What can we learn about politics from
contemporary Indigenous Australian novels?

At the start of this address, I acknowledge that I am speaking from Bidjigal land and pay respect to the past and present elders of this land. I also want to acknowledge the dedicated and imaginative work of Sung-Young Kim, who has led his colleagues at Macquarie University and in the APSA Executive through the most difficult circumstances to bring about this Conference. Finally, I want to assure you that in delivering this 'Past President's Address' I am not trying to establish a new APSA tradition. This is a postponed 'President's Address' from the Conference that did not take place last year and I sincerely hope it will be a unique event.

The APSA President's address is an opportunity for reflection on 'the discipline' and the challenges that it faces. Our current President Helen Sullivan presented an incisive and inspiring speech of this kind at the opening of the Conference on Monday, urging political studies academics to develop new ideas to respond to critical challenges of our time, explaining where we might start the task of 'saving the world' and pointing to some exemplars. I anticipated that Helen might do something like this, so I had to develop a different approach to the discipline for today's address. Thinking about this led me to return to consideration of literary fiction as a source of writing about politics, and particularly Australian politics. Literary fiction often challenges the habitual assumptions we bring to politics. It is a source of challenges that we generally ignore in our professional teaching and research.

The starting point for this address occurred 40 years ago in a small Government Honours seminar at the University of Queensland led by Di Zetlin and Don Fletcher. The student participants included four future politics academics: myself, Rae Wear, Geoff Levey and Ian Cook. I'd like to dedicate this address to Ian, a great friend and

intellectual colleague who worked in Politics at Murdoch University for most of his academic career and who died earlier his year from cancer.

The topic of the seminar was 'Politics and Literature' and for me it opened up new ways of thinking about politics but also new ways of reading novels, short stories, plays and poetry. I've periodically returned to politics and literature in my teaching and research career—most persistently in the late 1990s and early 2000s when Don Fletcher and I wrote but could not get published a book manuscript on politics in contemporary Australian political fiction.

That experience suggested that I needed to return to safer, more publishable forms of academic research and writing on Australian politics, which I duly did. In an indication of the continuing marginality of literary fiction to Australian political studies, better scholars than Don and me haven't succeeded in establishing a secure place for fiction as source for understanding and interpreting Australian politics. Articles on politics and fiction or in fiction have certainly appeared in academic journals but they have been invariably written from literary studies or cultural studies perspectives. This pattern has had two consequences. First, a looser sense of 'the political' than that generally used in political studies has prevailed. Second, most political studies academics do not read these journals and so remain unaware of the potential for approaching politics through literature. Almost no one in the world of Australian political studies has taken up the suggestion made by Geoff Stokes in the mid-1990s that a key source of theorising about Australian politics can be found in our country's literary fiction (Stokes 1994).

One recent exception to this silence is John Uhr and Shaun Crowe's 2020 book *Novel Politics: Studies in Australian Political Fiction*, published by Melbourne University Press. In *Novel Politics*, they explore political themes in the major works of six Australian authors, three from the nineteenth century and three from the early twenty-first

century. Paraphrasing the left wing American literary critic and activist Irving Howe, Uhr and Crowe (2020: 2) identify *political* novels as '… emerg[ing] when people no longer take society for granted, but instead see it as a field of conflicting ideas or ideologies—including the ideal sort of society that readers should be supporting and promoting'. Political novels thus present narrative descriptions of political, economic and social relations and critiques of them that point more or less explicitly to a better set of arrangements.

By these criteria, the three contemporary Indigenous novels on which I will focus today—Waanyi writer Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* (2006), Bundjalung writer Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* (2018) and Wiradjuri writer Tara June Winch's *The Yield* (2019)—are all political novels. Wright's *Carpentaria*, as its title suggests, is set in far north Gulf country in Queensland. Much of the novel revolves around conflicts between Aboriginal leaders Normal (Norm) Phantom, Joseph Midnight and Mozzie Fishman over who has claim to custodianship of the land and what responsibilities this entails. These conflicts stretch back hundreds of years. Relatedly, these Aboriginal leaders and others grapple with the presence and effects on their land of the settlement town of Desperance and the Gurrfurrit mining company, with their associated whte ideologies of economic progress, liberal democracy and Christianity.

