‘One Red Blood’: Multi-species Belonging in Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*

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Alexis Wright’s novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), explores the continuing repercussions of British neo-colonial imperatives to ‘intervene and control the will, mind, and soul of the Aboriginal people’ in Australia (Wright, *Swan* 47). This essay focuses on the ways *The Swan Book* seeks to reinstate Indigenous sovereignty and identity through demonstrating an ethic of Country, in which non-human beings are granted agency and respect for their contribution in maintaining ecological balance, interspecies relationships, and connections to the ancestral stories of the Dreaming. *The Swan Book* presents a future 100 years after Australia’s Bicentenary, in which climate change has caused irrevocable damage to the material and spiritual landscapes of the country. Climate change has also resulted in an influx of climate refugees into Australia. These refugees are subsequently detained along with some of the country’s Indigenous population in a camp next to a polluted swamp.[1] The swamp is where the reader finds Wright’s main character, an Indigenous girl named Oblivia who, after enduring a gang rape, becomes mute. Rejected by her community and left alone after her guardian, Bella Donna, dies, Oblivia eventually develops an affinity with black swans through a ‘common syntax of alienation, homecoming, and ecosystemic restoration’ (Norden 270). The novel charts Oblivia’s and the swans’ shared determination to reunite themselves with their homeland and in doing so repair the damage wrought by British colonial-settler culture on Indigenous Country and the myriad beings—animal, plant, spirit, and ancestral—that suffuse it.

Previous scholarship on Wright’s *The Swan Book* has considered the significant ecological, political, and spiritual costs of climate change for Australia’s Indigenous communities. Adeline Johns-Putra, for example, has discussed how *The Swan Book* is a postmodern climate change novel that challenges ‘the hegemonic centrism of human exceptionalism’ through its emphases on non-human agency and narrative silence (32). This scholar has further commented that Oblivia’s unique connection to the black swans foregrounds the interlinking phenomena of racial and environmental exploitation in the novel (34). Cornelis Martin Renes, too, has focused on how ‘the nurturing link between humans and the environment’ that is established through Oblivia’s relationship with the black swans proposes ‘an alternative Indigenous universe’ (714). Elsewhere, Anne Le Guellec-Minel has highlighted the tendency for the discourse of climate apocalypticism to favour ‘the anxieties of urban, relatively affluent social groups’; *The Swan Book* indicates a departure from this discourse by placing rural Indigenous characters and non-human ecologies at its narrative centre. Priyanka Shivadas has also written about the ways in which non-human agents in *The Swan Book* challenge the notion of human exceptionalism in a future world affected by climate change.

My essay adds to this existing body of scholarship by exploring the aims of Wright’s prominent representation of non-human animal species in *The Swan Book*. I find that Wright presents the centrality of non-human animals in Indigenous cosmology so as to displace a Western anthropocentric framework which subordinates their will and intrinsic value to that of human beings.[2] Following Le Guellec-Minel, Shivadas, and Jane Gleeson-White, I also discuss how Wright’s focus on non-human animals in *The Swan Book* demonstrates the unique problem that climate change poses for an Indigenous notion of Country. Gleeson-White observes that

Country is a preeminent feature of Wright's three novels to date (*Plains of Promise* [1997], *Carpentaria* [2006], and *The Swan Book*). Significantly, Gleeson-White suggests that the 'rage and despair' of *The Swan Book* stems from the irreversible damage that climate change has caused to Country, and by extension to Indigenous knowledge systems and ontologies ('Country and Climate Change' 29). Heather J. Caslin and David H. Bennett explain that Country has a more expansive meaning in an Aboriginal Australian context than in a Western context. Contrary to being synonymous with 'nation state' or referring to geographical space in general, Country refers to a socially specific and geographically distinct area in which people have moral obligations to care for the land, and animals and plants as their co-inhabitants (Caslin and Bennett 17). By the same token, animals share responsibility in ensuring the overall health and vitality of the system through the sustenance they provide to other beings. The meaning of Country also extends to the notion of the land as an 'active living presence' (Gleeson-White, 'Country and Climate Change' 29); it is a 'nourishing terrain,' in the words of Deborah Bird Rose, which 'gives and receives life. Not just imagined or represented, it is lived in and lived with' (*Nourishing Terrains* 7).

