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Ecopoetic Encounters: Amnesia and Nostalgia in Alexis Wright's Environmental Fiction

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Introduction¹

Alexis Wright is from the Waanyi people, from the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. Her latest novels deal with contemporary environmental issues, be it pollution, mining and water shortages in *Carpentaria* (2006), or climate change, environmental wars and migration in *The Swan Book* (2013). Both novels present a particular form of environmentalist discourse that is mingled with concepts drawn from Aboriginal epistemology and ontology as well as with Wright's own postcolonial counter-discourse of resistance.

Frances Devlin-Glass affirms that in *Carpentaria*—it is also true of *The Swan Book*—Wright 'elaborates, from a Waanyi point of view, an understanding of the Indigenous sacred' (394). If it is important to acknowledge 'the particular social and historical and earthed reality' (392) at the basis of Wright's novels, I believe it is an impossible task for a reader who has not been properly initiated to Waanyi country to reconstruct a Waanyi perspective simply from reading the novels. After all, as Devlin-Glass rightly explains, Wright 'confounds categories of tradition / modernity, moving fluidly between Waanyi modes and western literary ones' (393). This fluidity between categories—what Wright refers to as 'a very long melody of different forms of music, somehow mixed with the voices of the Gulf' ('On Writing *Carpentaria*' 87)—reinforces the difficulty of separating what is Waanyi and what is not in the texts. This difficulty is exemplified by the fact that in contrast with many environments of the Gulf described in *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, Waanyi country is *not* a coastal environment, but rather it consists in escarpment and woodland country and 'falls within the Gulf Falls and Uplands Bioregion' (Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research). To me, this does not pose a problem; on the contrary, it makes clear that Wright's stories are not concerned with Waanyi country only, but with the Gulf country in its diversity and complexity.

It is a commonplace that literary works are not transparent media. It is more so with Wright's latest novels that focus on a region known for its syncretism: as Richard Martin, Philip Mead and David Trigger suggest, in the Gulf Country 'Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities are co-constituted through complex social relations that have produced both mimesis and alterity' (*The Politics of Indigeneity* 332). In *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, they argue, these co-constituted identities are made manifest by the entanglement of 'multiple cultural traditions' (332) and by the 'co-temporality of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal identities' (332-333). The multiplicity of traditions, cultures, epistemologies, ontologies and voices that are woven and blurred in Wright's environmental fiction should not be overlooked, but rather should encourage the attentive reader to accept that in this context uncertainty may function as a literary device. Indeed, as Alison Ravenscroft points out, Wright's writing is characterised by

‘a radical, irresolvable equivocality in language and form’ (*The Postcolonial Eye* 70) that should encourage us to ‘examin[e] the limits of our own imagining’ (77). If I agree with Ravenscroft that uncertainty in Wright’s fiction should draw the non-initiated reader’s attention to the differences in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of knowing, I am not as radical in my understanding of the ‘unknowability’ of Aboriginal points of view for non-Aboriginal readers. Like Professor of Environmental Humanities Kate Rigby in ‘The Poetics of Decolonization’ (124), and as Wright herself wishes, in my analysis of her novels I assume the position of a ‘welcomed stranger’ who ‘believes in the energy of the Gulf country’ (Wright, ‘On writing Carpentaria’ 87). With these views in mind, I will provide a reading of Wright’s environmental fiction that seeks not to reconstruct Aboriginal cultures from the text or assess their ‘authenticity’, but rather that aims at unveiling how Wright’s literary representation of Stranger-figures makes use of the complex intercultural quality of the region of the Gulf to interrogate European first encounters with what is now called ‘Australia’.

Alexis Wright’s environmental fiction sheds light on the fact that European encounters with Australia have always been twofold, simultaneously narrative and experiential. The characterisation of Stranger-figures², Elias Smith in *Carpentaria*, and Bella Donna in *The Swan Book*, shows that encountering Australia can be a poetic and ecological process that takes place in a storied world. In this world, journeys of migration, transformations of our collective environment, and stories and histories of travelling are irremediably entangled. It is important to note that this entanglement allows Wright to propose a postcolonial version of the ‘discovery’ and ‘settlement’ of Australia: Stranger-figures indeed participate in the creation of an allegorical mode that ultimately allows the storyteller to creatively renarrate the history of colonisation.