In Lukashenko's *Too Much Lip*, set in Bundjalung country in northern New South Wales, the ideological dynamics are similar. Members of the Salter family, brought together by the death of 'Pop' Owen Addison, debate and enact different responses to the imminent destruction of 'Ava's island' in a local river that is 'the most sacred place' (Lukashenko 2018: 30) to them. The potential destroyers are a multi-national consortium that intends to build and operate a prison on the site, backed by the local council and the state government, with the promise of jobs and prosperity. A current

of conflict between Indigenous and Christian worldviews is also present in the Salter family's history.[1]

Winch's *The Yield*, set in part of a large area of imagined Indigenous country of Ngurambang in central New South Wales, foregrounds clashes of religious ideology. One way in which the novel does this is through the historical character of the Reverend Ferdinand Greenleaf, whose well-meaning but failed attempt to establish Prosperous Mission for 'the Native inhabitants' (Winch 2019: 69) near the town of Massacre Plains confronts both the traditional local Indigenous cosmology and the economic expectations of the government, who take over the Mission and force its inhabitants into 'unpaid labour' (Winch 2019: 75). The ways in which Christian and Indigenous worldviews are compatible and in conflict is a theme that recurs in Albert 'Poppy' Gondowindi's dictionary of his people's language throughout *The Yield*. Intersecting this theme, the contemporary events in the novel describe conflict over the looming loss of the Gondowindi's family home to pave the way for a tin mine. Against the mine's promise of 'A. Jobs. B. Jobs. C. Jobs.' (Winch 2019: 89), August Gondowindi sets out to find the evidence that will convince white authorities of her family's cultural claim to the land.

So all three novels fit Howe's definition of political novels as those in which characters deploy conflicting ideas and ideologies that pointing to the potential future societies. But adopting Howe's approach might be seen as too restrictive—too focused on novels as the bearers of competing ideologies—to capture fully the politics of these (and other) novels. An alternative approach—one which includes more novels as contributing to the interpretation of politics and doing so in a wider variety of ways—has been developed by Maureen Whitebrook:

[1] For example, in the Salter family's loss of traditional language with the education of Granny Ruth by the Church (Lukashenko 2018: 105).

> Works of literature can confirm or contradict, limit or expand the findings of political science. And in significant cases, literature goes beyond the academic study of politics to suggest implications and consequences that relate formal study to the wider world experienced by the citizen. Thus literature provides the basis for a kind of alternative theory and, by exercising the imagination, allows the student of politics to gain some comprehension of the effects of politics on the lives of individuals and community (1983: 13).

In addition to these 'effects of politics', effects which might be understood as the various political structures acting on individuals and groups, novels can also represent the opportunities for and motivations behind political agency:

> …novels offer an enhanced understanding of matters of concern to political theory by way of their depiction of moral complexity, possibilities of choice, the ways that theory works out in practice—for 'real individuals', as represented by characters in novels (Whitebrook 1995: 29).

It is this broader approach that I take to the reading of as *Carpentaria*, *Too Much Lip* and *The Yield* as political novels.

I could have chosen to focus on any number of other novels, short stories, poems, lyrics, plays and screenplays by contemporary Indigenous writers such as Kim Scott, Ellen van Neervan, Tony Birch, Ali Cobby Eckermann, Meyne Wyatt, Evelyn Araluen, Samuel Wagan Watson and Briggs. My rationale for choosing the three novels I have is not scientific. They are not intended as some kind of random and representative sample. All three have, however, been extensively reviewed, all won the Miles Franklin Literary Award and, partly as a consequence, all enjoyed a wide readership in Australia, so they are a good place to start.