It is, then, no wonder that Susan Pyke has commented that 'the devastating impact of climate change is already being experienced by those on the margins, including people of the Waanyi nation' of which Wright is a member (268). Perhaps the most obvious way that *The Swan Book* shows how Aboriginal communities suffer disproportionately as a result of dramatic changes to the earth's biospheres is through a depiction of the 'mass traumatisation of nonhuman animals' in the Australian landscape (Atkinson 43). Notably, the black swans are not endemic to the area surrounding the swamp; they 'kept arriving from nowhere, more and more of them' (Wright, *Swan* 47), having flown from the once-wetter climes of the country in search of water and refuge. *The Swan Book* suggests that a return to a non-anthropocentric, Indigenous moral framework, which 'situates humanity as a participant in a larger living system' (Gibson et al. 4), is one way to forestall the acceleration of climate change, the greatest threat to life on earth regardless of one's species. As Wright explains in 'The Future of Swans,' to reframe the environmental problems of the novel within an Indigenous cosmology has positive implications for how not only Australia but the world may deal with the effects of climate change.

The Swan Book is a novel brimming with the sights, sounds, and actions of non-human animals that bear witness to the incredible multiplicity of life forms in nature (Shivadas 100). I regard this as Wright's deliberate strategy to challenge the ways that non-human animals exist as undifferentiated and passive entities in Western anthropocentric moral systems. According to Patrick Curry, Western anthropocentrism locates 'all agency and value in humanity alone, leaving the rest of nature . . . without agency, subjectivity or independent value or integrity' (53). This anthropocentrism contrasts with an Indigenous Australian cosmology where there is no hierarchy placing humans over non-human animals. As David Bennett explains with reference to the Arunta and Wik-Mungkan people, many Indigenous cosmologies view humans and non-human animals as having been created by the same ancestral beings (20). Humans and non-human animals are thus regarded as kin; in the words of Yolngu actor and dancer David Gulpilil, they share the 'One Red Blood' (qtd. in Rose, *Wild Dog* 4). The profusion of non-human animals in *The Swan Book*—including but not limited to swans, brolgas, snakes, rats, parrots, mynas, cats, camels, lizards, fish, bats, dogs, and a talking monkey—certainly bestows on them moral value on par with human characters. Moreover, their prominence urges readers to attend not only to the actions and behaviours of human characters, but their non-human counterparts as well. As my subsequent analysis will show, these animals have a vital and active role to play in an Indigenous notion of Country. It is imperative to listen to these animals' stories, since they embody the interconnectedness of all beings within the novel's moral

framework: '*There is a lot to learn about owls. . . . Not the type of thing you could learn in one day. . . . How do you explain their special stories of origin and creation, return and renewal, which are as new as they are old?*' (Wright, *Swan* 184). Songs, rituals, dance, and stories are core ways in which humans and non-human animals maintain connections to 'the living cosmos of the ancestors' while promoting abundance, balance, and harmony between the various biosocial systems bound to the land (Dutton 246). Wright asks readers of *The Swan Book*, as she has done in her other fiction and essays, to acknowledge that within the Indigenous world 'everything is sacred and animals are sacred and have stories' (Wheeler Centre). It becomes the task of humans to reorient themselves to the different 'languages' that non-human animals use to communicate their place in the Dreaming, thereby undoing the 'narcissism of Western thought that would view language [as] an exclusively human trait' (Daley 305).

