

Climate Fiction and the Crisis of Imagination: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*

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Abstract

This article analyses the representation of environmental crisis and climate crisis in Carpentaria (2006) and The Swan Book (2013) by Indigenous Australian writer Alexis Wright. Building upon the groundbreaking work of environmental humanities scholars such as Heise (2008), Clark (2015), Trexler (2015) and Ghosh (2016), who have emphasised the main challenges faced by authors of climate fiction, it considers the novels as an entry point to address the climate-related crisis of culture – while acknowledging the problematic aspects of reading Indigenous texts as antidotes to the 'great derangement' – and the danger of a singular Anthropocene narrative that silences the 'unevenly universal' (Nixon, 2011) responsibilities and vulnerabilities to environmental harm. Exploring themes such as environmental racism, ecological imperialism, and the slow violence of climate change, it suggests that Alexis Wright's novels are of utmost importance for global conversations about the Anthropocene and its literary representations, as they bring the unevenness of environmental and climate crisis to visibility.

Keywords: Alexis Wright; cli-fi; slow violence; ecological imperialism; climate apocalypse

Alexis Wright, activist and award-winning writer, is a member of the Waanyi nation from south of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Northern Territory. She has written widely on Indigenous Australian rights: her works of fiction and non-fiction include *Grog War* (1997), *Plains of Promise* (1997), *Carpentaria* (2006), winner of the Miles Franklin Award in 2007, and *The Swan Book* (2013). The present analysis dwells on the epic novel *Carpentaria* and the climate change dystopia *The Swan Book* and considers the novels as an entry point to address the climate-related crisis of culture and the danger of a singular Anthropocene narrative. Exploring themes such as environmental racism, ecological imperialism, and the slow violence of climate change, I suggest that Alexis Wright's novels are of utmost importance for global conversations about the Anthropocene and its literary representations, as they bring the unevenness of environmental and climate crisis to visibility.

In the past two decades, climate change and its effects have been articulated in a growing body of literary works and have especially become major trends in Anglophone fiction (for a comprehensive analysis of cultural works engaging with anthropogenic climate change, see **Goodbody & Johns-Putra, 2019**). Environmental humanities scholars such as Ursula K. Heise, Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra are increasingly investigating the ecopolitical value of environmental literature, and the main challenges faced by authors of climate fiction, such as the more-than-human complexity of climate change, the novel's anthropocentric tendencies, the planetary scale and the slowly unfolding pace of human environmental impact.

In his groundbreaking monograph *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (2015), Timothy Clark draws on the idea that the roots of the climate crisis are to be found in a failure of the imagination, hence literary studies can play an important role in understanding, if not solving, this crisis. He also posits, however, that the Anthropocene might be a threshold at which literature becomes inadequate to represent the planetary scale of human environmental impact. Providing multiple examples of climate change fiction, from Ian McEwan's *Solar* (2010) to Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour* (2012), he claims that the generic conventions of the contemporary novel and the techniques available to engage a reader's response (such as the conflict between characters with opposing views) are at odds with the scale of the ecological crisis: Clark argues that 'familiar modes of suspense and identification (...) have more to do with the human psychology of competition or self-fulfilment (...) than with the true complexities of the issue' (**Ibid: 181**). He further validates that extreme weather events unfold with 'indulgence in a pleasurable destructiveness' (**Ibid: 182**), and that literary realism is ill-equipped to deal with the agency of material things.

The clash of scales also encompasses the distinction between *homo* and *anthropos*: humans have never experienced themselves as a species nor thought of human agency over multiple scales at once (**Chakrabarty, 2009; Horn & Bergthalle, 2020**).

Adam Trexler's study on climate change novels (**2015**), similarly, highlights that the 'interpenetration between domestic and planetary scales' (**Ibid: 26**), the *longue durée* of climate change and the agency of non-human others require a complex transformation of the novel's generic conventions. In order to be articulated through fiction, climate change should force multiple narrative innovations of pre-existing genres:

[t]he Anthropocene challenges science fiction's technological optimism, general antipathy toward life sciences, and patriotic individualism. Chiller fiction becomes wholly implausible when supernatural forces resolve enormous, atmospheric effects. Coming-of-age stories break down when the actions of prior generations trigger insolvable weather disasters and collapse economic opportunities for young people struggling toward independent adulthood. Safe identification with the hero of a suspense novel breaks down when he drives sports cars and exotic yachts, not to mention serves a government that has repeatedly thwarted climate accords. It is even more difficult to condense the distributed, impersonal causes of global warming into a climate villain (Trexler, 2015: 14).

