

## Responsive Topographies: Reading the Ontopoetics in *Mullumbimby* and *The Swan Book*

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The ways in which European settlers have disrupted Australian lands, and disrupted the relationship that First Nations people have to Indigenous Country, are massive and manifold. This despoliation has deep and lasting implications because Country relies on a dialogue between people and place, and this dialogue is based on millennia of accumulated knowledges. Mitigating the despoliation requires the acknowledgement of this dialogue's importance, and one mode of making it legible, particularly to European settlers, is through works of Indigenous literature. Such works typically portray the exceedingly complex navigation that First Australians must undertake in order to re-establish or maintain their crucial—and rightful—communication with place. By binding these navigations in works of literature, First Nations people can extend communicative understandings of land into a domain available to settler readers/readings. In this way, literature, which is itself a topography that is responsive to a range of understandings and interpretations, becomes a terrain for portraying the responsive topographies of people and place.

Through this essay, I read navigations of responsive topologies in two novels: Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*. I select these novels for two reasons. First, while their form and narrative are very different, they each respond to the same phenomenon—to the way that climate emergency is reshaping how Indigenous people relate to their land. This is a connection Indigenous scholars, such as Zoe Todd, explicitly address. The current phase of ecological disaster, generally named the Anthropocene (though this is a contested term), is an extension of the same European violence that has shaped the experience of First Nations people since 1788; settler society and climate change are part of the same continuum.<sup>1</sup> *Mullumbimby* deals with the consequences of borders, fences and property rights, and the obstacles these incursions pose to the protagonist's self-understanding as a Bundjalung woman. *The Swan Book* is an apocalyptic epic, set in the aftermath of the climate catastrophe through which we are now living, and which displays a resultant distortion in the relationship between story and place. Secondly, my choice was informed by the differing sense of place these novels offered to me specifically, as somebody familiar with the eponymous town of Mullumbimby on the one hand (my family emigrated from Scotland to Australia in 2003 and settled in Mullumbimby), and on the other, as someone totally unfamiliar with Wright's primary location, the Gulf of Carpentaria. My specific emplacement as a reader educated through the Western canon thus establishes a spectrum of familiarity and unfamiliarity between these two novels. This spectrum appears to me to be analogous with formal qualities of

these novels—*Mullumbimby* as a broadly realist narrative, *The Swan Book* as a complex, heteroglossic odyssey. Orienting myself to the relationship between familiarity and emplacement in these novels thus offers me an opportunity to reflect on the way that Indigenous understandings of place are shaped and reshaped by colonial destruction, and how my place as a settler is shaped and reshaped by these texts.

Registering my reflections in this self-conscious manner—using my own experiences as a white settler as my point of entry into discussing these texts—is a position consistent with standpoint theory. Emerging from feminist critical theory in the 1970s and 1980s in the work of theorists like Sandra Harding, standpoint theory articulates the relationship between knowledge and power. As a theory and a methodology, it affirms the situated nature of knowledge and dispenses with the commitment to objectivity espoused by the sciences, giving a conceptual framework to the lived experience of oppressed groups by acknowledging that ‘different experiences should enable different perceptions of ourselves and our environments’ (Harding 7). As Indigenous education scholar Martin Nakata points out, one of the issues with standpoint theory is that it contributes to the reification of identity categories, stalling the possibility of change (12). As Nakata makes clear, the ‘cultural interface’ is always shaped by ‘historical specificities’ which blanket identity categories suppress (323). Rather than seeing my reading as stemming from my entrenched identity position, it may be more productive to see it as the result of an encounter, a unique event where my experiences and ignorances, my standpoint at a given point in time, contribute to a specific interpretive event. This model of reading is inspired by critical theorist Jacques Rancière, and his ideas positing a horizontal distribution of knowledge which is loosened from structural disciplinary boundaries and erases the differential between the knower and the known. Rancière calls this practice ‘indisciplinarity’, which must ‘practice a certain ignorance’ in order to generate new possibilities for knowledge (‘Aesthetic Dimension’ 17). Rancière’s focus is on the partition between specialised distributions of knowledge. I extend his analysis to include my ‘ignorance’ of specific qualities of Indigenous emplacement as I undertake this study. This practice enables me to interrogate two hierarchies that have the potential to emerge in settler readings of Indigenous literature that depicts different forms of Indigenous knowledge. First, to approach these readings through an immovable settler identity would make me constitutively inaccessible to these texts. Secondly, to set myself up as an ‘impartial’ critic of these two novels, where they become objects of my critique, renders them subject to my ‘mastery’ as an interpreter. This reiterates the settler dynamic of extraction that places emphasis on distanced observation and abstractions. In this context, indisciplinarity allows for the possibility of a sensitive settler reading of Indigenous novels without positing some kind of acquisition of the understandings gleaned therein. An interdisciplinary approach, which uses my own standpoint as its framework—foregrounding my specific familiarities and ignorances—thus works to combat some of these intractable divisions, at least for the purposes of this short essay.