So what can 'we' learn from these novels about politics? Asking this question begs the question of who 'we' are. As a white Settler reader, the way in which I can read

these novels will be different from the ways in which Indigenous readers can read them. Despite the apparent confidence of some Settler critics that the 'Western literary form' of novels like Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* invites all readers to enter fully into their worlds (Gleeson-White 2013: 8; see also Devlin-Glass 2008), greater circumspection seems warranted. As Alison Ravenscroft argues:

> From such a 'white' subject position, from the position that *Carpentaria's* white critics take up for instance, we can be tempted to approach another's knowledge as if it were always and in all ways accessible. … [W]hite critics of this Indigenous-signed text … have mistaken the meanings they can make of it for truth, for complete knowledge, for 'reality' itself' (Ravenscroft 2010: 198).

Circumspection among Settler readers about what they can learn and know might apply particularly to the Indigenous languages used in the novels, as well as to the traditional law, cultural experiences and cosmological beliefs that are central to their narratives.[2] Examples include the entries in Albert 'Poppy' Gondowindi's dictionary in *The Yield*, Kerry Salter's encounters with her ancestor Grandad Chinky Joe and with totemic animals in *Too Much Lip*, and the 'erasure' (Wright 2006: 96) of the township of Desperance and the voyages of Norm and Will Phantom in *Carpentaria*.

The same circumspection applies to any statements I make about what we can learn about politics from Indigenous novels. My interpretive voice is not authoritative and I do not want to join what Alexis Wright has called 'the bandwagon of academics writing and giving advice on Aboriginal issues', or engage in 'telling stories on behalf

[2] Ravenscroft (2010: 198) asserts 'the necessary estrangement of [Carpentaria's] white readers' in relation to understanding these elements of the novels. In relation to cultural Law'Rather than reading *Carpentaria* as a resource from which we can know others—as ethnography purports to be, for instance—we might read it as a novel that presents a white reader with its own quite specific qualities of unknowability, and undecidability. We cannot read it ethnographically, but not for the reasons that Maria Takolander suggests, not because it has no 'ethnic authenticity' in its pages. We cannot read it for its ethnic authenticity because we could not recognise this so-called authenticity if it bit us. But as white readers, we do not need to read ethnographically to allow the Law a place in the critical production of Indigenous-signed texts' (Ravenscroft 2010: 214)

of Aboriginal people' (2016: 68, 58).[3] The best way to learn about politics from these novels is to engage with them yourselves.

Having said that, in the rest of this address I want to sketch what I see as the challenges of these novels for Settler political science in Australia. In particular, I want to focus on how these novels suggest that the habitual understanding of the Australian state in political science is deeply flawed. Much of my analysis here has been prompted by Morgan Brigg, Mary Graham and Lyndon Murphy's 2019 article in *The Australian Journal of Political Science*, 'Toward the Dialogical Study of Politics: Hunting at the Fringes of Australian Political Science', which repays careful reading and rereading by anyone concerned with the state of our discipline.

One challenge presented by these novels is that they all focus on politics in remote and regional contexts, away from the metropolitan centres of Australia.[4] This choice of settings seems partly driven the by fact that the authors of the three novels all live in, or have strong connections to, the country they describe.[5] Setting the novels in and around towns named Desperance, Durrango and Massacre Plains—names which themselves speak volumes—focuses attention squarely on frontier conflicts between Indigenous and Settler Australians over industrial versus customary relationships with the land. In important senses, the frontier is everywhere is Australia, as we non-Indigenous people often state, perhaps far too blithely, when we acknowledge that the sovereignty and land of a particular Indigenous people have never been 'ceded' or 'sold'. Nonetheless, these novels involve settings where winning or losing a frontier conflict over land has particularly serious consequences.