A thorough analysis of the challenges presented by the Anthropocene to the art and the humanities is offered by Amitav Ghosh's extended essay on the subject of climate change, *The Great Derangement* (**2016**). One of the most debated books on the limits of human thought when it comes to environmental catastrophe, it points out 'serious' fiction's reluctance to deal with climate change. The acclaimed novelist identifies a variety of factors that are likely to have an important influence over the crisis of imagination that he laments: the novel is usually set in a certain time horizon that rarely extends beyond the lives of the characters and requires a confined setting. Further, the literary imagination is 'radically centred on the human' (**Ibid: 114**) and on the individual at the expense of the idea of the collective, and treats nature as a mere background. It tends to employ conventional literary strategies linked to human psychology rather than to the nonhuman context, whilst the land and the natural world are portrayed as a backdrop for human drama, lacking agency. Ghosh also argues that science fiction and climate fiction might be better equipped to deal with climate change, but they are 'made up mostly of disaster stories set in the future', which 'is but one aspect of the age of human-induced global warming: it also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present' (**Ibid: 124-125**).

What is also important for the present discussion is his assertion that among the key features of the birth of the modern novel were the relocation of the unlikely – such as a character hit by ‘an unheard-of weather phenomenon’ – and the unheard-of to the margins and the exile of catastrophism toward the background. In fact:

to introduce such happenings into a novel is in fact to court eviction from the mansion in which serious fiction has long been in residence; it is to risk banishment to the humbler dwellings that surround the manor house—those generic outhouses that were once known by names such as ‘the Gothic’, ‘the romance’, or ‘the melodrama’, and have now come to be called ‘fantasy’, ‘horror’, and ‘science fiction’ (Ghosh, 2016: 45).

The Anthropocene, however, is defined precisely by weather events that have a high degree of improbability. Ghosh actually suggests that there are literary movements confronting and celebrating the improbable, like surrealism and magical realism. He posits, though, that what marks a major difference between these movements and the current weather events is that ‘these events are neither surreal nor magical. To the contrary, these highly improbable occurrences are overwhelmingly, urgently, astoundingly real’ (*Ibid*: 50). To treat climate change as magical or surreal would run the risk of robbing it of its urgency: magical realism, he concludes, is a form of concealment as much as the realist novel.

Diverging from Ghosh’s skepticism about literary movements replete with the unheard-of, Ben Holgate (2019) states that one possible response to the crisis of imagination posed by climate change could come from magical realism. Besides drawing on postcolonial scholars such as Elleke Boehmer and Homi Bhabha who have widely described the link between magical realist fiction and the postcolonial world, he also sheds light on the commonalities between the former and environmental literature; namely, the development of new language and forms of expression that respond to dominant ontologies and epistemologies, the defamiliarising juxtaposition of the unreal and the ordinary, a focus on the interconnectedness of the natural world, and a capacity to break down boundaries between human and non-human. He particularly reads Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* as an antidote to ‘the great derangement’ (Ghosh, 2016), linking Indigenous Australian ontology with magical realist fiction, and asserting that the magical elements of the text do not undermine the urgency of climate change, but rather help the reader to ‘understand the ‘real’ setting of climate change’ (Holgate, 2019: 9). As Holgate notes:

[a] magical realist text does not necessarily have to present extreme weather events or climate change as the 'magical' elements. Indeed, Wright's *The Swan Book* portrays drought and flooding in the apocalyptic setting in a matter-of-fact manner, that is, as 'real' (Holgate, 2019: 9).

Holgate notes that Wright employs magical realist conventions to convey the Indigenous Australian understanding of the world and of its creation, the Dreamtime, following other Aboriginal authors. The land and its entanglements with human and non-human beings are central to the Dreamtime as well as to Indigenous Australian Law, that Bill Gammage defines as 'an ecological philosophy enforced by religious sanction' that 'compel[s] people to care for all their country' (cited in Holgate, 2019: 43).

I situate my critical position as a partial departure from both Ghosh' and Holgate's stances, underscoring that several critics have warned against the association of Indigenous Australian knowledge with magic and the supernatural. In relation to 'Western' categorisations of Alexis Wright's work, Alison Ravenscroft (2012) points out that not only the Waanyi writer has been anchored to white Australian literary canon, but her texts – both *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* – have often been fixed 'within the constraints of magic realism' (Ibid: 60), reinforcing the binary opposition between Indigenous magic and 'Wester' reality as the only possible reality. She refers to Toni Morrison's claim that 'among African Americans there are ways of knowing that might fall into magic or superstition in the eyes of white American readers' (cited in Ravenscroft, 2012: 25), and that she aims at representing reality even when her stories have been referred as magical by white scholars. Similarly, Wright refuses this assimilation with magical realism and states that she considers literature 'the best way to tell the truth ... more of a truth than non-fiction which isn't really true either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what it is safe to tell' (2002: 13). As such, Wiradjuri writer, poet and academic Jeanine Leane, following Wright and Ravenscroft, defines *Carpentaria* 'a work of Aboriginal realism' (2015: 155). Critically, Frances Devlin-Glass addresses white readers urging them to read *Carpentaria* as Aboriginal realism and a true representation of Indigenous Australian Law and a 'powerful contribution to understanding of indigenous knowledge' (2008: 392). These texts provide the foundations of my argument and have helped me to recognise the limitations of my own position as a white Western European reader of an Indigenous text. As Ravenscroft notes, 'Indigenous Law cannot be 'seen' from a Waanyi point of view if one is not Waanyi' (2012: 77), and although it is important to keep moving towards understanding, this movement can never be an arrival, and knowledge always remains provisional. Bearing in mind Ravenscroft's paradigm of 'radical uncertainty and impossible dialectic' (Ibid: 63) and the risks arising

