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Adam Shoemaker

1 In a searching and powerful essay published in late 2020, Alexis Wright asks the reader to think seriously about time, place, and reparation in Australia. In it, she offers a superb tribute to the famous Australian Indigenous activist, poet, artist and educator, Oodgeroo, on the centenary of her birth. Wright argues that truthful recognition of First Nations Australia – of its people and their aspirations – should be a brightly-burning priority. And she exemplifies through her own writing the potential of narrative to transform cultures, for those who have the willingness to listen to the land and to learn from Country.

2 The essay is cleverly and poignantly entitled, "In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?" And woven into its first page is the understated comment, "We go back a long time as story makers, story tellers, and story keepers" (2020, 1). This is a seemingly simple observation. However, in the case of a masterful and variegated work like Alexis Wright's 2006 novel *Carpentaria*, things are not that simple. Nor should they be.

3 In her complex work Wright underscores a number of key features: Country, time, and story. Those same issues underpinned the work of Oodgeroo (then known as Kath Walker) in her earliest days of poetry-creation. In fact, I argue that Oodgeroo's approach to story-making and story-keeping lies at the core of her creative enterprise. I also maintain that the process of thinking about Oodgeroo as a subtle and accomplished creator and keeper of stories helps us to think about those same attributes in the work of Alexis Wright.

4 To cite an example, in one of Oodgeroo's most poignant poems, "The Past," she writes:

> Let no one say the past is dead.
> The past is all about us and within...
> Deep chair and electric radiator
> Are but since yesterday,
> But a thousand thousand camp fires in the forest
> Are in my blood.

> Let none tell me the past is wholly gone.
> Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
> Of all the race years that have moulded me. (2008, 86)

5 Yesterday. Today. Millennia ago – and today again. This time-shifting, flexible and imagistic approach conjures up the essence of storytelling in these signal words of Oodgeroo, just as these are core to the envisioning of *Carpentaria*.

6 This reading connection also has to do with the idea of power. This concept is central to *Carpentaria* (via the power of the seasons; of movement through the environment; of dreams of destruction). Despite the putative borderlines of "the novel" in *Carpentaria* Alexis Wright pushes beyond the pages of the book: she enables her characters to live and breathe her distinctive approach to story-making. In turn, this provides them (and the reader) with a form of respite and protection from the intercultural assault of non-Aboriginal people.

7 Prominent contemporary Indigenous leaders, such as Noel Pearson, have described this intercultural gulf in incommensurable terms. For example, in his 2021 book *Mission* he writes:

> Classical Aboriginal Australian thinking was very different to European thinking – so different that European concepts of 'religion', 'law', 'economy' and so on are of limited use to describe Aboriginal culture – and classical Aboriginal concepts are very hard to translate into European languages. (426)

The genius of both Oodgeroo and Wright is that they have both – in their own distinctive ways – bridged that apparent divide through an unrelenting creative emphasis on the ownership of story (as well as of land and language). Independent storytelling really matters. As Oodgeroo once said to the Indigenous novelist Philip McLaren "It is by bold trust in our storytelling abilities that we win our readers" (quoted in Philip McLaren "*Maang; bagaan di* (A message for my elder sister)," in Shoemaker 1994, 25). When one expands this "bold trust" over time, the making, telling and keeping of such stories becomes even more resonant.

8 Australian Indigenous people have, of course, been thriving in the continent of Australia for a very, very "long time," in an unbroken relationship with land, climate and people dating back well over 60,000 years. Therefore, Wright's triad of emphases on the form and practice of "story" could not be more significant. I argue that, taken together, the three terms emphasised above – regarding story-making, story-telling and story-keeping – provide an enduring creative and inspirational framework for Alexis Wright's work. They also point strongly towards keys aspects of Australian Indigenous perception, belief, and relational achievement. As Sandra Phillips and Alison Ravenscroft have put it:

> By "story" we don't mean only story in the sense of fictional narratives, although it can mean this too. We see story as that which holds knowledge and assists in its production, dissemination and understanding. This is an approach to storytelling as a practice through which knowledge is both generated and carried. In this, we take our lead from contemporary writers – from Alexis Wright for instance and how she figures Indigenous story. In *Carpentaria*, Alexis Wright doesn't only write story; she writes about story. Story is figured as that which carries knowledge of country, of the stories the country writes and the stories that are told to it. (2016, 107)

