

## Country and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

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Alexis Wright's most recent novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), has been highly praised by critics and reviewers, and widely acknowledged as her most challenging and important novel to date (Ravenscroft; Webb; Williamson). Alison Ravenscroft discerned a note in *The Swan Book* not evident in Wright's two earlier novels, one which I believe leads to its core: 'If *Carpentaria* is a powerful narrative about hope that cannot die, *The Swan Book* surely puts the longevity of hope into doubt, seriously at risk'. I suggest that the element of doubt about hope, despair even, evident in *The Swan Book* derives from the fact that for the first time in Wright's fiction the essence of the land – 'Country' – has been irrevocably altered by climate change.

The Aboriginal English word 'Country' describes conceptions of land and its complex interrelations with human and non-human beings that are central to Australian Indigenous Law. Country contains Aboriginal knowledge systems; it also designates an active living presence, and the reciprocal relations of care between Aboriginal people and their land. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose writes that Country 'is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person [...] Country is not a generalized or undifferentiated type of place [...] Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life' (Rose 1996, 7). It is this vibrant, active land that Wright writes into her three novels: *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book*. By normalising the subject position of Country, her novels interrupt a western narrative which has figured land as lacking in agency, as an inert resource to be 'improved' and 'developed'.

*Plains of Promise* is Wright's early attempt to represent Country in the genre of the novel and here she tends more to describe and state its importance rather than mostly 'dramatizing' (Devlin-Glass 2007, 82), as she does to increasing effect in her next two novels. While *Carpentaria* is Wright's most hopeful portrayal of the power of Country to contest the destructive forces of multinational capitalism and colonisation, *The Swan Book*'s portrait of Country ravaged by climate change is laced with rage and despair. Set some one hundred years in the future, it portrays a land damaged for three centuries by colonisation, capital and now climate change; and acts as a warning and a lament for vanishing and irrevocably altered places. In 2003 Australian philosopher Glenn Albrecht coined the neologism 'solastalgia' for this so-called 'new' condition, the psychic or existential distress caused by environmental destruction, especially to known and loved places. But solastalgia is not new. Indigenous Australians have been experiencing solastalgia since the arrival of the British in 1788, so Aboriginal writers such as Wright are well positioned to convey this condition for a climate-changed planet. Today, conceptions of Australian land—as particular Country or as abstracted resource—have implications not just for the postcolonial Australian nation, but also for a planet facing ecological crises.

These global ecological crises are of such magnitude and consequence that they have inaugurated a new literary critical practice, ecocriticism. Formally recognised in the 1990s, it broadly addresses 'the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (Glotfelty and Fromm, xxi). In 1996 leading ecocritic Laurence Buell asked a question that helped to shift the focus of literary enquiry (as it pertains to literature generally): 'What happens when we try to reread Euro-American literature with biota rather than homo sapiens as our central concern' (Buell, 22)? Rereading Wright's novels with biota—as land—rather than homo sapiens at the centre of analysis reveals that they portray a clash between two cosmologies with different understandings of land. These cosmologies—of Indigenous Australia and of the British who colonised the continent in 1788—can be distinguished chiefly on the basis of how they conceptualise land and the relation of humans to it. In the former, land is a vital ecological system with its own being and agency to which humans belong; it is 'Country'. In the other, land is viewed as economic wealth, property to be developed, exploited or otherwise 'improved' for profit, with humans raised above it. I use the word 'cosmology' to gesture to the roots of these worldviews in their ancient stories of land: Judeo-Christian *Genesis* and the Aboriginal creative rainbow serpent found in the stories of Wright's ancestral Waanyi land. By analysing Wright's novels in terms of key large-scale tropes (as broadly defined by Greg Garrard, discussed below) that pertain to land—including Country, capital and Judeo-Christianity—it is possible to argue that they work rhetorically to privilege Aboriginal over Anglo-Australian understandings of this continent and by extension of the earth. By so doing, they imaginatively reclaim the land in Australian literary fiction which has been dominated by white representations of it.