Melissa Lucashenko's *Mullumbimby* is a novel set in—and named after—a small town in the hinterland of northern New South Wales. Its protagonist, Jo Breen, is a single mother who negotiates a difficult relationship with her adolescent daughter Ellen, while longing for a sense of identity, a longing that is bound up with a desire to feel a connection to the land: the 'annoying, unanswerable, and ever-more-present question worming away in her brain' is 'who the hell are you? And what exactly do you think you're doing here?' (10). With money acquired from her divorce, Jo buys a farm and sets about cleaning and tending to it, ensuring the plot of land 'looks like somebody loves it', as Jo says, before she corrects herself—making the land '*knows* somebody loves it': the land has agency here (47). Her lover Twoboy is dismissive of her ownership of the farm; he insists that his ongoing claim to Native Title is the only way to 'live like blackfellas should — on Grandad Tommy's country, and practicing his Law' (81). Native Title, for Twoboy, is a route towards a genuine Indigenous emplacement on the land, whereas simple ownership of a small plot is a compromise and a cop-out. This is the main point of tension and contention in the volatile relationship between these two characters: how best to establish the proper Indigenous way of living on settled land.

The death of Jo's beloved horse Comet—an emotional turning point in the novel, caused by a 'brand-new barbed wire fence' on her property and described quite literally as a murder (117)—is the moment Jo begins to clearly see that her quest to connect with her *budberam jagan* (sacred land) is directly impeded by the colonial system that led to the establishment of the town, and which parcels up the land into individual properties:

Everything in the world, she began to see, was bordered. Almost everything was locked up and claimed by other people. The dugai had come and planted that bloody flag of theirs at Botany Bay, and in the intervening centuries had taken it upon themselves to lace the country tight, using bitumen and wire and timber to bind their gift of a continent to themselves. (133)

The terms and stakes of the novel encapsulated by this quote already expose several complexities of Indigenous emplacement of which I was ignorant until my first reading, and which challenged my own experiences. Moving to Mullumbimby was for my family a way of reconnecting to the natural environment, but Lucashenko's novel exposes this desire as problematic. What makes the land accessible for white settlers is exactly what estranges Indigenous people seeking to reclaim their rightful form of emplacement. In addition, my understanding of Native Title before reading this novel was a diminished one, because I had not given adequate thought to the nuances involved in the modernising process that Indigenous people are being pushed to undergo. Through the conflict between Jo and Twoboy, *Mullumbimby* displays this multifaceted and complex negotiation between First Nations people and their damaged land, and shows that Indigenous emplacement

forms a much more complicated dynamic between settler apparatus and Indigenous practices. The dynamic displays what Stephen Muecke terms ‘Indigenous modern’, a framework in which the outdated dichotomy between colonial rationality and Indigenous naturalism is dispensed with. For Indigenous people in the contemporary moment, ‘being modern means having a range of responses to the contemporary world,’ and the scope for blending traditional outlooks with settler structures here is endless (145).

Jo’s conflict with borders and fences propels her towards a desire to attend more closely to Indigenous Country, and *its* codes and contours. Throughout the novel she participates in the traditional knowledges that she has inherited from her Aunt Barb. In particular, she focuses on *dadirri*, described in the novel’s glossary as a ‘form of Aboriginal meditation’ (284). This act of sitting and listening to the surrounding environment is practiced in order to attain clarity. Letting the place speak for itself is a critical component of Jo’s Indigenous emplacement, and is a feature found throughout various forms of Indigenous knowledge. My reading of Jo’s experience of *dadirri* is informed by the work of environmental philosopher Freya Mathews, who quotes a Law-man from north-western Australia describing a phenomenon known as ‘Le-an’, which is ‘a kind of call from within the psychic interiority of the world’ (‘World Hidden’ 102). Throughout the novel, Jo hears a call that I understand as Le-an: she feels an inexplicable pull to ‘go West’ at several points, an intuition that eventually leads her to a revelation about her white neighbour and his true intentions. Her *dadirri* at the novel’s end helps her to understand the dance of the fairy wrens, to interpret their signalling as a set of directions to find Uncle Humbug, a local elder who understands more about her situation than he initially admits. Jo begins to truly understand her connection with Bundjalung country when she allows the country to communicate to her in this way, cultivating the patience and presence of mind to understand that the messages arising from the land are meant *for her*.