I freely acknowledge that, in addressing the complexity and marvellous achievement of *Carpentaria*, I have neither the right nor the intention to speak on behalf of the author or her work. However, this observation on the primacy and relationality of "story" is one which is so compelling, so rich and so important to global readership that it

necessitates the emphasis placed on it in this paper. As Phillips and Ravenscroft continue:

> Story includes knowledge of the seasons and tides, the weather and how it changes over millennia. Story is knowledge of the past and present but it is also sometimes speculative... Seen in this way, Indigenous story holds knowledge about contemporary Australian racialised discourses, colonialism and neo-colonialism; it holds knowledge about the bodies of humans and other living things, and the relations between them. Indeed, stories make and hold these relations one with another. (2016, 107)

9 Likewise, Eugenia Flynn emphasises the multivocal, independent and communitarian dimensions of First Nations works in Australia. She illustrates the fact that an appreciation of Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and of speaking together are absolutely core to the future of the nation: "Most Indigenous works typically hold a place of autonomy, viewing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities as the primary audience and thereby creating authentic works that can then attract a wider audience" (2016). I echo that view here. I concentrate upon the fictional world created by Alexis Wright in *Carpentaria,* as well as upon the enveloping socio-political world into which she has written (and will continue to write) her work. I attempt to explicate how Wright moves from three seemingly simple foundational principles to open up a whole universe of possibilities: possibilities for race relations, for equity and justice, and for a reimagined Australia.

10 I believe that this is the challenge which Alexis Wright has laid down before the reader of *Carpentaria*: to understand what these three foundational concepts relating to "story" mean, and to appreciate them on the deepest level. Wright invites us to go on the journey. To see where it leads – to and from the past. For story-making, storytelling, and story-keeping are so fundamental, so essential to First Peoples in Australia that it is a mark of respect to respond to the author's invitation.

11 That said, this is not a straightforward reading journey. As noted earlier, time moves, switches, channels and changes in the pages of *Carpentaria*. Often, in the writer's universe, that which was now is – and always shall be. Violence in the present (such as the scourge of Aboriginal deaths in custody) exists side-by-side with historical violence on the frontier. Time moves both slowly and rapidly. As Jeanine Leane has written of *Carpentaria*:

> There are few familiar moorings for readers whose ethnocentric education presupposes that literature and history rely on inherently coherent and linear narratives. People with time and timeless people inhabit the space of the Gulf. Time and timelessness, history, memory and the sacred are central concerns of *Carpentaria.* Representations of deep and shallow time, notions of cosmos and chaos, history and memory, myth and reason are juxtaposed in Wright's narrative [...]. It collapses time and space to honour Aboriginal past, present, memory, future and the sense of collectively experienced time. (2015, 151–52)

Sharing stories in this way can be simultaneously straightforward and, at times, devilishly difficult. Despite its poetic beauty and its fantastical imagery *Carpentaria* is not "easy" to read. That is an incentive to learn, to appreciate, to grow. In other words, *Carpentaria* is an invitation to learn about "story" (in terms of both reading and reception) as never before. In order to do so, one has to look in more depth at the first of the author's three key principles: that of *story-making*.

12 Wright's novel is a phantasmagoria of different voices – representing oral history as well as the oral present and future. It lives and breathes characters whose points of

view shift and morph in league with the tropical seasons and the heaving, creative land in which the novel is set. Its characters are entirely memorable, whether they are the murderous and venal mayor Bruiser, the toughly resistant Angel Day, or the journeying and questing protagonist Norm Phantom.

13 As engaging as they may be (and as searching, each in their own way), it could be argued that it is the Australian Indigenous concept and reality of Country which is the leading character of Wright's novel. This applies on a number of levels: honouring Country; speaking with, and listening to, Country; being led by Country; protecting Country and caring for Country: these are all core to *Carpentaria*.