In his landmark 2004 study *Ecocriticism*, ecocritic Greg Garrard says: 'One "ecocritical" way of reading is to see contributions to environmental debate as examples of rhetoric' (7). In Garrard's inflection, a rhetorical approach becomes an investigation of 'large-scale metaphors' (ibid) or tropes, which Garrard defines broadly. To address the 'monolithic concepts' such as 'nature' and 'the environment' that shape environmental debates, Garrard breaks them down into 'key structuring metaphors, or tropes' (16). Because these key structuring metaphors are all 'in some sense, ways of imagining, constructing or presenting nature in a figure', Garrard calls them 'tropes' (ibid). Garrard's tropes include pollution, pastoral, wilderness, apocalypse and Earth. To Garrard's list I add 'Country', 'capital' and 'Christianity'. These are all ways of imagining nature and are therefore germane to environmental debates. My analysis focuses on the way *The Swan Book* articulates Country and land through its central character, Oblivion Ethyl(ene). It is centrally concerned with land, and with land as Country, an active agent in the narrative, a protagonist that operates to counter settler misunderstandings of Aboriginal land as inert, exchangeable property. Here land and humans are mutually constituted rather than humans being apart from and above land.

My reading of Wright's text also shifts from the predominantly postcolonial treatment of her work to date towards a contemporary ecocritical perspective, in line with recent scholarship which has sought to bring ecocriticism together with postcolonial studies. Such work includes Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin's *Postcolonial Ecocriticism* (2010);

2015), Pablo Mukherjee's *Postcolonial Environments* (2010), Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley's *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011), and Bonnie Roos and Alex Hunt's *Postcolonial Green* (2010). As Huggan and Tiffin explain, 'postcolonial ecocriticism preserves the aesthetic function of the literary text while drawing attention to its social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world' (14). By extending postcolonial studies of Wright into the sphere of ecocriticism to examine *Country*, it becomes possible to consider the contributions that discourses of *Country* might make to broader questions of the human, of nature, and of their interrelationship. Further, my focus on *Country* in *The Swan Book* responds not only to the urging of the novel itself but also to its author's stated intentions. In 2004 Wright said:

Firstly, I develop my novels on ideas of seeing how the land might respond to different stories. The land is, I suppose, one of or even the central character. Most of the images and ideas relate to the land being alive and having important meaning, which is tied to the ancient roots of our continent. (qtd. in Vernay 121)

### ***The Swan Book***

As with her first two novels, *The Swan Book* opens in Wright's ancestral Waanyi land, the plains of the Gulf of Carpentaria—but this land is altered almost beyond recognition by climate change and the invasion of the Australian army into Aboriginal communities under 'the Intervention' ruling. On the day that Wright won the Miles Franklin Award for *Carpentaria*—21 June 2007—the then Prime Minister John Howard announced the Northern Territory Emergency Response, known as the Intervention. Prompted by the release of the *Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*, the Emergency Response enlisted the support of over 600 soldiers from the Australian Defence Force to enter Indigenous communities. *The Swan Book* targets the politics behind the Intervention as well as satirising Western culture in general. The West's acquisitive wanderings and trespass across the entire Earth, and its exploitation of the planet's resources in search of cheap natures, have so transformed *Country* and its creatures that they have lost their ancestral stories connected with specific land forms and locations. In a time of climate change, as landscapes are altered and disappear, new stories are required: stories about biota that portray the natural world not as a spectacular backdrop for human dramas, but as a being with agency and with which human life is inextricably bound, *Country*. *The Swan Book* is one such new story.

The Prelude is narrated in the first person, by a damaged young girl named Oblivion Ethyl(ene), known as Oblivia. This is Wright's most sophisticated narration yet of the entanglement of humans, other-than-humans, land and stories that make up *Country*: Oblivia's mind is both the realm of ancestral *Country* and of the novel itself; *Country* narrates through Oblivia. The swamp's eutrophication is a result not only of the violent imposition of the Intervention, but also of anthropogenic climate change, which has flipped the continent's weather systems so the tropical north has become infested by dust. Here climate change has profoundly altered *Country* itself, tearing entire species from their lands and their stories, as exemplified by the arrival of black swans at the swamp.