The notion that humans are unique in being the only animals capable of language has often been used within the Western anthropocentric tradition to justify the place of humans at the apex of a hierarchy of moral consideration. This is the result of a logic wherein the absence of language is tantamount to an absence of communication. 'Nature,' the opposite of human civilization, is thus considered to be 'mute' (Curry 59), leading to a situation in which the various messages and stories that are encoded in the voices, gestures, movements, and rituals of non-human animals are routinely ignored. Moreover, humanity's exceptionalism in being the only species purportedly capable of language (and thus communication) has been used to degrade non-human life forms and ensure that their use as resources is elevated above and beyond their status as beings with intrinsic value.[3] I will endeavour in the last section of this essay to make a connection between Wright's representations of non-human animals and Oblivia's muteness. Previously, Johns-Putra has observed that Oblivia's muteness opens up the possibility of a 'reality' set apart from Eurocentric and anthropocentric norms, where the protagonist's selective silence 'creates something of a vacuum for other voices to fill' (35). *The Swan Book* clearly pushes against an anthropocentric 'fetishization of voice' (Johns-Putra 39) by turning readers' attention towards the diverse ways in which beings both human and non-human communicate with and beyond their immediate species. Consequently, I will draw attention to Oblivia's muteness in order to highlight how racism, ableism,[4] and anthropocentrism are mutually imbricated in Western colonialism. Patrick Condliffe has stated that 'the body of the animal and the body of the Othered human—"the indigenous"—share the same marginal space in [Australian] society' (189). I would add that disabled bodies are also discursively marked as 'Other' in society and are thus subject to comparable (but not equal) forms of oppression and marginalisation as bodies of colour and non-human bodies. It is useful to investigate Oblivia's muteness because it demonstrates how 'animality' is a category that is used to justify the dual exclusion of Indigenous and disabled people from the category of the human. Oblivia's embrace of the black swans and her subsequent refusal to communicate in ways that are normatively acceptable to hearing people is an important reminder to readers to orient themselves ethically to others whose embodiments, minds, and ways of life may be (radically) different from their own.

Culture, Stories, and Interspecies Belonging in *The Swan Book*

In their book, *Manifesto for Living in the Anthropocene*, Katherine Gibson, Deborah Bird Rose, and Ruth Fincher pose the question of how human civilisation might begin to reverse its detrimental impact on the earth's biosocial systems and consequently reduce the speed of climate change. Drawing on the work of Val Plumwood, they argue that it is necessary to 'resituate the human in ecological terms, and . . . resituate the non-human in ethical terms' (3). Readers can turn to one of Rose's earlier essays to understand how to achieve the latter aim. In

'Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism,' Rose discusses how non-human animals have their own unique ways of living in the world, their own 'cultures' per se, that are vital to sustaining the land and reanimating ancestral stories connected to specific Aboriginal nations. Rose quotes one Aboriginal Elder who makes the following observation about culture in non-human communities: 'birds got ceremony of their own—brolga, turkey, crow, hawk, white and black cockatoo—all got ceremony, women's side, men's side . . . everything' (qtd. in Rose, 'Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism' 100). The Elder shifts from their comment being about individual species of birds, to the different customs and protocols governing human men and women, and then finally to a universal claim that all things possess distinct, non-substitutable, and equally valued ontologies in Country. In keeping with the spirit of this Elder's statement, *The Swan Book* also includes various animal species that illuminate different relationships with, and aspects of, Country. The swans' flight path in the novel denotes a story of dispossession, homesickness, and return that mirrors the 'solastalgia' experienced by many Aboriginal Australians due to the ongoing environmental and spiritual repercussions of British colonisation (Gleeson-White, 'Country and Climate Change' 29). In another example, snakes in *The Swan Book* feature primarily in chapters where Oblivia travels from the north to the south of Australia after being abducted by Warren Finch, the Deputy President and later first Aboriginal President of the Republic of Australia. Snakes symbolise not only Finch's predatory behaviour—an irony given the fact that his namesake is a diminutive bird commonly preyed upon—but also that Oblivia's presence in certain areas is treated as a form of trespass by these animals (Wright, *Swan* 183). Meanwhile, the plaintive cries of parrots and owls alert the reader to their role in communicating the foundational stories of the Dreaming, as well as their sense of crisis in the wake of current environmental imbalances. While in a city dubbed 'The People's Palace,' Oblivia turns her attention to the 'homesick' parrots who 'would suddenly utter words from ancient languages. The girl watched the parrots waste their knowledge; their rare and valuable words disappearing into thin air' (Wright, *Swan* 261). This passage poignantly suggests that the failure to recognise non-human animals as conveyors of historical and ancestral information is deeply connected to the denigration of Indigenous cosmologies in our current world. The image of the parrots' 'rare and valuable words disappearing into thin air' reminds readers of the centrality of oral communication in Indigenous cultures in maintaining living and immediate connections to the past. In *The Swan Book*, it is not only the words of humans but also the screeching, squawking, and singing of birds that can signal 'a voice from the spirit country' (Wright, *Swan* 186).