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[3] 'It has been a life's work of growing increasingly aware of how other people were telling stories on behalf of Aboriginal people in Australia, and how stories are used in campaigns to achieve certain goals. I think it would be fair to say that we are the country's troubling conscience and managed by its most powerful power brokers through a national narrative' (Wright 2016: 58).

[4] Other recent examples that focus attention away from cities include Kim Scott's novels *True Country* (1993), *Benang* (1999), *That Deadman Dance* (2010), *Taboo* (2017); Meyne Wyatt's play *City of Gold* (2019).

[5] Tara June Winch lives in France.

The use of regional and remote locales also challenges the usual focus of Australian political science on national and state levels of government and public policy, with the associated assumption that there is an 'Australian politics' or 'state politics', rather than varied localised political dynamics in different parts of the country. Central governments based in the capitals have little day-to-day reach in the townships of the novels. In *Carpentaria*, for example, politicians from the 'South' only fly in and out of Desperance for brief publicity events (Wright 2006: 9), while police and other government officials are posted to the town to escape their urban pasts and are left to their own devices. 'Fashionable city people, Southern people' (Wright 2006: 55) cannot understand the town and its surrounding regions. Unscrupulous locals trick the government into public policies that only result in more problems, like the spread of feral pigs and cane toads (Wright 2006: 52-53). When the state government renames the settlement Masterton, the locals retain the name Desperance on all the town signs, deliberately erasing themselves from official maps (Wright 2006: 57-60).

While national and state governments have little purchase on the everyday politics of Desperance, Durrango and Massacre Plains, local councillors, council officials and police are represented as exercising greater power over Indigenous people. These overwhelmingly white figures of official authority are also all male. These include the 'self-made' Mayor of Desperance, Stan Bruiser, who works closely with Constable Truthful (Wright 2006: 35). Bruiser's counterpart in Durrango, Mayor Jim Buckley, is a corrupt real estate agent and developer who 'own[s] the cops and the local magistrates' and whose grandfather was the local police officer (Lucashenko 2018: 36-40; 63). These men regularly exercise coercion and violence in their official attempts to control the populations of their towns but are also more generally violent. This depiction of masculine violence as the central dynamic of government is reinforced in *The Yield* by the Reverend Greenleaf's inability to protect the residents of the Mission from threats and attacks by local white men.

The emphasis on official coercion and violence throughout the three novels might be unsettling to those of us who teach and research Australian politics. We tend to do so without paying much heed to the role of coercion and violence in the governing of Australia, although even a passing familiarity with figures on rates of Indigenous incarceration (2.4 adults per 100) and deaths in custody (six times the rate for non-Indigenous Australians) should be enough to prompt more attention (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021; Allam et al 2021). In applying Max Weber's (2019) famous definition of the state as the 'human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory', Australian political scientists tend to focus on 'legitimate' rather than 'physical force'. Hence the extensive soul-searching in recent years among political scientists and public commentators about the apparent loss of public trust and confidence in Australian democracy and the crisis this loss presents for governmental institutions. These novels suggest that we should be paying as much, if not more, attention to crises of 'physical force'.

That is not to say that these novels are silent on the question of the legitimacy of the Australian state. Winch signals this issue as central at the front of her novel, using Saint Augustine's rhetorical question 'In the absence of justice, what is sovereignty but organised robbery?' as the epigraph for *The Yield*. For Max Weber (1978: 212-254), states can derive their 'legitimate domination' from two general sources: legal rational authority and traditional authority. To different degrees, these novels undermine the claims of the Australian state to either of these sources.

Claims to legal rational authority require, among other things, that the institutions and officials that comprise the state act according to laws and regulations that specify their purposes and how those institutions and officials must (and must not) go about achieving those purposes. In a few instances, such legal rational processes at state or national level appear to operate to the advantage of Indigenous people. In *Too Much*

Lip, for example, the Salter family lose their land claim in the Land and Environment Court but Donna Salter provides evidence that results in a finding against Jim Buckley by the NSW Independent Commission Against Corruption. This apparently prevents his proposed development from proceeding and destroying Ava's island.