## Climate change

Climate change is portrayed as the product of the same Western culture that spawned imperialism and capital: a restless, invasive, acquisitive culture, bent on the trespass of other lands for the sake of material excess and self-aggrandisement. This culture, a conflation of Christianity and capitalism, is represented by the recurring trope of Christmas and its associated figure of Santa Claus. It is an ingenious metaphor, because Christmas is both one of the holiest days in the Christian calendar and capitalism's most cherished driver of consumer spending; and Santa Claus flies through the heavens like an archangel delivering gifts, not from God, but from those temples of commerce, shopping malls. Other motifs insistently ascribed to Western culture, such as noise and movement, pertain to its engagement with the material world. An unnamed suburban family of red-haired 'white Australians' (215) acts as a synecdoche for both white Australia and Western culture more generally. They are 'anonymous friends' (210) to Oblivia's betrothed, the Aboriginal 'archangel Warren Finch' (119); and their house, fittingly called 'the Christmas House', is described as 'a safe house because it was typical' (211). This 'typical' white family is characterised as 'gushing with every footstep' and as being 'moving-mouth friends' whose 'voices shouted to be heard' (212, 214, 213). Country, on the other hand, is characterised as 'this silent place of worship', 'a sigh', 'a whisper' (34, 334).

In this paper I am interested not so much in Wright's representation of climate change per se, as in its effects on her representation of Country. Climate change shapes *The Swan Book* in three notable ways. First, this novel even more emphatically than *Carpentaria* portrays Aboriginal and Western cosmologies in terms of their respective relationships to land. The Aboriginal people of the swamp are portrayed as 'sitting for all times in one place' (12). In contrast, Western culture is portrayed as one of wanderers loosely tied to land, a condition dating back to its origin story: its people are 'gypsies searching for something to happen in their lives, their world had been like that from the day their ancestors had been expelled from the Garden of Eden' (249). Second, it is climate change that brings Wright's first homodiegetic narrator: Oblivia, who narrates the Prelude. Oblivia then orchestrates the rest of the novel via a heterodiegetic narrative. The entire novel works not only to figure Oblivia as the silent (she refuses speech) inscriber of the stories of Country but also as an extension or agent of Country itself. In the face of climate change, Country must be granted narrative authority; it must tell its story if it is to survive. And third, *The Swan Book* introduces Wright's first Aboriginal protagonist characterised almost entirely by Judeo-Christian tropes: the 'gift from God' (119), Warren Finch. These three new features of Wright's are directly connected to real-world climate change as it pertains to Country and, by extension, to the Earth. That Wright considers it the responsibility of writers to imagine climate change she made clear in 2013: 'In the last ten years, environmental scientists have been telling us the world is going to change, and I think it is the work of the writer to imagine this, to imagine what the world might look like' (Wright 2013b, 28).

In Wright's imaginative realisation, climate change changes *everything*, including stories and the way they are told. The new literary genre of climate change fiction—dubbed 'cli

fi’ by journalist and activist Dan Bloom in 2007—has risen rapidly in the last two decades after its first appearance in the 1970s. In Australia, Steven Amsterdam made an early foray into the new genre with *Things We Didn’t See Coming* (2010) and more recently novels like Anson Cameron’s *The Last Pulse* (2014), James Bradley’s *Clade* (2015), and Mireille Juchau’s *The World Without Us* (2015) have also addressed climate change. Two other scholars of cli fi, Adam Trexler (2015) and Timothy Clark (2010, 2015), argue that climate change brings new scales of time and space to literature. For Clark, climate change deranges the human scale of modernism and throws familiar Western knowledge systems into chaos (*Ecocriticism* 13). *The Swan Book* registers these ‘derangements of scale’ in the range of its focus, which moves from the very small and unperceived (a virus, swans, a polluted swamp, a mute girl) to the planetary (global weather systems, mass movements of people), and ‘Internationally Warren’ (123) himself. Trexler distinguishes three key effects that engaging with climate change has on the genre of the novel. First, it introduces scale effects that require literary critics to develop new ways of describing the interpenetration between the domestic and the planetary (26). Second, it makes the human economy newly significant (*ibid*). Third, climate change fiction allows ‘nonhuman things’ to shape narrative (*ibid*). These formal effects can be seen in *The Swan Book*. They also appear, if to a lesser extent, in Wright’s two earlier novels. I suggest these effects pertain to an event with which Wright’s fiction is generally concerned, the arrival on Aboriginal land in 1788 of the first British colonisers and therefore of Western culture, which she portrays as an act of theft:

After all, anyone could see that foreign ghosts were not particularly harmful if you got past the innocuous cunning way that they could steal a whole country, kill your people and still not pay all those centuries of rent. (57)

Such violent colonial imposition threw the Aboriginal world into chaos just as climate change has thrown the planet and its inhabitants, its creatures, people and their stories into chaos some three hundred years later.