from efforts to find 'redemption in Aboriginal people's culture, as if those we have conquered should now save us' (Rose, 2004: 2), I propose a reading practice of *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* that considers the novels as entry points to address the climate-related crisis of culture (while acknowledging the problematic aspects of reading the novels as antidotes to the 'great derangement') and the danger of a singular Anthropocene narrative.

Following Lucy Rowlands' lucid work on the issue of narrative and indigeneity (2019), I stress that Indigenous perspectives on climate change and environmental damage cannot be excluded from the global conversations about the Anthropocene, 'precisely because the survival of their culture and relationships with their country are most at risk' (Ibid: 2). Much contemporary discourse on the Anthropocene, though, invites us to think at undifferentiated species level, running the risk of erasing power hierarchies, as the *anthropos* after which geologists have named the current epoch does not seem to have a class, a race, a gender, nor in-built vulnerabilities shaped by colonialism and capitalist inequality. As Ursula K. Heise suggests, the environmental humanities should provide an account of the 'productive conceptual tension between humans' agency as a species and the inequalities that shape and constrain the agencies of different kinds of humans, on one hand, and between human and nonhuman forms of agency, on the other' (Heise, 2008: 6).

This universalising logic is also a recurring feature of multiple literary representations of the Anthropocene. Hsu and Yazell (2019) have termed 'structural appropriation' the process in which mainstream post-apocalyptic climate fiction projects into white American characters and readers the structural violence of climate catastrophe that has already been experienced by colonised, postcolonial and Indigenous populations. These future scenarios, exemplified by Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* (2015) are often inhabited by small groups of survivors struggling to regenerate US culture and society, both endangered by a 'third-worlding of the West as a result of apocalyptic social collapse' (Ibid: 350). If, as Lawrence Buell (1995) has suggested, the '[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the environmental imagination has at its disposal' (Ibid: 285), analysing what these narratives conceal and obscure instead of revealing is an urgent task. In these narratives of apocalypse climate change is portrayed as a universal human threat that is experienced by a universal human subject, silencing the manifold vulnerabilities to environmental catastrophes that have been conceptualised by global climate justice movements.

Sharae Deckard has rightly suggested that climate fiction from the Global South and other postcolonies might differ from the one published in North America or Western Europe, in terms of contents but also aesthetic (Deckard & Akbar, 2020). Having the unevenness of environmental crisis and the tight link between climate change and settler colonialism as 'constitutive part[s] of its own aesthetic', it can offer 'a corrective to the 'invisibilisation' of these already-occurring disasters in the Western media' and intervene in Hollywoodian and Euro-American representations of climate change where apocalypse is a 'sudden, total shock to a bunch of privileged white people fleeing for their lives, rather than a process unfolding incrementally'. This resonates with what Rob Nixon (2011) has termed the 'slow violence' of climate change, which is 'neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental' and 'occurs gradually and out of sight' (Ibid: 2), taking years, even centuries, to manifest. The main casualties of slow violence are the unseen 'poor' (hence the title *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*) lacking resources. Among the most common forms of slow violence against the poor Nixon places 'petro-imperialism, the megadam industry, outsourced toxicity, neocolonial tourism, antihuman conservation practices, corporate and environmental deregulation, and the militarization of commerce' (Ibid: 5). Nixon brings together postcolonial studies, ecocriticism and literary studies to address the representation of climate crisis in an age when the media often chooses the instant sensational event over the long-term effects of disasters that are 'anonymous and star nobody' (Ibid: 3), and suggests that both human responsibility for climate change and vulnerability to environmental harm are 'unevenly universal'.