In a similar way, the Gondowindi family's land claim eventually reaches the High Court. Although the fate of the claim remains uncertain at the end of *The Yield*, the suggestion is that shareholders have lost interest in the proposed tin mine as a result of the resistance by the Gondowindi and their supporters. *Carpentaria* does not hold out even this sort of hope, with Gurrfurrit's mine only halted through direct acts of sabotage led by Will Phantom.

The novels make it clear that, at least at the local level, legal rational authority is constantly vulnerable to personalised rule exercised by the likes of the mayors, Bruiser and Buckley. Desperance's town clerk, Libby Valance, who tries to follow the local government rules, is barely able to control the behaviour of the white residents and unable to rein in Bruiser. Constable Truthful is equally unable to control Bruiser. Following the arrest of three youths for a crime they did not commit, Bruiser assaults them in the police station. Truthful opposes Bruiser but he cannot prevent the violence. When the youths later hang themselves in the cells out of fear, Truthful realises that he will be officially blamed and takes his own life.

The traditional authority that might provide a viable alternative or supplement to legal rational authority for the 'legitimate use of physical force' is also missing from these novels. In *Carpentaria*, the white settlers are a people without any history, culture or traditions that would provide the basis for legitimising state action (see Ravenscroft 2010: 203). Indeed, Desperance's white residents cannot even remember where they came from or how they arrived in the area (Wright 2006: 57). *Too Much*

Lip represents white Australians in a similar way. Black Superman, a member of the Salter family, accuses

> … whitefellas [of] going around thieving all the time. They need help. Shame nobody ever tries to get em back to their culture. … You mob wanna take these whitefellas round here up to the city. Show em some of their sacred sites. Shopping malls and factories and shit (Lucashenko 2018: 230).

Cultural traditions should provide a basis for guiding the actions of the state and its citizens but Australia's white culture is too shallow to do this.

These novels, then, suggest that while the Australian state continues to make laws and exercise coercive power against Indigenous people, it lacks a legitimate basis for doing so. Moreover, Indigenous people have deep traditions that include an alternative law. Rather than proposing the failure of the Australian state to live up to its legitimating rationale, these novels propose a contest between Settler and Indigenous law in which only the latter has real legitimacy. Both laws operate simultaneously over the same territory, even though only one will be visible or accessible to the Settlers. In *Carpentaria*, this idea is presented vividly in the repeated efforts of Desperance's white citizens to protect the boundaries of their town against intruders, oblivious to the 'huge, powerful, ancestral creation spirits occupying the land and sea moving through the town, even through other folk's houses' (Wright 2006: 59).

Is there a way out of this impasse between Settler power and Indigenous laws? In *Carpentaria*, the way out seems to be the obliteration of Desperance, which allows Norm and his grandson Bala to start again, free of the Settler world. The final words of the novel are: 'It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh as they walked hand in hand out of town, down the road, Westside, to home' (Wright 2006: 519). The abandonment of the mine in *The Yield* and of the correction centre in *Too Much Lip* result in a similar, if more limited, renewals of the world. Beyond those suggestions, the novels offer no advice. Perhaps

that is the point. Readers should take up the challenge to begin or continue work on their own responses. About halfway through her recent collection *Throat* (2020), the Mununjali Yugambeh poet Ellen van Neervan challenges her readers to enter into a 'Treaty of Shared Power' with her as the author. She begins with a set of statements but then switches to a series of questions. I want to finish my address with the final three queries that van Neervan (2020: 62) poses to her readers:

> How can we re-imagine custodianship?
> Is this an agreement or a series of unanswered questions?
> Are you willing to enter an agreement that is incomplete and subject to change?

These questions seem to me to be helpful if we are to work through the challenges raised in *Carpentaria*, *Too Much Lip* and *The Yield* to reimagine, rethink and rework the Australian state.

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