14 The book is not just about the land as such. Rather, it breathes (and literally inspires) the land and waterways, the mudflats and mangroves; the dusty scrub; the coastal fringe where saltwater and freshwater intermingle. The novel may be located in the Gulf Country borderlands between Australia's Northern Territory and Queensland but that latter-day geography is secondary. The novel is in *Waanyi* country and is imbued with *Waanyi* ways of seeing, knowing and believing – of True Country.

15 In that way, even the term "leading character" which I mentioned above does not do justice to the land of the Pricklebush mob. The land – Country – makes its own story and speaks it through the people of the land, and in its own right.

16 Consider the magisterial opening page of *Carpentaria*: "The ancestral serpent, a creature larger than storm clouds, came down from the stars, laden with its own creative enormity [...]. It came down these billions of years ago, to crawl on its heavy belly, all around the wet clay soils in the Gulf of Carpentaria" (Wright 2006, 1). The serpent creates through movement and generous intent. It excavates tunnels; it invites the sea-water to swarm "in a frenzy of tidal waves" (1); it creates the enormous, sinewy river systems of the Gulf. It is a serpent which creates through, and on behalf of, the world. And it envelops the people: "They say its being is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and it is attached to the lives of the river people like skin" (2).

17 This points to the creative genius of Wright's novel. The rivers animate and they destroy: they flood, they recede; they provide life and they extinguish it. The power I noted above is natural – not human. To cite a memorable example, when the Gurfurritt mine catches fire and its workers are trying to escape in a welter of panic, the land is reanimated:

> The yellow-haired man tripped. Instantly, his head was split open at the temple by a rock that had, up to that moment, lain on the ground, embedded in soil that was thousands of seasons old, untouched by humankind since the ancestor had placed it in this spot, as if it had planned to do this incredible thing. (2006, 405)

18 This says it all. The land tells its own story, in its own time, in its own prescient and pregnant way.

19 And the river – the flow of lifeblood – has its own key rhythm. As Wright puts it: "It takes a particular kind of knowledge to go with [...] the movement of water as it seasonally shifts its tracks according to its own mood" (3). Hence, story-making is the creation of epic, of reverence. The author's skill is that of being able to liberate the words of the land so effectively that her authorial voice becomes collective – rather than individual – in approach.

20 This ushers in the second key point in Wright's triad. It is that *Carpentaria* is about *story-telling* in the most artful of ways.

21 What does this mean? That the plot is not a ready-made, beaten track to follow. That the narrative is replete with the unexpected, and quick shifts of time, place, voice and tradition. The reader has to be prepared to go on a pilgrimage with this book; to travel the mudflats, eddies and sand-dunes of *Waanyi* country; to float in the Gulf of Carpentaria through both calm and storm; and to feel the human suffering in the god-forsaken outback town of Desperance. This requires careful, open, slow, reading and listening.

22 As the formidably talented novelist Tara June Winch expressed it in her June 2020 review of *Carpentaria* as an "unmissable" text:

> Don't be intimidated by 519 pages; it really couldn't have been trimmed – this is the whole truthful story of the Pricklebush mob set in Gulf of Carpentaria on the author's Waanyi country. [...] *Carpentaria* will change you, as long as you have the guts to read all the way through.

As Winch goes on to analyse, the entire novel is a shape-shifter of a work: "Dream and reality blend, and time bends, and everything occurred even if it never happened."

23 However, as Winch sees it, this is no obstacle to our appreciation or understanding of the text – quite the reverse. Instead, it is a testament to the fact that *Carpentaria* is a novel whose ambitiousness merits open, respectful listening in one's mind's eye. The total picture of the book is frequently one of scale and urgency. The narrative focuses on a land of power (as in the seasonal cyclones which visit the coast) but also on a land of vulnerability (because of the human-made scourge of extractive mining). It is necessary to see both the threat of the Anthropocene and also the strength of all of the eons of First Nations time which have preceded it.

24 Speaking of both Wright and *Carpentaria*, Winch summarises: "I think few have really *read*, read her" (2020). And in order to do so, one has to hold a mirror up to one's own perspective as a reader.

25 If this is an oral-story-turned-epic-novel, just how important is it to consider one's own reading position? It could not be more crucial. One's cultural biases, linguistic abilities, gender, levels of privilege and personal heritage all come into play. This is not to say that non-Indigenous readers have no hope of accessing this book – they clearly can. But the *way in which* they access it is different; less host than metaphorical guest at the table. And a clear precondition for a deeper understanding of *Carpentaria* is a willingness to learn more about First Nations peoples' views of both humanity and nature.