Furthermore, as Stephanie LeMenager (2017) suggests, much of the climate fiction of Europe, white America, Britain and Scandinavia is concerned with what Roy Scranton has termed 'learning to die' in the Anthropocene: according to Scranton one of the main challenges of the Anthropocene is learning to die not as individuals, but as a civilisation, because it is too late to imagine effective responses to the challenge of living in the Anthropocene. But who is learning to die as a civilisation? As the Potawatomi philosopher Kyle P. Whyte makes clear in *Indigenous science (fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises* (2018), narratives of apocalypse that project climate crisis in 'horrific science fiction scenarios' (Ibid: 225) obscure ongoing oppression against Indigenous people, and conceal their perspectives on the continuities between colonial violence and climate change. 'Having endured one or many more apocalypses' (Ibid: 236) and having suffered the most severe hardship arising from environmental transformation due to different forms of colonialism, most Indigenous people live in a present which is already dystopian. Among such dreadful

transformations Whyte mentions ‘ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration’ (**Ibid: 226**) and a disrupted relationship with the nonhuman. A key feature of what the philosopher has defined ‘living Indigenous science fiction’ (**Ibid: 230**) is the contrast between a spiralling time of constant change and ongoing crisis – which sheds light on the role of colonial dispossession in environmental transformation – on the one hand, and linear narratives of upcoming crisis and dire futures of climate change on the other (**Xausa, 2020**).

The ‘slow violence’ of Ecological Imperialism: *Carpentaria*

Reconstructing *Carpentaria*’s plot is an exceedingly challenging task: as Kate Rigby notes, the novel’s nonlinear narrative and its several tangled storylines pose ‘profound hermeneutic challenges’ (**Rigby, 2013: 123**) for non-Indigenous readers. These difficulties partly derive from Wright’s choice to ‘engage more Indigenous readers, especially from remote locations, to be readers of this book either now, or in the future, or perhaps at least, to be able to listen to a reading of the book’ (**Wright, 2007: 80**).

Set in the fictitious town of Desperance, in the Gulf of Carpentaria in north-west Queensland, the award-winning novel presents a multilayered structure that portrays the lives of the Indigenous Australian people of the Pricklebush clan. The clan lives in a ‘human dumping-ground next to the town tip (...), piled up together in trash humpies made of tin, cloth, and plastic too’ (**Wright, 2006: 4**), separated from the white settler population’s quarter known as Uptown. As Ben Holgate notes, this garbage ghetto segregating Indigenous Australians from the white society and preventing them from having legal control over their traditional land is a form of slow violence and environmental racism, a form of systemic racism whereby minority groups and communities of colour are burdened with a disproportionate number of health hazards. It is clear from the first pages that the Indigenous protagonists of the novel suffer ongoing colonisation, although Australia is officially considered a decolonised nation since the British handed over direct rule to Australia in 1901 and the Commonwealth of Australia was inaugurated. The novel centres on the Phantom family and their patriarch Normal Phantom, leader of the Westend Pricklebush people – and, most importantly, a guardian of the Law and protector of the environment –, and their disputes with the Eastside camp – home to Joseph Midnight’s mob exiled from the West – on the one hand, and with the white Uptown and the Gurfurrit mine on the other.

The town of Desperance, built 'in the hectic heyday of colonial vigour' (**Ibid: 3**), was intended to serve as a port but eventually lost its harbour waters as the Rainbow Serpent altered the river's course. The Serpent is one among multiple ancestral spirits that reside within the environment, shape it, and watch over the Country. As such, it collapses space and time, merging geological time with the Dreamtime and creating a place of 'deep time underneath Desperance' (**Leanne 2015: 9**) that falls out of the scene of white settlers imagining: 'the inside knowledge about this river and coastal region is the Aboriginal Law handed down through the ages since time began' (**Wright, 2006: 3**). Just as *The Swan Book's* polluted dry swamp, *Carpentaria's* main setting is a place nobody cared about: 'they were changing guards at Buckingham Palace but nobody in the world cared what happened to Desperance' (**Ibid: 71**), and 'never in their wildest imagination had they [the Pricklebush clan] expected to see the likes of downtown Desperance splashed across television, like New York, Jerusalem or Kosovo' (**Ibid: 303**).

The town acquires a more sophisticated outlook when the first multinational mining operation established in the region:

The multi-million dollar mine, from infancy to its working prime, was probed, described and paraded to network viewers. Interviewers and footage of scenery went jig-jogging along in soap opera intensity, before finally shifting to pan, and viewers were encouraged to dissect what had become of this showcase of the nation (Wright, 2006: 397).

It soon becomes clear, however, that the resource extraction industry starts 'pillaging the region's treasure trove' (**Wright, 2006: 8**) and undermining the traditional sacred land. The novel highlights that both the traditional land and its dwellers are 'pillaged' and exploited by the mining company – 'they cannot crush people just because they have the power to crush the landscape to smithereens' (**Ibid: 185**) –, and that the Pricklebush people are well aware of the environmental risks arising from the dewatering of the ore in a flood-prone area. 'Who was involved? Who knows? Who cares? What was the environmental hazard to his traditional country?' (**Ibid: 372**); 'how many evolutions would it take before the natural environment included mines in its inventory of fear?' (**Ibid: 379**). As Holgate suggests, the iron ore is yet another form of ecological imperialism, a concept introduced by Alfred Crosby to describe European settlers' introduction of plants, animals, and diseases in colonised areas as well as the dispossession of land, the subjugation of native peoples, and the exploitation of the natural environment for economic profit. Furthermore, by making a false Native title claim on the area, Joseph Midnight chooses to benefit from mining royalties, indicating that ecological imperialism can also led Indigenous people to fight among