Colonial Encounters and Myths of Settlement

In the history of the exploration of Australia, as in other settler societies, narrative and experience are intimately intertwined. In *The Explorers*, a collection of explorers’ accounts of their ‘discovery’ of Australia, the historian Tim Flannery explains:

Many of the explorers knew they were writing in a mainstream tradition: they knew their journals were as important as their walking boots. There are some wonderful writers in this book who were aware that a thing is not truly discovered until it is written about, for only then does it take shape in the minds of those who have no direct experience of it. (4)

In a colonial context, the first account of a location acquires huge significance, for it has the ability to shape the sense of place that will circulate through time, space and society, affecting millions for several generations. Romaine Moreton, a philosopher and artist from the Goenpul Jagara people of Stradbroke Island and the Bundjulong people of northern New South Wales, says that the doctrine of *terra nullius*, whereby the land was thought of as *belonging to no one*, did just that:

the issue of representation has been present before the inception of Australian nationhood, for it was inherent in the gaze of the first British subject to look upon the land now known as Australia. The Indigenous body was born into western narrativity as the Aborigine, and indeed positioned within Australian historicity as symbology representing the unhuman. The Aborigine did not exist before the presence of the

western gaze, and it is within this gaze that the fictitious Aborigine is subjugated still within Australian society and western historicity. (5)

Put in service of first the Empire and then the Nation, too many colonial narratives of first encounters have silenced Australian Indigenous communities and imposed a foreign understanding of the land and of the body onto what seemed unfamiliar environments and peoples.

Richard Martin *et al* explain, citing the ‘pioneering myth about the land’ (333), that ‘[a]bsent from this narrative of Australian history, however, was any serious consideration of the experiences of Aboriginal people on the frontier’ (333). The refusal to see what colonisation entailed for indigenous populations had long-lasting effects on historical discourses. Tom Griffiths refers to this phase of denial of the devastating effects of colonisation as the ‘great Australian silence’³:

it sometimes consisted in obscuring and overlaying din of history-making. But the denial was often unconscious, or only half-conscious, for it was embedded in metaphor and language and in habits of commemoration. Silences are not just absences, although they can be manifested in that way. Silences are often discernible and palpable; they shape conversation and writing; they are enacted and constructed (138).

Griffiths explains that the ‘euphemisms of the frontier, laconic and sharp, entered Australian language. Aborigines were “civilised” or “dispersed” or “pacified”, white settlers went on a “spree” and boasted of the “black crows” they had shot’ (138). Griffiths however claims that since the 1980s, this historical narrative began to change as some historians⁴ sought to ‘step outside the imperial, European view of the past in order to embrace a cross-cultural history’ (136). Moreover, as Rigby explains by citing Judith Wright as an example, ‘the importance of connecting ecological with both post- or anti-colonial and feminist concerns [had] beg[un] to be recognized by some activists, writers and scholars from the mid-1970s’ (120). The advent of postcolonial counter-discourses in both history and literature, combined with the increased audibility of land rights activism and Aboriginal literary voices—including Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Kevin Gilbert, and Jack Davis, to cite only a few—would never cease to challenge the narrative of the building of the Nation. Wright participates in this literary tradition that unsettles Australian nationhood⁵. By weaving an allegorical mode that renarrates strangers’ first encounters with Australia, she rearticulates the relationship between self and place and contributes to challenging colonialism and nationalism. In her novels, Wright refashions the (hi)story of the ‘discovery’ of Australia and reconceives the influence of Western narrativity on Australian society.