These moments demonstrate a key facet of Country, that is, that spiritual and emotional belonging for non-human animals and humans is tied to specific geographies. Migration to another place either through choice or force results in the severing of these ties and the loss of one's status as a 'native' dweller of the land. Caslin and Bennett note that some Indigenous Australian communities do not make a sharp distinction between 'feral' and 'native' animals, preferring to describe the former as animals that do not have Dreaming and the latter as animals that do. Citing Bruce Rose, they go on to suggest that animals which were once considered *ulerenye* ('strangers' that had no Dreaming) are capable of becoming *-arenye* ('belonging to the country') over time (Rose, *Aboriginal Land Management Issues*, in Caslin and Bennett 25). Returning to *The Swan Book*, it is possible to explore belonging (*-arenye*) and not-belonging (*ulerenye*) to Country through Bella Donna and Oblivia, as well as the white and black swans that feature in the novel. Iva Polak in *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction* considers belonging/not-belonging in relation to Bella Donna and the stories of the white swans that she teaches to Oblivia (201). The white swans are a species introduced to Australia in 1896, while Bella Donna is a 'patroness of World Rejection' (Wright, *Swan* 32) who has made an arduous journey to Australia after her home country and several others were destroyed because

of climate change and its ensuing social chaos. Moreover, the swamp people do not recognise Bella Donna and Oblivia as *-arenye* because their narratives do not exist 'in the collective memory of the people of the North' (Polak 201). Primarily made up of Aboriginal Australians, the swamp community views Bella Donna's stories with suspicion, refusing to countenance them on the basis that they refer to foreign lands and situations ('The sovereign facts lying on their table said that there was nothing worth hearing about from anywhere else on earth that was like her stories' [Wright, *Swan* 35]). Furthermore, as a '*Wanymarri* white woman' (Wright, *Swan* 23), Bella Donna's arrival in Australia and subsequent claiming of ownership over a dilapidated boat appears to model itself on the First Fleet and its crew as the original 'boat people' of the country.

Likewise, the black swans that have arrived at the swamp are regarded as a foreign species that might threaten the livelihood of birds that are endemic to the area. As Daniel Fisher notes, the swans' involuntary migration to the north of Australia means they are 'now without a dreaming for the country' in which they find themselves (183). Focalised through the aggravated voices of the swamp people, the narrator claims, '*We do have our own local birds. . . . All kinds. . . .* Currawongs abounded. Noisy miners ran through the place. Thousands of brolgas were standing around, *tall and proud*, and living happily with the swamp people for aeons thank you very much' (Wright, *Swan* 68). This comment resonates with Wright's account of what inspired her to write *The Swan Book*. Wright recalls how she spotted a black swan in her native Gulf of Carpentaria, an unusual sighting given that these birds enjoy cooler climates and coastal areas. Wright connects this environmental anomaly—a result of a sudden change in weather patterns leading to large amounts of rain in Central Australia—with more general themes of communicative failure and lack of belonging when one is dislocated from one's homeland: '[The swan's] got no story up in our country. So what do you do? What happens to a bird—or to anyone—who has no story for that country?' ('The Future of Swans'). This dilemma is one that Oblivia returns to repeatedly in the novel, as she muses on the black swans' peregrinations and their lack of a stable homeland. Moreover, Oblivia's reference to their migration to a place 'where they had no storyline' makes the crucial point that belonging within Indigenous cosmology is generational and spiritual. The black swans are considered *ulerenye* around the swamp because they have no storylines that speak of their ancestors having traversed the same land as they do now, and they are not recognised in or recognisable to the totemic ancestors of that Country:

> She could not have known anything of how long it had taken the huge black birds to make the migratory flight from so far away, to where they had no storyline for taking them back.
>
> The swans had become gypsies, searching the deserts for vast sheets of storm water soaking the centuries-old dried lakes where their own habitats had dried from prolonged drought. (Wright, *Swan* 15–16)