My interpretation of Jo’s emerging understanding of her world is further assisted through a mode of thinking characterised by Mathews, in response to Le-an, as ‘ontopoetics’. This worldview proposes that ‘the world is not merely an object-domain, as represented by physics, but also a field of meaning, a potentially communicative presence with a psycho-active dimension of its own that may be “sung” into responsiveness to us’ (‘Sugarman’ 80).

To attain a mutual rapport with the natural world—outside the ideological strictures of colonialism and modernity—requires the acknowledgement of the onto-poetic nature of reality and its fundamentally communicative, dialogic structure: ‘land cannot be known in the Indigenous manner merely by empirical means but must also be engaged poetically by call and response’ (‘Sugarman’ 80). My understanding of onto-poetics, as outlined by Mathews, offers me a way to read Jo’s experiences through my own Rancièrian ‘ignorances’, where my settler calls and responses are unsettled by, and learn from, but do not assume to replicate Le-an.

For Jo, the reconciliation between Indigeneity and the colonial town is provided by her realisation of what I read, with Mathews, as a ‘communicative presence’ (‘Sugarman’ 80). The poetic quality of the land insists on finding her, communicating with her, in a way that only she can hear, given her relationship to her ancestral Country. This validates her sense of belonging to the land, beyond both land deeds and Native Title claims. In a pivotal moment of the novel, she discovers the evidence of her identity as a Bundjalung woman was there all along, mapped on her daughter’s handprint. The whorls of her palm are imprinted with a topographical map of the Brunswick Valley in which Mullumbimby is nestled. It takes the attention of Jo’s young nephew Timbo to spot this resemblance, a resemblance that confirms Jo’s reciprocal relationship with her part of the world: ‘Jo thought wildly: *I gave birth to the valley*’ (246). The sheer revolutionary force of this understanding culminates when Jo argues with Twoboy about Ellen displaying her palm-map in court as proof of that belonging. Though Twoboy is adamant that Native Title is a goal to be obtained at any cost, Jo realises that the trauma this would cause to Ellen would be a betrayal of her daughter’s safety, and in standing her ground, a transformation occurs:

She became tremendously heavy and solid. There was no need for knives, nor even for argument, for she was as massive as a mountain, as heavy and immobile as Chincogan ... she had somehow grown large enough to contain every Bundjalung woman who had ever stood near the place she stood. (250)

The scene is the fruition of Jo’s understanding of her relationship to her ancestral Country. To my onto-poetical reading, the land is revealed as her strength. Such a relationship is far more real than a legal document obtained in court, which the settler understanding would deem to be the only genuine mode of connection. Though, in the end, Jo has the evidence that would grant Native Title to Twoboy, and her, she refuses to use it on the grounds that it would endanger her daughter, who is a living expression of the communicating land.

Mathews argues that onto-poetics, as a communicative engagement with the natural world, requires some kind of invocational gateway and situated experience (‘World Hidden’ 103). It requires a sensitivity to the living beings in the environment and unfolds to the knower as a logic of narrative. *Mullumbimby* generously opens settler readers to this experience by depicting Jo’s journey into understanding her ancestral reality and by offering a glossary for those terms that act as invocation for her. Mathews’s conceptualisation of onto-poetics, developed with Indigenous knowledge holders, allows me to accompany Jo in her communicative engagement with Country and find a sense of familiarity along with her, one which resonates with my own particular familiarity with the geographic place depicted in the novel.

Conveying the possibility of new ontological knowledges through 'ignorant' readerly encounters with Indigenous literary forms is part of the two-way modernising process that settler and Indigenous peoples must undergo to positively shift Indigenous-settler relations. It exemplifies the Indigenous-modern ethos that Muecke proposes, as it is an apparatus of the settler state that is nevertheless adapted to provide the topography for new relations. This process is present in the novel as a whole; it can also be read within the novel via the transformation of the fence from a weapon of colonial violence into a tool for renegotiating Indigeneity *against* forms of colonial violence. The very fence that killed Jo's horse was in fact built by Granny Nurrung, an elder of the area, in order to protect the grounds of a traditional ceremony (274). The conclusions of the novel are, in this way, consistent with my particular encounter with it. The ethos of *Mullumbimby* is consonant and inclusive. It does not reject settler or Indigenous modernities, but it does ask settler readers to attend to the Indigenous Country which was there for millennia before colonisation, and which remains present and deeply resonant to those with ancestral connections to Country.