Ecopoetic Encounters, Embodiment, and Allegories of Colonisation

Ravenscroft suggests that ‘bodies are made, they are substantialised, in cultural practices; there is no universal body’ (‘Sovereign Bodies of Feeling’ 1). This claim is given flesh in Wright’s novels. The beginning of *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* show that both novels are underlain by a form of embodiment that unsettles the Western boundaries between body, story and country. In *Carpentaria*, this is evoked when the narrator-storyteller says that the ‘being [of the ancestral serpent] is porous; it permeates everything. It is all around in the atmosphere and is attached to the river people like skin’ (2). The opening then makes clear that the serpent is the creator of the features of country, but also that its body resides in country, in its Law and in its people. In telling the story of the serpent, one also re-enacts the serpent’s journey. In

other words, the opening of *Carpentaria* blurs the difference between the story of the serpent, the country the serpent creates, and its embodied re-enactment in storytelling. In the same vein, the text of *The Swan Book* says of the protagonist Oblivia: ‘Locked in a world of sleep, only the little girl’s fingers were constantly moving, in slow swirls like music. She was writing stanzas in ancient symbols wherever she could touch Whatever she was writing [was] dredged from the soup of primordial memory in these ancient lands’ (7). By describing Oblivia writing the story of country on country itself, with her fingers, and with a form of ink that is the very ‘memory’ of the land, the text illustrates the form of embodiment so characteristic of Wright’s environmental fiction, and in which body, story and country cannot be disentangled.

At the beginning of both novels, Wright shows that body, story and country are not discrete phenomena, but rather exist in relation to each other. This applies to Aboriginal characters in the novel, but does it apply to the Stranger-figures of Elias Smith and Bella Donna? I argue below that it does, and that it is even a form of counter-discourse whereby Wright applies principles of Australian Aboriginal ontology to the representation of non-Aboriginal characters. Overall, the inseparability of body, story and country enables us to envision some aspects of Wright’s narration, and particularly the representation of Stranger-figures, as allegorical, for the meaning of each entity of the triad points to the two others in a sort of continuous metonymic recursion that resists the fixation of meaning. Note that I am not saying that *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* are allegories. Rather I believe that both novels make use in some episodes of an allegorical mode that complicates the literal meaning of characters, especially foreign ones. This allegorical mode then allows Wright to rewrite and renarrate the arrival of the Europeans.

Wright’s environmental fiction is based on Indigenous Australian conceptions of embodiment where meaning emerges from the entanglement of body, story, and country. I am not here suggesting that ethnographic and anthropologic accounts of other Aboriginal peoples should be used as means to ‘decode’ the Waanyi perspective woven into the text. Rather, I believe that these accounts may shed some light on some aspects of Wright’s novels, particularly her use of the intimate connections between body, story and country.

Basing her account of ‘country’ on her ethnographic work with Australian Aboriginal people in the Victoria River region of the Northern Territory, Deborah Bird Rose explains:

One could say that country is all culture, but the more interesting point is that it is all sentient, communicative, relational and inter-active. In this sense, culture is not something you have, but rather is the way you live, and by implication, the way your knowledge arises and is worked with. Country is both the context of life and the emergent result of life being lived. Country exists because of the living beings who participate in the life of country, and country flourishes through looped and tangled relationships. . . . [Country] is a matrix of communicative inter-action, a system of connectivities and benefits, a home on earth. (‘Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism’ 100)

In this account of Aboriginal ways of knowing, Rose makes clear that there exists no discrete boundary between culture, being, and country. According to Rose, if ‘culture . . . is the way you live’, and if ‘[c]ountry is . . . the context of life and the emergent result of life being lived’, then it follows that culture, country and existence, and by extension story, country and

body, are emerging co-constitutively. In *Nourishing Terrains*, Rose makes the blurring of country and being even clearer, for she explains that country is perceived as a living entity:

People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. . . . [C]ountry is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. (7)

In their discussion of the Yanyuwa people, in the southwest Gulf of Carpentaria Amanda Kearney and John Bradley point to the intimacy between names, place and memory. They explain that an 'emotional geography of Yanyuwa country is embodied in place, body and mind and chronicles a uniquely Indigenous and Yanyuwa way of knowing the world' (79). They also link the 'interconnectedness of people and place' (89) to language: 'the calling of a place name derives from a position of perception and from this position of perception comes Yanyuwa existence. . . . [T]he relationship between people and place cannot be any more intimate. The inalienability of Yanyuwa links to place go beyond a Western conception of people in the landscape' (89). Kearney and Bradley continue and explain that 'Knowledge and Law associated with all of these places has emotional dimensions, and becomes the means by which groups of people and individuals negotiate the world around them' (89). By insisting on the inalienability and intimacy of the connection between place names, people and people's interaction with the environment, Kearney and Bradley illustrate the entanglement that I have identified in *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* above.