### **Oblivia and Country**

Oblivia’s swamp story begins with the appearance of two species of climate-change refugees: a European human, ‘Bella Donna of the Champions’, the caller of swans (31); and a black swan. Both are figured as angels—and both claim the outcast Oblivia. Warren also claims her. Under traditional Law, the elders of his Brolga Nation and Oblivia’s neighbouring swamp country have long ago arranged for their marriage. Except that like everything in this colonised, climate-changed world, this ordained narrative of Country is damaged: the elders of both Countries attempt to prevent the marriage because, according to a story in a newspaper, ‘a very important little girl’ (93), Oblivia, has been raped ‘in an Aboriginal community by members of a gang of petrol-sniffing children’ (93). As discussed below, part of Oblivia’s struggle is to retrieve and tell her own story. This story ‘about what happened to the girl who was found in a tree’ is common knowledge in the Brolga Nation and everyone has their own version:

Some people were saying firstly that the girl was taken, kidnapped by the tree from her people as punishment. Others said that she was really the tree itself. She had become the tree's knowledge. Or, possibly, she was related to the tree through Law, and the tree took her away from her people. (95)

Oblivia is of the gum tree in which she is found. She is 'stick-like' (14), 'stick thin' (82), has 'stick wings' (78) and may even be the tree itself (95). She inscribes the tree's ancient stories, which are 'the sacred text, the first text' (51). Like the book she narrates, Oblivia exists on a multitude of levels, as suggested by her name. She is oblivion (both forgetting and forgotten). She is a vessel into which Bella Donna introduces her alien swan stories, her memory 'created by what the woman had chosen to tell her' (45). And she is Ethylene, a hydrocarbon found in crude oil, which is used for petrol sniffing and produces among many other things the ubiquitous plastic shopping bag. It is also a hormone that ripens fruit. Oblivia is 'Ignis Fatuus = Foolish Fire' (7), the dust, the drought. Unlike Warren, Oblivia is a reluctant chosen one. She attempts to reject her role as the black swan's minder and give it back to Country. She tells the drought 'she was jack sick of it. *You got your old job back. I am giving this last black swan back to you*' (331).

The first thing Oblivia announces in her homodiegetic narrative is: 'Upstairs in my brain, there is this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house' (1). This 'cut snake' virus evokes the Waanyi rainbow serpent, which has become mad (as a 'cut snake') from the poisons of white culture. 'Bush doctors' tell her the virus is 'like assimilation of the grog or flagon' (3). Oblivia also calls it 'nostalgia for foreign things' (3): it is the many stories of the European world planted in Oblivia's mind by Bella Donna. The Epilogue also suggests that the virus is associated with Bella Donna and her swan stories: 'To see the swan like this made the girl feel sick of the virus thing talking in her head, and telling her that she and the swans were joined as companions' (332). Oblivia's mind attests to the formidable strength she needs tell her own story of Country despite its exclusion from the Western narratives of the Christmas House (219) and despite Warren's belief that he owns it (93): 'The really worrying thing about missile-launching fenestras [of the virus's house] is what will be left standing in the end, and which splattering of truths running around in my head about a story about a swan with a bone will last upon this ground' (1). In 2008 as part of her Oodgeroo Noonuccal Lecture, Wright said:

Oodgeroo absolutely understood the power of belief in the fight for sovereignty over this land—that if you succeed in keeping the basic architecture of how you think, then you owned the freedom of your mind, that unimpeded space to store hope and feed your ability to survive. (2008, 19)