The ending of the novel emphasises just how resilient the responsive topography of Mullumbimby is to destructive settler logic:

it gradually dawned on Jo that to destroy the talga [ancient song sung by lyrebirds] of the rockhole, the dugai would have to kill every last Goorie who knew it. They would have to clear the World Heritage forest, and then they would need to destroy every lyrebird in the valley as well, probably every lyrebird for hundreds of miles around. But unless they did that, unless they went so far in their savagery and madness, then the talga would always be sung in the nooks and crannies of the bush where it seemed like nobody was listening. And the ancient song would always be heard... (278)

This paragraph underlines the deep narrative aspect that unites Bundjalung country and its people, which I understand through the lens of onto-poetics as characterised by Mathews. It's worth reiterating that I do not claim to be gaining any sort of privileged access to the specific dialogue that a Bundjalung person might have in Mullumbimby. Rather, it's my specific encounter with the narrative, read with indisciplinaryity in mind, that clarifies for me the meaning and significance of the dialogue between people and place as characterised by onto-poetics. And it's Lucashenko's generous and invitational writing, complete with the glossary, that makes this clarification possible in the domain of literary form.

If settler readers are to recognise the violence of colonialism and the emergence of climate change as an imbricated process, then the 'savagery and madness' Lucashenko describes in *Mullumbimby* is not out of the question, especially if the colonial project continues unabated. This is a vision of reality that is expressed in a very different novel, one that contends with

the consequences of savagery that *does* go so far as to heat the planet and destroy its biodiversity: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*.

*The Swan Book* demonstrates the crisis that happens when story can no longer achieve purchase in a ruined country. In this novel, the climate has changed, great populations have moved, and in this confusion and collision between strange people and dying places, stories become untethered, loose and dangerous. It is set across more expansive terrain than *Mullumbimby*; the two primary locations are a swamp in northern Australia and a bustling unidentified city in the south, and it moves from the former to the latter in a digressive drive down highways, bushwalks and helicopter rides, before moving back again at the novel's end via a slow refugee exodus. This is a story set at an indeterminate date in the future and in a land wrecked by climate change, utterly altered by the colonial Anthropocene. The extent of the damage done to the planet is described in a darkly humorous way: 'Now the day had come when modern man had become the new face of God, and simply sacrificed the whole Earth' (12). The madness of settler logic alluded to at the end of *Mullumbimby* has become the savage reality here. The novel depicts Indigenous Country as a communicative field of story, and it also depicts the destruction of that field: 'Swans had Law too', the omniscient narrator says, but nobody remembers those stories now (67).

Wright's form is at its dizzying best when the swamp people proclaim: '*It is after all factual that terribly, terribly dry stories that flip, flop several times in one hour are dangerous to the health of the mind*' (35). Though Wright's novel is far from dry—it is a rich tapestry drenched with meaning—there is a self-referentiality in this sentence that, to my reading, illuminates much of the rest of the novel, whose characters are all afflicted with some delusion or another. Oblivia, the protagonist, suffers from a virus-spirit obsessed with 'things that had originated somewhere else and got bogged in my brain' (3). If stories that remain where they're meant to be told are a sign of good health, then *The Swan Book's* allusive collage of global literature woven into a tale about a Waanyi girl trying to find her way home, is a symptom of some kind of deep malady. Indeed, an episode from Oblivia's childhood reveals the connection between story and place at the heart of the madneses of the novel.