Like the black swans, the white swans, and Bella Donna, Oblivia also struggles to establish kinship relations with the swamp people. They reject Oblivia after she is gang-raped and hides in the hollow of a eucalyptus tree (Wright, *Swan* 85). It is Bella Donna who decides to adopt the 'little foundling child' (Wright, *Swan* 84) and teach her the mythological origins of white swans. Initially, the stories that Oblivia and the reader are told are those involving swans from 'faraway ancestral districts' (Wright, *Swan* 23). Bella Donna mentions the *Hansdhwani* (*Hamsadhvani*, 'cry of the swans'), a raga she plays on her flute carved from the wing bone of a white swan, along with the Greek myth of Leda and Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin*. These

stories share the quality of foreignness; 'full of the old woman's stories about swans before she [Oblivia] had seen one,' it becomes the young girl's task to cast aside Bella Donna's tales and create her own stories about, and in connection to, Country (Wright, *Swan* 17). Therefore, as Polak notes, the primary function of Bella Donna's stories 'is not to invade the North [of Australia] with non-Aboriginal swan lore, but to pave the way for new narratives for black swans' (201). Oblivia's main route to achieving this goal is through establishing a totemic connection with the black swans. I describe the relationship Oblivia cultivates with the black swans as totemic because their shared rituals are what enable them to form their own sense of belonging (*-arenye*) with Country. The primary way that Oblivia recognises the black swans as her totem is through acquiring their 'language': she 'decided to learn how to talk to swans too. Yes, she would be fluent in swan talk' (Wright, *Swan* 69). Oblivia develops not only empathy but a sense of moral obligation in assisting the black swans to return to the swamp after Warren Finch destroys their habitat.

I have previously mentioned that neither Oblivia nor the black swans are considered to be *-arenye* by the people of the swamp. Wright appears to draw our attention to the struggle of Aboriginal Australians to reclaim their status in her prelude to *The Swan Book*, in which the narrator describes 'a cut snake virus'[5] that lives in the 'doll's house' of Oblivia's mind (Wright, *Swan* 1). The virus attempting to take over Oblivia's mind can be treated as an allegory for the way white settler-colonial culture has sought to destroy Indigenous Law and the knowledge contained in Indigenous peoples' stories and replace them with the law and stories of their oppressors. Wright herself has suggested as much in 'What Happens When You Tell Someone Else's Story?' in which she remarks, 'It seemed to me that the physical control and psychological invasion of Aboriginal people has continued as it began, from the racist stories told about Aboriginal people from the beginning of colonisation two centuries ago. It is this style of story that has continued to invade every sense of Aboriginal sovereignty and resistance.' Gleeson-White observes that *The Swan Book* is a novel that depicts Oblivia's 'quest to regain sovereignty over her own brain' ('Going Viral'). I agree with Gleeson-White's argument and would add that it is through Oblivia's determination to establish the i/Indigeneity of the black swans that she is able to remove the invasive presence of racist-colonial stories from her mind. To begin this task, Oblivia listens to the '*special stories of origin and creation*' (Wright, *Swan* 184) that are contained in the songs and cries of the black swans. Moreover, as part of the reciprocal nature of Indigenous cosmology, where 'human actions, too, are being interpreted and made meaningful by other parts of the cosmos' (Rose, 'Life and Land' 214), Oblivia extends her care and knowledge to the black swans through music, touch, and dance. One key example of this occurs towards the end of the novel. Warren Finch has earlier abducted, married, and then abandoned Oblivia in The People's Palace to embark on a political junket around the world. Oblivia is initially bereft without her swans but is eventually reunited with them after Finch's death:

> She watched, and she knew . . . [t]hey had found each other's heartbeat, the pulse humming through the land from one to the other, like the sound of distant clap sticks beating through ceremony, connecting together the spirits, people and place of all times into one. These were her swans from the swamp. There was no going back. She would follow them. They were heading north, on the way home. (Wright, *Swan* 324)