For a reader not initiated to Waanyi Country and Law, ecopoetics offers an interesting perspective from which to approach Wright's environmental fiction, for it offers the means to address the peculiar embodiment that I have identified above. In *The Song of the Earth*, Jonathan Bate explains that 'ecopoetics [is] a way of reflecting upon what it might mean to dwell with the earth. Ecopoetics must concern itself with consciousness' (166); ecopoetics is an interpretive method. Bate goes on and explains that '[t]o read ecopoetically is . . . to find "clearings" or "unconcealments". In the activity of *poiesis*, things disclose or unconceal themselves. . . . Ecopoetics seeks not to enframe literary texts, but to meditate upon them, to thank them, to listen to them, albeit to ask questions of them' (168). An ecopoetic approach to the text is therefore interactive and reflexive; the reader asks questions and reads with wonder, enters a conversation with the text, embraces the interaction with the linguistic environment as a way of dwelling, as a way of being-with / in-the-world. Reading ecopoetically reveals that the world is full of meaning and that it consists in the interweaving of stories and experience. In this view, reader and text co-emerge, not unlike how body and story co-emerge in country.

In literary narratives, some episodes are self-reflexive and draw attention to the experiential and storied quality of life: I call these episodes *ecopoetic encounters*. These ecopoetic encounters are linguistic representations of an organism-in-its-environment; they dramatise the connection between language and experience; they make readers reflect on the meshwork of verbal and ecological narratives that constitute life-on-earth. In my close reading of Wright's environmental fiction, I focus on ecopoetic encounters that coincide with episodes where Stranger-figures first experience Australia. These episodes do not provide an authoritative meaning regarding colonial encounters or indigenous knowledge, but rather they are constructed so as to make the reader reflect on the very nature of Australian contemporary society vis-à-vis the colonisation of Aboriginal territories. The peculiar depiction of

embodiment in Wright's environmental fiction facilitates allegorical readings; the first encounters of Elias Smith and Bella Donna with Australia can be read as alternative histories of exploration, colonisation and settlement. The strangers' first encounter with Australia are also highly dramatised and aestheticised: Elias and Bella Donna's first contact with the isle-continent is complemented with a story of origin that grounds the discovery of Australia into an Aboriginal mode of knowing, being, and telling.

By displacing the spotlight of alienation from the indigenous other to the foreign stranger, Wright contributes to redefining the nature of Australia by asserting an alternate sense of place based on indigenous modes of living. She invites the reader to reflect on the role of European migration in Australian history, but also on its impact on Australian ecology. In the postcolonial and transcultural context of Australia, this reflection on the entanglement of language and experience, of poetics and aesthetics, and of history and ecology contributes to unsettle the nationalist narrative. By dramatising a *rediscovery* of Australia, Wright shows that writers have a role to play: they can refashion the Australian myth of origin by actualising it to the contemporary postcolonial and transcultural situation of the isle-continent.

Wright employs two narrative strategies to do so. In *Carpentaria*, the allegorical encounter is dramatised through Elias's amnesia, which reveals the settlers' denial of the process of colonisation. In *The Swan Book*, Bella Donna functions as a figuration of Western narrativity, and her nostalgia lays bare the loss of socio-ecological systems brought about by modernity.

Elias Smith, Amnesia, and Colonial Denial

The poetics of amnesia at the core of Elias's characterisation creates a particular effect in *Carpentaria*. The figure of Elias Smith functions as an embodiment of a Euro-Australian culture and society disconnected from its past; his arrival in Australia and his amnesia therefore open up the possibility of a Euro-Australian 'fresh start' in the Antipodes. Elias indeed displays a respectful attitude towards the indigenous Pricklebush, and he is appreciated by the latter in return: he becomes like a brother to Normal Phantom and is even integrated in the Pricklebush community and culture. Tragically, the fresh start that Elias embodies and the hope for a change of mentality that he brings about are short-lived and do not spread to the white population of Desperance, who wrongfully believe that Elias is guilty of the crime of burning down the Shire Council office, where the 'history of Uptown' (72) is said to reside. After a simulacrum of trial, they exile him out of town, and make manifest their inability to self-criticise and rethink the history of invasion.