Oblivia is an Aboriginal girl who becomes mute after being raped by a petrol-sniffing youngster. She is discovered sleeping in a tree by an old European woman named Bella Donna. The tree in which Oblivia slept was a sacred tree 'where all the stories of the swamp were stored like doctrines of Law left by the spiritual ancestors' (78). After Oblivia was found, the tree was destroyed by the Army 'on the premise that this nexus of dangerous beliefs had to be broken, to close the gap between Aboriginal people and white people' (79). The attempt to homogenise Aboriginal and white people only succeeds in damaging the source of Aboriginal culture—the tree's destruction leaves the local people:

too speechless to talk about a loss that was so great, it made them feel unhinged from their own bodies, unmoored, vulnerable, separated from eternity. They had been cut off. They called themselves damned people who felt like strangers walking around on their own country. (79)

The bond that tied the Indigenous people to Country, a bond mediated by the tree, has been deeply injured. But Oblivia, while dreaming in the ‘bowels’ of the tree, wrote ‘stanzas in ancient symbols’ in a language ‘dredged from the soup of primordial memory in these ancient lands’ (7) and so has become the inheritor and bearer of these memories, these traditional knowledges, whether she knows it or not. This, to my reading, connects me with Mathews’ onto-poetics: the tree’s being is essentially communicative. Almost as a last act of desperation before it is destroyed, it pours its poetry into the mind of the sleeping child. Literary studies scholar Linda Daley argues that this novel shows how the Indigenous imaginary survives the destruction of Country by becoming its own Country: ‘the topography of the mind itself can manifest a form of sovereignty’ against the settler logic that denies sovereignty and destroys the environment through climate change. It does this through invoking ‘forces of Country that live on through language as literature’ (21).

Indeed, in the novel’s prologue (in which Oblivia is the narrator) she declares that what follows ‘is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain’ (4). The world is dreaming itself into Oblivia’s mind. Again, I can approach this concept through Mathews’ conceptualisation of an onto-poetic understanding of the world. Even after global destruction, the language that weaves the connection between place and people will still be at work. In *The Swan Book*, as in *Mullumbimby*, the world is essentially communicative, and poetry flows from place. In addition, Wright’s multiplicity of voices and stories in the novel correspond to the chaos and destruction that occurs throughout her text.

While Oblivia is entrusted with the stories of the swamp, Aunty Bella Donna feeds her stories of white swans from halfway across the world. Meanwhile, black swans fly in huge numbers to gather around the swamp, establishing a special kinship with Oblivia, because the swans are following cyclones ‘when their own habitats are dried from prolonged drought’ (16). They are climate refugees. The disruptions between place, animal and story form a complex interweaving. Oblivia is not only the custodian of local knowledge now forever lost, but the stories from elsewhere create incomprehensible shifts in the fabric of her world. In fact, the reason that Oblivia is mute comes from her despair at the disconnection between world and word: ‘The girl thought that she should be silent if words were just a geographical device to be transplanted anywhere on earth’ (23). She alone seems to understand the power that stories have, to the detriment of the entire planet.

My brief reading of *The Swan Book* is necessarily marginal and suggestive—a critic with more erudition in the Western canon and Indigenous cultures would be able to track these

disjunctions more cogently. What I want to make clear is that my specific encounter with the novel, one shaped by my specific ‘ignorances’, brought forth a specific and new critical understanding. I find the complexity and disorientations woven into *The Swan Book* analogous with broader onto-poetical truths present to me, as a settler reader. Global crisis and destruction can, in this way, be catalysed by a refusal to hear the poetic speech of place. To transplant stories and models of thinking onto places that express their own needs through their own culture is perhaps the most pernicious form of colonial violence, and one that *The Swan Book* makes open to my experience.

These novels, read together with Mathews’ concept of an onto-poetic world, allows me to see that even in destruction, the world cries out. Further, it wants humans to hear this cry in all places, be they familiar and unfamiliar. That there is a communicative presence between place and people is a cornerstone of Indigenous knowledges, one that may not be immediately available to white settlers such as myself, but the implications of such knowledges can be made legible to me through the medium of literature, read through an onto-poetical lens. Lucashenko’s work shows me the situations and narratives in which nonhuman communications make a difference. And the warning that Wright’s novel provides is that, if humans don’t acknowledge the deeply onto-poetic structure of this world, it may become forever illegible to our species.

## ENDNOTES

1. The relationship between the climate emergency and colonial violence is well-established. For example, ecologists Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin suggest that the geological Anthropocene’s commencement ought to be dated to 1492, the year Spain invaded South America (174). Indigenous scholars and anthropologists have elaborated on this connection; Audra Mitchell, Kali Simmons, and Zoe Todd all characterise the Anthropocene as a consequence of Western ontology’s nature-culture divide (n.p.; 175; 252). Poet and academic Lucy Burnett challenges the prevailing responses to climate change as perpetuating the colonial teleology that led to the Anthropocene in the first place (163).

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