themselves. Holgate critically argues that *Carpentaria* is set in 2002, a decade after Mabo judgement abolished the legal fiction of *terra nullius* – or ‘land belonging to no one’, on which British based their claims to possession of Australia – and recognised the land rights of the Meriam people, traditional owners of the Murray Islands. The novel, therefore, could be interpreted as a ‘counter-reaction to the conservative reaction to Mabo’ (Holgate, 2020: 53).

The Uptown’s white settler population, instead, maintains a good neighbour policy with the Gurfurrit mine – a policy that ‘worked to kill opposition’ (Ibid: 364), as Will Phantom explains. Son of Normal Phantom, leader of the Westend Pricklebush Aboriginal, Will remains adamant through the whole novel in his campaign against the environmental and cultural damage brought about by the new mine, acknowledging that:

cold and heartless ambitions of politicians and bureaucrats came flying in from faraway cities and capitals to destroy the lives of Aboriginal people (123), [and] some little operation like this could be very lucrative for any of the miners wanting to make their retirement package. Nothing short of an olive plantation back in the home country for the Italian. Palaces in Europe or Asia for the management (Wright, 2006: 372).

He will eventually guide the sabotage of the Gurfurrit pipeline, but the final defeat of the mine will be helped by the complete destruction of the town by a massive cyclone. Anthony Carrigan suggests that Wright depicts the ‘slippage between indigenous-led resistance and environmental agency’ (Carrigan, 2015: 94). The arrival of the ‘big rain’ is sensed by the main characters, who observe this ‘mysterious change of great attitude’ (Wright, 2006: 443) in the clouds, the seagulls, the cockatoos and many other birds heading inland. The Pricklebush’s dwellers, who are presented from the first pages as the ones who understand the Gulf country weather and ‘know the moment of climatic change better than they know themselves’ (Ibid: 3), feel the agency of the air long before the Uptown people:

Remember the real people of the Gulf, those poor black should living on heartbreak and worries in the Picklebush because they know all about cyclones, unlike those copycat Uptown dolce vita type of people sitting in comfortable armchairs expecting to acquire their ancestral ties with the sea by sitting on their posteriors watching television programs, and never going out to sea on any occasion to pay their respect, like the old people who were the backbone of the Pricklebush who did not mind paying their dues, and will tell you cyclones don’t come from nowhere, because there is plenty of business going on when cyclones come onto the country out of the rooftop of the world, like what is going on outside

now from the most powerful creation spirits, who come down out of the skies like a tempest when they start looking for Law breakers (Wright, 2006: 460).

The cyclone obliterates the whole town, including the Gurfurrit mine. Will, observing the devastation left behind by the cyclone, realises that the whole human history could be erased if the Gods decided to 'move the country' (Wright, 2006: 473). But whose history is obliterated by the cyclone? Throughout the whole novel, Wright stresses that Desperance's dumping ground, home to the Pricklebush clan, is one of the most unknown places in the world (as the swamp in *The Swan Book*); the cyclone, however, erases both the mine and the privileged side of the town, whose inhabitants turn a blind eye to the arrival of the flood. This way, the living land writes an alternative history that fills the gaps and silences of the official one. Kate Rigby suggests that 'the massive cyclone constitutes the most dramatic incursion of the other-than-human into the action of the novel and, ultimately, facilitates its utopian conclusion' (Rigby, 2013: 132), and 'acts as a corrective in the lives of some of the key Aboriginal characters as well, and it is with their unfinished stories that the novel ends' (Ibid: 133). Will Phantom, indeed, learns to see nothing monstrous in 'the bulwark of the spirits rose from the waters' (Ibid: 473) and in the consequent more-than-human creation 'singing the country afresh' (Wright, 2006: 499). The Indigenous Australian protagonists' experience of the cyclone is radically different from that of the Uptown people, who pathologise the event as a malign force to defeat. As Leanne notes:

for the settlers, the town is levelled and destroyed. For the Aboriginal residents, the town is transformed as part of the cosmos of the underground serpent. It never was a question of 'if', but 'when'. In this way, Wright challenges European arrogance and inexperience with the living land (Leanne, 2015: 158).