26 This is reminiscent of the stance adopted by J.E. Chamberlin in his landmark 2003 book, *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories*? In it, Chamberlin relates an apposite example quoted by the Kiowa First Nations writer, N. Scott Momaday, the author of *House Made of Dawn*, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* and many other works. As Chamberlin relates the story, Momaday emphasised to him that "a traditional Indian view of nature involves bringing people and nature into alignment" (2003, 133). According to Momaday, the reasons for this were two-fold: "first, to achieve some kind of moral order" and second (and just as importantly) "to enable a person 'not only to see what is really there, but also to see what is *really* there'" (133). The synchronicity with Winch's point about reading, and "really reading" *Carpentaria* is striking.

27 So story-telling is a vital element of *Carpentaria*, beyond doubt. But story-receiving, that is, truly listening to and hearing the story being related with a disposition of openness and respectful curiosity, is equally crucial. Both are pivotal to *Carpentaria*. They liberate an understanding of the characters in the novel as well as an appreciation of the book's critical reception in the wider world. This is particularly relevant as *Carpentaria* has been translated and published in a number of different languages worldwide (including Polish, Mandarin and French). If stories can be more migratory than birds, then it is crucial to consider the nuances of the novel's international linguistic reception as well as the rhythms of its home language.

28 The third component of Wright's triad of approaches is *story-keeping*. This is fascinating and crucial: it pertains to the ownership and custodianship of land, sea, air – and narrative. In her 2020 essay Wright referred to this as the "sovereignty of story-holding" (3); a core creative and ethical concern for First Nations authors. Many postcolonial scholars have attempted to come to terms with this concern by posing a suite of pertinent questions. Who owns text – and textuality? Who controls representation – and in whose voice is the text articulated? Whose narrative is dominant and whose approach to narratology can unlock the work? These sorts of issues have preoccupied many non-Indigenous critics who have considered *Carpentaria* to date, whether they have adopted a psychosocial, an environmental, an apocalyptic or a transnational perspective on Wright's work (see for instance Ng 2018). I maintain that such approaches – as valuable as they are – only go so far. I argue that, ultimately, they do not fully connect with the underpinning energy and art of First Nations story-telling and story-keeping which is exemplified in *Carpentaria*.

29 I cannot claim an authoritative speaking position in this regard. However, as a respectful listener I have observed a pattern which has been growing in acuity, strength and volubility over the past fifty years. It is a pattern which, in Australia, was given significant public expression in the 1960s in the transformative poetry of Oodgeroo Noonuccal (writing as Kath Walker when she published her first volumes of verse). It is an inherently plural listening stance and speaking position – one in which the land and its people are given voice through the Indigenous author.

30 Oodgeroo evoked many things in her poetry: pride, sorrow, humour, togetherness, political *nous*, extraordinary talent, philosophical insight and First Nations patriotism. She achieved so much, and so enduringly, with her initial poetry collections, *We Are Going* and *The Dawn is at Hand*. Aside from the very wide readership which she gained, Oodgeroo devoted herself to the revolutionary power of both education and writing from the earliest days of her very public career.

31 For example, her work as one of the leaders of the "Vote Yes" campaign in the Australian federal referendum of 1967 to include a recognition of First Nations people in the Australian constitution – which was carried with unprecedented support – is well-known (see Cochrane 1994). She was always a revolutionary thinker and an incredibly talented, committed and gifted leader. Oodgeroo clearly was a poetic radical just as much as she was a First Nations hero and a political activist. But she always resisted these epithets and externally-applied labels. Her view was as succinct as it was clear: the voices of her written work were plural; its inspiration collective. As she stated: "I see my books as the voice of the Aboriginal people, not my own personal voice. They dictate what I write" (quoted in Shoemaker 2004, 186).

32 She continued, in relation to *We Are Going*:

> I felt poetry would be the breakthrough for the Aboriginal people because they were storytellers and song-makers [...]. It was more of a book of their voices that I was trying to bring out [...]. I'm putting their voices on paper [...]. I didn't consider it my book, it was the people. (quoted in Shoemaker 2004, 186)

There could not be a more explicit argument for Indigenous story-keeping than this one.

