Peculiar and meaningful lexical choices are noticeable also in the depiction and characterisation of industrial sites such as the Gurfurrit lead mine. Will Phantom identifies the social, environmental and cultural threat represented by the mine, which he considers the heart of Uptown’s corrupt socio-political system. Kristiina Varrone points out the “abstract, impersonal, inhuman, non-human” (Varrone 73) nature of the mine, which she reads as a symbol of the white society’s indiscriminate tendency to exploit natural resources until exhaustion. Partly disagreeing with this point, I maintain that semantic isotopies in this case converge to the representation of the mine as an anthropomorphic creature and predator. In fact, Wright uses various personifications to describe the mine, in order to underline that, despite seeming a nonhuman economic force, it embodies the interests and voracity of specific social groups: a lot of Aboriginal people abandoned their home place because “The mine bought off the lot of them” (Wright, *Carpentaria* 98). Will asks himself “Would the mine want to kill Elias?” (379) and then he reflects upon the fact that “If a man was to survive, he had to first think of what the mine was capable of doing to him” (386). Furthermore, a choral narrative voice blames the mine for “scraping around our land and our Native title” (408).

⁵ Between 1910 and the 1970s, many half-caste Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were removed from their families and placed in institutions or fostered by white families to be assimilated into white society. Assimilation was based on a belief of white superiority and black inferiority, and presumed that “full-blood” Indigenous peoples would naturally die out. These generations of uprooted and displaced children became known as the *Stolen Generations*. For more details see Broome 1982, Read 2006 and Hanish 2011.



CONCLUSIONS

In my article, I showed how the narrative theory combined with text semantics can be applied to Indigenous postcolonial literature to interpret character relationships and to analyse the representation of the vulnerability of a minority culture in an era of political, social and environmental crisis. In my investigation, I focused on how the risks related to cultural assimilation are represented at a textual level. To carry out my analysis, I drew mainly on Eco's concept of semantic isotopies, Girard's mimetic theory of desire and scapegoating, and Price-Mars' ethnographic studies. In *Carpentaria*, Wright shows how mimetic mechanisms related to dispossession and assimilation policies undermine the stability and cohesion of various Indigenous communities in a world dominated by power imbalance and slow violence. Furthermore, the novel depicts the social and psychological dynamics which put marginalised ethnic groups at risk of being stereotyped and used as a scapegoat.

The notions of bovarism, mimetic desire and scapegoating are rooted in and pertain to European literary theory. Therefore, the adoption of these concepts to investigate an Indigenous work of literature could be seen as a form of Western-centric misreading and appropriation. However, I maintain that mimetic mechanisms are at the base of a colonisation of the mind and racist stereotyping that Wright aims at exposing and challenging throughout the novel. As Wright points out, "*Carpentaria* imagines the cultural mind as sovereign and in control, while freely navigating through the known country of colonialism to explore the possibilities of other worlds" (Wright, *Writing* 84). Depicting the risks and pernicious effects of mimetic mechanisms in a postcolonial reality and using thematic isotopies to underline how Indigenous people are continuously marginalised, scrutinised, blamed and subjugated by white Australians, *Carpentaria* opens to a contrapuntal reading that shows the different results of assimilation and resistance.

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