The flood catastrophe mitigates the effects of colonisation on the traditional sacred land and its Indigenous Australian inhabitants. While Rigby stresses that in the world beyond the novel the incursion of the non-human rarely benefit the most vulnerable ones, and the erasure of the mine does not signal the end of ecological imperialism, *Carpentaria's* hopeful conclusion comes from the various forms of resistance – spiritual and militant – to environmental exploitation offered by Dreamtime ancestral spirits, guardians of the Law like Normal Phantom, and Indigenous Australian guerrilla warriors like Will, who join hands to watch over the Country. The novel therefore challenges the binary opposition between the real and the supposedly unreal, responds to the crisis of the imagination that Ghosh laments, and resists a magical realist reading that

would stigmatise the cyclone as a supernatural event – hence ill-equipped to represent the compelling urgency of climate change.

As this extreme occurrence suggests, even though Northern Australia is a flood-prone area, such ‘natural disasters’ are as a matter of fact less natural than human induced. The cyclone comes at the very end of the novel, but it is built from the very first pages through the representation of the ‘slow violence’ of environmental and neo-colonial exploitation. Thus, *Carpentaria* prepares the reader to the altered environment represented in *The Swan Book*, but it is not less engaged with climate change than Wright’s latest novel, as Anthony Carrigan stresses:

its creative integration of many factors that have driven climate change - from colonialism to extractive industry - permit us to read for climate change at multiple narrative levels, and in ways that reflect the culturally differentiated responses that are needed to address climate change in reality (Carrigan, 2015: 95).

‘The eternal reality of a legacy in brokenness’: *The Swan Book*

The Swan Book is set 100 years into the future, when the Indigenous Australian are still living under the Intervention in the North, and the environment is fundamentally altered by climate change. In Wright’s third novel, despair seems to predominate over hope:

*Mother Nature? People on the road called her the Mother Catastrophe of flood, fire, drought and blizzards. These were the four seasons. *People talked the language of extinction*. They talked about surviving a continuous storm under the old rain shadow, or they talked about living the best part of their lives with floods lapping around their bellies (Wright, 2013: 5. Author’s emphasis).*

The novel follows the life of a young Indigenous Australian woman called Oblivia, a victim of a gang-rape by petrol-sniffing Indigenous boys, that signify ‘dysfunction within her own society’ (Holgate, 2020: 45). After being raped, she hides from her abusers inside a sacred tree, where she inscribes ‘stanzas in ancient symbols’ (Wright, 2013: 6) over the tree surfaces, writing knowledge on the land itself. Like Normal Phantom in *Carpentaria*, she becomes the guardian of the Law and of the environment. Eventually, she is rescued by a European Old Woman, Bella Donna of the Champions – ‘the white woman was one of those nationalities on earth lost to climate change wars. The new gypsies of the world’ (Ibid: 20) – but she never recovers from being violated and decides to stay mute. Bella Donna takes the girl to live with her in a polluted dry swamp, ‘the world’s most unknown detention camp in Australia that still liked to call itself a first-world country’ (Ibid: 35), and begins to tell stories about her journey and the climate refugees from the Western countries.

The swamp, resembling Desperance's human dumping-ground, is a hidden place that is considered from European people 'another eden' (**Ibid: 27**). However, Wright does not romanticise this land as a pristine land: it is affected by environmental devastation as any other place in the world, as she has previously stressed in *Carpentaria*. The swamp is another site of ecological imperialism and environmental racism, a place of traditional land controlled and destroyed by white settlers. Environmental degradation and the denial of Indigenous Australian rights are woven together:

This was the history of the swamp ever since the wave of conservative thinking began spreading like wildfire across the twenty-first century, when among the mix of political theories and arguments about how to preserve and care for the world's environment and people, the Army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the Aboriginal people (Wright, 2013: 41).

As Holgate notes, we can also read a critique to twenty-first-century environmentalism that claims to preserve virgin wilderness while impinging human rights. The swamp people 'already knew what it was like to lose a Country' (**Wright, 2013: 35**) and were not interested 'in being conquered by other people's stories' (**Wright, 2013: 29**). As such, *The Swan Book* represents the vulnerability deriving from human-induced 'slow violence', restoring voice to those people who can already perceive the scale and the effects of climate change.

Wright invites the reader to consider Obliva not as the main character, but 'the main *human* character'. The very idea of the book came indeed from the migration of the black swans, as the author declares in an interview:

The black swan is indigenous to Australia. But when I started thinking about writing a book about swans, way back in 2003, people started telling me stories of swans that they had seen in the desert, so far away from coastal and wetter regions of Australia. What happens to a bird - or to anyone - who has no story for that country? We had taken them out of their habitat through environmental damage that has been mostly men-made, and the swan moved. Where do they go and what stories do they have? (Wright & Zable, 2013: 30).

When the black swans arrive at the swamp, Oblivia understands that they share a similar experience of exile: like swans displaced from southern Australia by global warming, Oblivia has lost sovereignty over her own brain: 'I have become a gypsy, addicted to journeys into these distant illusionary homelands' (**Wright, 2013: 3**). Similarly, 'the swans had become gypsies, searching the desert for vast sheers of storm water' (**Ibid: 13**).