33 Fascinatingly, there is a strong and direct connection between Oodgeroo's view of the collective sovereignty of "story" and Alexis Wright's perspectives on First Nations authorship and authority. Speaking with Omar Sakr in 2015, Wright stated that:

> I always credit my own people as teaching me everything I know [...] they were my university, really, even though I've been to university and I've studied a whole lot of things. And it grew from there where they wanted me too – they were teaching me to listen and [...] to have respect. (Wright 2015)

Oodgeroo and Alexis Wright are sisters in this struggle and are remarkably aligned in their views. This has real ramifications for authorship, authority and reading praxis.

34 To take this further, in *Carpentaria*, what the land – or Country – says about the scarifying degradation of the Gurfurritt mine speaks volumes. This inspires a collective, irreverent First Nations voice in the novel which is as biting as it is penetrating. And it applies to the entire multi-generational cast of *Carpentaria.*

35 For instance, Will Phantom exemplifies the people's voice of radical opposition to the mine. This is because of its environmental vandalism, its dispossession of people, its avarice and its killing of Country. The Gurfurritt mine is a symbol of greed. It is the enemy of the Pricklebush mob. And it is a malevolent voice of power and threat to nature. In Wright's words:

> This was kingfisher country. A lone, deep-sea blue kingfisher dashed across the sky in fright. Will watched its path across to the hills. Its flight was a part of the larger ancestral map which he read fluently. He does not have to speak to ask the spirits to keep the birds away from the mine. *See! Mine waste everywhere*. The grounds were covered in contaminated rubble. *Make them go back to the river.* (2006, 394)

This is vintage *Carpentaria.* The dominant motif is animistic – the kingfisher – but the spirit map of the passage is both "larger" and "ancestral" (both of which are key concepts). The creator spirits speak, hear and suffer damage. Their creatures are under attack – and so are they. Meanwhile, the "bloody radical" renegade Will Phantom acts as an instrument of land rights and opposition to development. At the same time, he becomes the symbol of entirely logical resistance.

36 The linkages between this core episode in *Carpentaria* and the lived experience of Australian Indigenous people outside the pages of the book are uncanny. Recent events in Western Australia remind us that the curtain between fictional imagination and lived reality can be a very thin and transparent one. This was brought into stark relief in May 2020 when the Australian mining company Rio Tinto destroyed a cave in Juukan Gorge in the Hammersley Ranges – located about sixty kilometres from Mount Tom Price in Western Australia. This was despite the significance of the cave as "the only inland site in Australia to show signs of continual human occupation through the last Ice Age" (Wahlquist 2020).

37 The connection between this wanton destruction and the culture which it (quite literally) exploded was profound. This sacred cave site was the location which had produced a "4,000-year-old length of plaited human hair, woven together from strands from the heads of several different people, which DNA testing revealed were the direct

ancestors of Puuntu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura traditional owners living today" (Wahlquist 2020).

38 Once again, the keeping of story – past, present and future—is inescapable. There is little doubt that if Oodgeroo had been alive in 2020 she would have been protesting the attack on the Juukan mine as strenuously as anyone in the nation; politically, creatively and in a Country-led way.

39 As noted above, the strength of the bridge between Oodgeroo and Alexis Wright was even more explicitly reinforced in December 2020. In that month Wright published a magnificent essay entitled "In times like these, what would Oodgeroo do?" (2020). It was a wonderfully timely and highly significant piece. Wright's essay is a landmark tribute:

> When I read Oodgeroo's poems, I delight in her extraordinary creative powers and I can see how she celebrated Aboriginal people as the inheritors of a heroic culture, still fighting and surviving, as we have done since time immemorial. (2020, 1)

40 Both Oodgeroo and Alexis Wright were and are partners in that inheritance. Like Oodgeroo, Wright is a story-teller of outstanding talent. The quality of her written *oeuvre* is only matched by the excellence of her commitment and creative generosity. In her stand-out essay, Wright makes points about narrative which apply equally to Oodgeroo and herself:

> We practise many forms of storytelling every day. We have always told and sung stories through adherence to our religious law, and practised a highly sophisticated writing system, encoding thoughts to preserve important stories of responsibility, passed down through the ages to teach new generations to care for this fragile continent. (2020, 2)

Yes, yes and yes. The key connection which Wright draws between story-keeping and personal and societal responsibility is a remarkable one. And when Wright reflects on Oodgeroo's corpus of work she also underlines, in a self-reflexive way, her own convictions about the value, purpose and trajectory of works like *Carpentaria*. She observes that Oodgeroo's poems demonstrate "that we did not need to mimic other people's literary ideas, or be assimilated into Western paradigms of thinking about what was 'real' English literature" (2020, 3).

41 The same can clearly be said about *Carpentaria* – and of Alexis Wright's ever-increasing creative achievements. In her best-known novel, Wright redefines genres. She interpolates multiple voices and styles. She transmigrates from fantasy to symbolism; from magical interpretation to traditional oral storytelling; from critique to political satire; all the while incorporating independent vernacular language and poetic inspiration. It is a *magnum opus* and it is unique in its impulses.

42 Like Oodgeroo, Wright stakes a claim to "self-governing" (2020, 4) rather than derivative literature. Like her, she writes with Indigenous (textual and political) "sovereignty" in mind and "on our own terms" (2020, 4). Like Oodgeroo, she knows that "story can be a weapon" (2020, 2) but also that aggression is not the only key to progress and enlightenment. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Alexis Wright has emulated Oodgeroo's inspiration in simplistic fashion. While it is true that she has honoured and revered her literary Elder's work, she has also extended Oodgeroo's achievement in important ways.

43 As Wright puts it: "I want to build a literary framework based upon the ancient storytelling tradition that comes from this country" (2020, 5). And, writing in 2018, she characterised the dimensions of this epic intent:

> The everyday contemporary Indigenous story world is epic [...] I feel comfortable in saying that our story world follows the original pattern of the great ancient sagas that defined the laws, customs and values of our culture. The oral tradition that produced these stories continued in the development of the epic stories of historical events, and combining ancient and historical stories, resounds equally as loudly in the new stories of our times. (218)

With *Carpentaria*, she has clearly forged that path.

44 Wright has gone further than any other contemporary Australian novelist to really explore the making, telling and keeping of First Nations stories in a wholly transformative and original way. In the broad sweep of *Carpentaria*, there are scores of issues addressed. All of them have continuing historical, contemporary and future relevance – from climate change and Protecting Country; to Deaths in Custody; to Land Rights; to the language of diverse respect; to the questions of gendered violence; and to the rights of children. But, in the end, it all comes back to Country.

45 Her outstanding legacy is one of relational stories told of, by and for the land. *Carpentaria* is – like First Nations knowledge – "always already" and a book which is in time, for time and for all time.

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ABSTRACTS

This paper revolves around the core principles of story-creation as defined by First Peoples in Australia. It focusses on the many dimensions of this distinctive narrative approach in Alexis Wright's magnum opus, *Carpentaria* (2005). Indigenous Australian notions of time, place and story-making are crucial to the argument. Finally, the paper interrogates the links between the poetic and story-telling oeuvre of the famous Indigenous Australian leader and poet of the 1960s and 1970s – Oodgeroo – and the masterful novelistic approach to story-telling exemplified by *Carpentaria*.

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Keywords: Alexis Wright, story-telling, story-making, Carpentaria, story-keeping, Indigenous Australia, Oodgeroo

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Adam Shoemaker is Vice-Chancellor of Victoria University in Melbourne and conducts his research in the area of Indigenous literature and culture. A former Commonwealth Scholar, he has been a visiting professor at the University of Antwerp and the University of Toulouse. His major contributions to the field of Australian Indigenous writing include co-editing *Paperbark* (University of Queensland Press, 1990), publishing the first comprehensive analysis of Aboriginal writing, *Black Words, White Page* (third edition, Australian National University Press, 2004) and editing (with Stephen Muecke) *David Unaipon's Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* (The Miegunyah Press, 2001). His French-language works include (also with Stephen Muecke) *Les Aborigènes d'Australie* (Gallimard, 2002).