In this moment, the reunion of Oblivia and the swans facilitates a profound reconnection not only between different species who are a part of Country, but with the notion of Country itself. They had not only 'found each other's heartbeat,' but have accessed a life force that

encompasses and courses through all things. Through kinship with her swans in a shared experience of Country, the universe of Indigenous knowledge becomes known to Oblivia: 'the spirits, people and place of all times into one.' As the passage suggests at its end, this revelation is what revitalises Oblivia and allows both her and her swans to make their long journey back to the swamp. Once they have done so, as if to mark their return with ceremonial importance, Oblivia plays a song on the flute originally bequeathed to her by Bella Donna. What is produced is a 'sound [she knew] was known to be sacred to swans. . . . Her music danced on among the din of winds rustling through the grass and ruby saltbush; and the swans flew down to rest among the arum lilies on an insect-infested marsh lake' (Wright, *Swan* 324). The hopefulness that is contained in this passage, signalled in the mellifluous lines of Oblivia's song beckoning the swans to listen and tarry a while, suggests that environmental renewal is still possible despite Warren Finch's attempts to obliterate all life within and around the swamp. While certain numbers of Oblivia's flock have perished due to drought and the arduous journey from The People's Palace back to their home (Wright, *Swan* 334), the final lines of the novel hint at the prospect of revitalisation: 'Maybe *Bujimala*, the Rainbow Serpent, will start bringing in those cyclones and funnelling sand mountains into the place. Swans might come back. Who knows what madness will be calling them in the end?' (Wright, *Swan* 334). This revitalisation, however, will not come without a fundamental shift in the way humans relate ethically to non-human others within the Australian landscape. Wright's novel suggests that the way to avoid total environmental collapse requires humans to reorient themselves ethically in such a way that they are not always speaking *for* or *to* animals but are grateful receivers of their stories as well.

The 'Speaking' Animal, the 'Mute' Human

Critics have so far interpreted Oblivia's muteness as a metaphor for the way white Western colonialism has denied Aboriginal Australians their right to share their ancestors' stories with successive generations as a result of dispossession and assimilation. Chiara Xausa describes Oblivia's 'forced' muteness as 'a denial of her Indigenous voice' (112). Similarly, Johns-Putra writes that 'Oblivia's violation is a synecdoche for the violation of Aboriginal country, people and ontology' (34–35). In an interview with Wright for the *Guardian*, Maryam Azam writes that through Oblivia 'Wright offers . . . a representation of the voicelessness of most Aboriginal people when it comes to being able to talk about and address their vision for the future' (n.p.). In these contexts, silencing refers to the violent separation of Aboriginal Australians from their ancestral Country, whether through environmental destruction in the form of agriculture and mining or forced migration and detention. In this section, I would like to focus on the way certain characters in the novel equate Oblivia's muteness with silent disempowerment. Such thinking, I argue, is ableist insofar as it 'promotes an ideology of impairment as a negative form of embodiment' (Schalk) and fails to take into account the many ways that Oblivia communicates with others, both human and non-human. That other characters are unable to register her alternative modes of communication betrays their own imaginative poverty. This is a poverty that has negative consequences both in terms of the characters' inability to claim Oblivia as part of their community and their continuing *obliviousness* towards the multi-species diversity and belonging at the heart of Indigenous Country. Although Oblivia may have 'long forgotten how to speak, and did not know how she could speak, and had no confidence to speak' (Wright, *Swan* 65), she has become resourceful in employing gestural language, non-verbal utterances, writing, and music to communicate meaningfully with human and non-human others.

The circumstances surrounding Oblivia's muteness in *The Swan Book* draw on two different traditions in literature. The first is the use of muteness as a symbol of women's oppression in a patriarchal heterosexist framework, whereas the second tradition takes muteness as a sign of a person's diminished cognitive and social intelligence. The latter often leads to an emphasis on a human's supposed animality as a result of their verbal inarticulacy (Steel 306). One notable example of the former tradition includes the myth of Larunda from Ovid's *Fasti*. Larunda, a young and beautiful woman, is punished for warning Juno of Jupiter's infidelity by having her tongue cut out of her mouth. Then, while Larunda is being escorted to the underworld by Mercury, the latter rapes her even as she protests against his advances—through her actions, since speech is impossible. Enforced silence and the sexual violation of women are interconnected phenomena in representations of literary misogyny. In 'Mutism and Feminine Silence: Gender, Performance, and Disability in *Epicoene*,' Melissa Hull Geil warns of the 'slippage of language' in texts such as Ben Johnson's *Epicoene*, 'between muteness and silence in women, between cognitive, psychological, and linguistic impairments and enforced control over a woman's body' (97). The traumatic violences imposed on women's bodies, whether through the literal removal of a woman's capacity to speak or through sexual assault, reflect the same patriarchal logic: that docility is the ideal state of femininity (Geil 96). Meanwhile, M. Lynn Rose tells us that deafness and muteness were intertwined in ancient Greek thought; being deaf was tantamount to lacking speech and vice versa (17). Consequently, 'a diminished ability to communicate by speech accompanies hearing loss [and] the assumption of faulty thought accompanies this diminished ability to communicate easily' (M. Lynn Rose 20).