From this moment onward, their stories and their fight for survival are 'brought together in an interwoven relation', as Meera Atkinson stresses (Atkinson, 2018: 51). The swans, Oblivia and the Indigenous Australian community – which has lost sovereignty over its land and culture – are all inheritors of oppression and dispossession: 'it's the eternal reality of a legacy in brokenness' (Wright, 2013: 75) that is not just a prerogative of the human society. The struggle of the black swan is intimately bound to that of Indigenous Australian people, and not just the backdrop for human drama. Critically, Ben Holgate suggests that the black swans are not just a 'metaphor for Australia's original inhabitants', but they are to be read 'literally as 'ancestors' who once travelled the continent, sharing their Law stories' (Holgate, 2020: 63).

Like the black swan who has no story for that part of the country, Oblivia, observing some alcoves depicting scenes from the world's history, cannot find anything regarding her story and the swamp's story:

After exploring all of these little scenes that had been created by months of labor, she had found no eucalyptus tree trunk with strange writing in the dust, no swamp lined with people guarded by the Army. She could not understand why this history did not exist in this world of creation. There was no miniature of a black girl such herself in any of these depictions of humanity, no swamp world of people quarreling over food (Wright, 2013: 198).

Furthermore, Oblivia and the swans share a condition of forced muteness: the black swans die without sound, and Oblivia, who experiences a denial of her Indigenous voice, observes that 'she had no sound either, and knew what it was like to be without sound. This country would never hear her voice, or the language she spoke' (Wright, 2013: 157). Oblivia and the swans have such an intimate bound that she starts to believe that by helping them to survive on the polluted swamp she might learn how to escape as freely as they had been able to take flight. When she becomes a climate refugee herself, indeed, the swans help her flight. At the end of the novel, when everyone is forced to head north to escape the ruined cities and the polluted areas:

Oblivia doesn't join the people with passports who were not a threat to national security. People who could pay the tax that allowed them to pass through the numerous security checkpoint on the highways. She joins instead those who were traveling incognito on unofficial and illegal crossings through the swamps. Some were former street people, others were the homeless people (Wright, 2013: 273).

Oblivia carries in her arms a cygnet refusing to fly, and she calls him Stranger - significantly. When everyone become increasingly disoriented during this forced migration and begin to hallucinate, she is probably saved by her own care for the cygnet. Moreover, as she could not be discovered escaping, she keeps hiding and walking under the cloud of swans moving slowly. It is this multi-species connection that saves both of them, and it is through this connection that they both gain agency and write their own story.

Conversely, the male human protagonist Warren Finch, who comes from a community of people who 'wanted to be good Black people, not seen as troublemakers, radicals, or people who made Australians feel uneasy' (Wright, 2013: 84) and is educated to become the first Indigenous president of Australia, will eventually lose his voice and agency. Finch is the male hero saving the world from environmental catastrophes:

Like a modern Moses, with the same intent of saving the world from the destructive paths carved from its own history. (...) He espoused correct answers for saving the lives of the Aborigines, displaced people, freedom of speech, endangered species, the environment. Enough causes to cover the entire planet (Wright, 2013: 110).

When he visits the swamp, the community commented:

the world's foremost environmentalist was visiting - but if anyone needed to know, they had some of the world's true environmentalists living at Swan Lake. They could bet a million dollars to think that they were not using much of the world's resources (Wright, 2013: 115).

To solve the pollution problems of the swamp, he closes down to swamp, because 'there is no time for places like that' (Wright, 2013: 207). He will eventually die, and his violent individualist agency will be replaced by the interconnection between Oblivia, the swans and the land, and their reciprocal ethics of care.

Conclusion

It has been widely stressed (Rigby, 2013; Carrigan, 2015; John-Putra, 2018) that Alexis Wright's two most recent novels respond to what Val Plumwood has defined Western culture's 'hegemonic centrism', which she considers to be 'androcentric, eurocentric, ethnocentric, as well as anthropocentric' (Plumwood, 2002: 101).

In Wright's fictitious worlds, women are not the silent background of male action, but they gradually gain agency and write their own stories. However, some significant differences can be observed between the two novels. While Oblivia is the main (human) protagonist of *The Swan Book*, the female characters in *Carpentaria* seem to be quite peripheral to the

main action, which revolves around the male protagonists Normal and Will Phantom, Elias Smith and Mozzie Fishman. Nevertheless, the novel explores the interconnectedness between sexism, racial and environmental exploitation through the figure of Stan Bruiser, mayor of Uptown, whose only one motto is: 'if you can't use it, eat it, or fuck it, then it's no bloody use to you' (Wright, 2006: 34). He brags about how he has raped most black women of the Pricklebush clan, including Angel Day, Normal's wife; further, Angel Day' and Normal's daughter Girlie is sexually harassed by the corrupt local white policemen Truthful. Whilst Angel Day's attempt to escape a persistent wretched condition (she is considered a property by her husband Normal too) is not successful – and her voice remains at best projected in the statue of the Virgin Mary that she colors and textures into an Indigenous Australian woman who lives by the sea –, the other female character of the novel, Hope, acquires agency in the last pages of the novel. After the arrival of the cyclone, helped by the tide and the groper, Hope leaves to find her husband Will Phantom:

The groper fish circling the boat, building up speed, crossing each other under the boat, picking the boat up and moving it back to sea through the surging flow of the changing tide. Hope rowed with all her might with the ongoing tide. She was so blinded by her mission she did not see the gopers helping her (Wright, 2006: 498).