*The Swan Book* constructs this architecture of the mind—and, as with a mind, it operates in many dimensions simultaneously. It teems with songs, stories, images and fragments from across the planet. And it attests that land—its nature, its stories, and humans' relations to it—is not just *the* question for postcolonial Australia, but also for the Earth itself in the face of climate change. In the Christmas House before her forced wedding to Warren, Oblivia finds a room filled with the stories of the Christian world, but she cannot find her story. 'After exploring all of these little scenes that had been created by months

of labour, she had found no eucalyptus tree trunk with strange writing in the dust, no swamp lined with people guarded by the Army' (219). By telling this swan book, her story of Country, Oblivia corrects this omission. She defies Warren's attempt to rob her of her thoughts and her story, understanding that he attempts to ensure 'that she would never reach the point where her emotions would overtake his plans, to leave him somehow, to return to the swans' (229). When Warren blows up the swamp to prevent her from returning to it from the city (230), Oblivia takes refuge in her imagination: 'Inside a small pocket of bravery hiding in the crevices of her brain, she imagined herself being united with the swan ghosts flying away from the massacre. It was the only way she could wish herself out of this place' (233).

The imagination and words have a quasi-material dimension in this novel, and Oblivia understands that stories have force. This force is conveyed at the moment Bella Donna's stories become fused with Country, with the swamp and with Oblivia: 'Something dropped into the water. Plop! Was this a fact that had slipped from her hypothetical love stories?' (46) As Arnaud Barras also argues, this is a key passage in the novel: a 'transgression of ontological levels' (9) is made possible by the onomatopoeic word 'Plop!' It is followed by a surreal passage that hints at the nature of Oblivia's narration, the way she has become fused with Country and with Bella Donna:

Far into the night, the swamp music continued telling the old woman's love story through the girl's dreams where, in the underwater shadows, she looked like a cygnet transformed into two people entwining and unwinding back and forth in the bubbling swamp, in waves scattered by a relic dropped from the beak of the black swan imagined by the old woman. (46-47)

When flocks of black swans arrive at the swamp, Oblivia attempts to reach beyond human language hoping that 'she might read their fortunes in the language nature had written' in their feathers (71). Her direct communication with the Law, with Country and the language of nature is further demonstrated by her writing in her gum tree refuge, her 'fingers were constantly moving [...] She was writing stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch' (7). These symbols may have been 'words that resembled the twittering of bird song speaking about the daylight' (8). Oblivia's sound is figured in terms of whispers of Country: the only words that can be heard 'emanating from the girl's mouth were of such low frequency that [Bella Donna] strained to distinguish what usually fell within the range of bushland humming, such as leaves caught up in gusts of wind' (20). When her body threatens to force her to attempt formal human speech, Oblivia closes her mouth so 'any of those screaming words that made it up to her mouth, crashed like rocks landing on enamel at the back of her clenched teeth' (38).

The novel's two climaxes are both journeys across Country. The first is the farcical national tour of Warren's body in response to the grief following his assassination, figured in clichés of Australian national discourse. It is the '*Highway Dreaming Code*' (295), the '*See You Around*' journey of the '*Spirit of the Nation*' (298). The second is Oblivia's exodus, her escape from her captivity in Warren's People's Palace (234) leading the black swans out of the city to return them to the swamp. As they travel north,

the swans take care of the girl: 'the Gypsy Swans moved to be gone, but only if she was following them' (326). In concert with the swans, Country drags the girl through the sky: 'She and the swans were caught in the winds of a ghost net dragged forward by the spirit of the country' (326). They arrive at 'another water-laden swamp land' which is described in detail with its water lilies, grasses, ants, flies, moths and 'bird-infested coolibah trees'. This rich, vividly-detailed natural world 'was the land screaming with all its life to the swans, *Welcome to our world*. All the spirits yelled to the girl to *eat the water lilies*' (327). The land speaks—screams—through its profusion of life. And yet this land—here a synecdoche for the entire Earth—has been abandoned by Western civilisation: 'Now the day had come when modern man had become the new face of God, and simply sacrificed the whole Earth' (11). *The Swan Book* holds this culture responsible for climate change, for so disregarding the Earth and its quiet wisdom that it has ransacked it for human purposes. Writing this global story into a story of Country, it argues for Oblivia's quiet action in caring, or attempting to care, for the place to which she belongs.



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