In *The Swan Book*, characters view Oblivia's muteness as a sign of her below-average intelligence. Shocked by her dishevelled appearance and reluctance to speak, Warren Finch assumes that Oblivia is of unsound mind and developmentally delayed: '*She looks deranged. Unhinged*. *She still acts like a child. . . . What's wrong with her. She can't always be like this*' (Wright, *Swan* 155–156). Repeatedly in the novel, Finch tries to force Oblivia to speak, while at the same time compounding her misery and oppression by abducting her and forcing her into marriage. Yet in doing so, he ignores the many strategies Oblivia employs to speak with those around her. In one instance, it appears that Finch actually understands Oblivia when she uses a combination of gestures and facial movements to enquire after the three 'genies' who protect Finch: 'Haphazardly, she held up three fingers to his face, and waved her other hand around, and blew mouthfuls of air' (Wright, *Swan Book* 233). However, elsewhere in the novel, it is evident that Finch rejects Oblivia's use of gesture as a legitimate form of non-verbal communication. Oblivia's alternative ways of communicating appear to emerge in the indefinite period after she is raped. She crawls inside a eucalyptus tree and subsequently falls into a deep sleep, wherein she absorbs the teachings of the primordial tree and accesses the earliest times of her people and homeland:

> Locked in the world of sleep, only the little girl's fingers were constantly moving, in slow swirls like music. She was writing stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch . . . . Whatever she was writing, . . . it was either the oldest language coming to birth again instinctively, or through some strange coincidence, the fingers of the unconscious child forming words that resembled the twittering of bird song speaking about the daylight. (Wright, *Swan* 8)

The movements of Oblivia's fingers are both productive and aesthetic; they have a clear communicative purpose in transcribing 'ancient symbols' from 'the oldest language,' yet they can be appreciated in themselves for creating pleasing visual movements like 'slow swirls.' Oblivia's ability to use her hands in order to recall the ancient stories of the swamp, such as

those of the '*dikili* ghost gums old as the hills' (Wright, *Swan* 8), recalls Wright's words from 'The Politics of Writing' in which she urges Indigenous nations to remain resilient in the face of colonialism by repeatedly performing the songs that were once sung by 'our ancestors who wrote . . . on the walls of caves and on the surface of weathered rock' (13). Moreover, the passage alerts readers to the important point that Oblivia's gestures bridge the so-called gap between human language and the incomprehensible 'noise' of non-human animals. Interestingly, a homologous relationship emerges between Oblivia's movements, human speech, and the twittering of birds. This not only demonstrates Oblivia's keen awareness of the non-human world, but also that it is the song of birds, rather than the speech of humans, that is the foundation for communication. Indeed, the final sentence, in the quotation above, overturns the primacy of human speech in both anthropocentric and logocentric paradigms.