Kate Rigby notes that Hope's agency is different from the 'autonomous individual valorised within eurowestern liberalism (including liberal feminism)', but it is rather closer to the 'recognition of interconnectivity shared by indigenous and ecofeminist philosophies' (Rigby, 2013: 133). Hope becomes part of a multi-species collective, just as Oblivia in *The Swan Book*.

The novels also respond to the crisis of imagination in dealing with climate change, and to the anthropocentric conventions of popular cultural responses to the Anthropocene. *The Swan Book* ends with some very significant lines about the swan's language: 'you had to hear those soothsaying creature creating glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land. Really listen to what they were saying' (Wright, 2013: 298). Similarly, *Carpentaria's* conclusion places the language of the land at its center:

Neither [Norman Phanton and his grandson, Bala] spoke, because neither would have heard the other. It was so much better to listen to the mass choir of frogs - green, grey, speckled (...). It was a mystery, but there was so much song wafting off the watery land, singing the country afresh (Wright, 2006: 499).

This 'new language' writes the land into fiction: the Country is not just the background for human action, or, most importantly, a *terra nullius* and an inert resource to be developed and improved for profit, but it is rather an active, vibrant and living land with agency. Quoting *Green Utopias*, by Lisa Garforth (2018): 'a truly ecological thought should not offer the beauty of landscape or harmony with nature but instead unsettle us by gesturing the enormous scale of an interconnected universe and the uncanny experience of living without stable ontological categories' (Garforth, 2018: 146).

Alexis Wright also responds to the 'unevenness of that *unsettling* prefix *anthropo-*' (Crane, 2019: 5) that compounds the term Anthropocene and fails to consider that some bodies are more vulnerable than others to human-induced climate change. By casting a new light on the continuities between colonial exploitation and climate change, the author questions and challenges the depoliticising universalism intrinsic in the Anthropocene. Both *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* address the alignment of ecological imperialism, environmental racism, and the denial of rights to Indigenous Australian people, and give voice to the long-term processes of slow violence that lead to final extreme catastrophes, amplifying the marginalised and forgotten experiences of those who are already experiencing the climate apocalypse.

However, unlike the hopeful portrayal of the power of the Country represented in *Carpentaria* (Gleeson-White, 2016), *The Swan Book* is an overwhelmingly dystopian novel ending with the death of the black swans. If *Carpentaria*'s utopian conclusion is facilitated by the spiritual and militant resistance to environmental damage, *The Swan Book* portrays the bleakness and despair that will predominate in the future if the voices of those who have cared for the land the longest keep going unheard. The reasons behind what we can consider by all odds an environmental apocalypse, as Holgate notes, might be related to 'a lack of advancement in Indigenous Australian affairs on a political front in the early twenty-first century as well as increasing global anxiety about climate change' (Holgate, 2019: 61).

It becomes clear, then, that the events described in Wright's novels are urgently real, and that the term Aboriginal realism used to describe her fiction is rather appropriate. As recent record-breaking heatwaves have revealed, Indigenous Australian people living across central Australia fear becoming the country's 'first climate refugees' (Allam & Eveshed, 2019). The recent Australian bushfires crisis has added another layer of trauma to multiple Indigenous communities, whose cultural identity comes from the land and grieves for non-human relations as well. As Williamson, Weir, and Cavanagh (2020) have written, this sense of 'perpetual grief' also

stems from ‘the as-yet-unresolved matter of the invasion and subsequent colonisation of our homelands’, although the long-term consequences of colonisation have rendered them accustomed to living with environmental damage. Calls for the reintegration of Indigenous Australian fire management techniques to lessen the damage of the fire have grown louder. And yet, as Alexis Wright has pointed out in a recent interview, Indigenous Australian knowledge ‘of caring for the land is questioned or largely ignored’ (2020). Similarly, in *The Swan Book* no one listens to the voices of those who have cared for the land and adapted to changing climate conditions for millennia. The novel is replete with forced silences, muteness and denial of Indigenous voices, hence the final invitation to listen to the language of the swans. It is only here, outside the story and the dominant narrative of human and non-human exploitation, that a form of resistance is possible.

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