One objection that might emerge from associating Oblivia's muteness with her preternatural capacity for communicating with non-human animals is that doing so may dehumanise her character and subsequently push her towards the 'non-human' and 'nature' end of a human/culture-animal/nature continuum. This is an issue that has emerged in recent scholarship at the intersection of disability studies, critical animal studies, and critical race studies. Sunaura Taylor explains how the gestures and expressions of sign language have historically been racialised and animalised, leading deaf people, particularly those of colour, to be perceived as 'primitive, rudimentary, and animal' (51). Readers of *The Swan Book* might therefore be mindful of the talking monkey, 'Rigoletto,' who in contrast to the 'silent' Oblivia recalls a racist tradition of Social Darwinism in which people of colour allegedly bore comparable physical and mental traits to non-human primates. However, Rigoletto's unexpected trajectory in the novel, from being a sidekick to the Harbour Master to the 'head honcho of a dancing troupe of monkeys' (Wright, *Swan* 266), conveys the agency of this non-human character and that he exists not merely to serve human ends: 'It had no intention of becoming the fortune-telling monkey of the lane' (Wright, *Swan* 248). Likewise, Oblivia's muteness in the novel need not be interpreted as a sign of her dehumanisation; instead, it can be figured as a way of demonstrating continuity and kinship across species divisions within an Indigenous cosmology. As Taylor observes, 'it is important to ask how we can reconcile the brutal reality of human suffering with the concurrent need to challenge the devaluing of animals and even acknowledge our own animality' (20). Oblivia's embrace of animal communication and the natural landscape in *The Swan Book* is a powerful call to readers to consider how an Indigenous ethic of Country, in which multi-species care and interdependence are viewed as the norm and not the exception to life, might be a way forward for the world at a time when the gulf separating humans and the rest of the environment appears at its largest.

Conclusion

Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* beckons readers to attend to the myriad human and non-human voices that are vital to preserving the sacred stories of Indigenous Country. *The Swan Book* takes aim at a Western anthropocentric viewpoint that dismisses the agency of non-human animals and the complex ways in which they communicate with and act upon their surrounding landscape and other beings. Instead, Wright affirms an Indigenous cosmology in which an ethics of multi-species belonging emerges through the shared ancestry and knowledge of human and non-human animals. *The Swan Book* suggests that it is imperative to listen to non-human animals in order to counteract the deleterious impact of humans on the natural environment. In one memorable passage, the narrator describes a group of gregarious mynas who spoke 'in throwback words of the traditional language' while gesturing towards 'a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this

land' (Wright, *Swan* 329). The mynas' ability to switch between two languages—the ancient and the new—is a powerful comment on the value of Aboriginal cultures in tackling our world's environmental dilemmas. By the same token, with its representation of Oblivia's muteness, *The Swan Book* reminds readers that listening should not be an activity that is limited to those human individuals who can hear. I have sought to examine Oblivia's muteness in relation to her affinity with non-human animals in order to show that ableism, anthropocentrism, and racism are intertwining systems of oppression in Western colonialism. As Taylor aptly reminds us, '[c]onsidering animals voiceless betrays an ableist assumption about what counts as having a voice—an assumption that many disabled and nondisabled people alike often make about animals' (63). Furthermore, the racist ideologies of Western colonialism have justified the gross mistreatment of Indigenous Australians through employing rhetoric and imagery that simultaneously denied them human status while edging them closer to the category of the animal. *The Swan Book* would have us understand Oblivia's muteness and her allegiance with non-human animals not as a sign of her sub-humanity or inhumanity, but as a recognition of the need for biocultural diversity and multi-species kinship in order to find solutions to our global environmental predicament.

NOTES

[1] *The Swan Book* explicitly mentions paternalistic government policies that have sought to control Indigenous Australians under the guise of 'protecting' them from various epidemics affecting their populations. *The Swan Book* refers to 'past times' in which 'more and more interventionist policies [were] charmingly called, *Closing the Gap*' (Wright, *Swan* 49).

[2] Fiona Probyn-Rapsey explains that 'Anthropocentrism refers to a form of human centeredness that places humans not only at the center of everything but makes "us" the most important measure of all things' (47).

[3] David Bennett references Val Plumwood and Richard Sylvan's belief that Western thought creates a 'false choice between disrespectful use and respectful non-use [of animals].' Such thinking is contrary to an Indigenous environmental ethic in which animals can simultaneously have intrinsic *and* instrumental value ('Inter-species Ethics' 155).

[4] Ableism is a belief that able-bodiedness is a superior form of embodiment as compared to disability. This value system results in symbolic and material discrimination against disabled people in society.

[5] In addition to literal examples of non-human animals in *The Swan Book*, Wright deploys animal metaphors in her *oeuvre* to denounce Aboriginal dispossession and signify a regeneration of Indigenous agency. In 'On Writing *Carpentaria*,' Wright refers to the ideologies of settler-colonial culture as a 'spider's trap door' (90), while in 'Politics of Writing' she celebrates the resilience of Indigenous stories in the face of assimilationist politics through an image of avian flight (10).

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