On numerous occasions the text makes clear that the interpretation by the white Uptown community of Elias as an angel-like religious figure is a fallacious account of the European encounter with Australia; as Ravenscroft points out, Desperance 'is populated with white men and women who are irrational and illogical. They are naïve believers in their own nonsense' (*The Postcolonial Eye* 68). Wright ridicules this misinterpretation and characterises the people of Uptown as 'foolish' (41) and not being able to '*remember their own religion*' (42). They view Elias's arrival as 'surreal' (63). In this sense, Uptown is populated with 'bad' readers unable to perceive the significance of Elias's arrival. In contrast, as I show below, it is in the marginal Aboriginal Pricklebush interpretation of the man from the sea that the nature of the European first encounter with Australia can truly be discovered. In other words, Wright suggests that an indigenous hermeneutics is more apt to describe European encounters with Australia than traditional nationalist narratives. Wright provokes a hermeneutic shift where interpretive authority slides from the 'centre' to the 'margin'.

In both the narrative form and content, in the text and in the storyworld, Elias Smith enters the flow of events in a storytelling mode that is reminiscent of Australian Indigenous oral traditions, but that also functions as a parody of Western fairy tales. This allegorical mode, combined with the vivid characterisation of Elias's embodiment, not only subverts the nationalist narrative, but it also enables the reader to immerse more poetically in that controversial episode of colonial history:

Once upon a time, not even so long ago, while voyaging in the blackest of midnights, a strong sea man, who was a wizard of many oceans, had his memory stolen by thieving sea monsters hissing spindrift and spume as they sped away across the tops of stormy waves grown taller than trees. (37)

The sensuousness of this opening scene is striking and it reinforces the experiential quality of the encounter. The hyperbole 'blackest of midnights' and the onomatopoeic alliteration of the sounds [θ] and [s] in the phrase starting with 'thieving sea monsters' give to this passage an aural quality, as if it were an oral story being told aloud, as if the monsters were effectively present alongside the reader. Paradoxically, as the passage draws us into the storyworld, it also erases the historicity of the scene, as Elias's memory is 'stolen'. This erasure makes it difficult to reconstruct the narrative of Elias's journey, and it rather puts emphasis on his experience of the storm and on his first encounter with Australia. In this rhetorical strategy where Elias's memory is stolen by local entities, the text performs the appropriation of the moment of encounter by an indigenous voice. Elias's amnesia allows Wright to overwrite the story of his arrival with a counter-narrative. As if to counter the effects of the appropriation of Aboriginal lands by settlers, Wright appropriates the settlers' story of beginning by mocking the genre of the fairy tale, as can be seen in the ironic use of the phrase 'once upon a time'.

This appropriation participates in the establishment of Wright's counter-discourse: the combination of allegorical mode and storytelling voice enables Wright to re-characterise the first encounter with Australia as an episode belonging to an Aboriginal story. In the passage that directly follows, the collective amnesia of Euro-Australians is dramatised even more, which allows Wright to renarrate the historical encounter with Australia as an episode of what the text itself describes as a 'Dreaming story' (38):

Unheard by the tempest, an austere cyclone called Leda that came this way from across the seas in a once-in-a-hundred-year storm, the man chased after her black wind to recapture his memories. . . . Mouth agape, hoarse throat yelling nothing but silence, he kept on chasing the black wind before losing his memory forever.

It was in those precise moments when Elias Smith was fighting hopelessly to save his identity, when his loss became absolute, that another unusual thing happened in this part of the world, that was far away from everything else. Lightning forked up from the sea, springing out of the mouths of sacred underwater locations along a straight line heading many kilometres in a southerly direction, towards coastline, until the last arm of the white golden fork went straight up the trunk of the lightning tree of an important Dreaming story hereabout. Fortunately for some, unfortunate for others, the tree was growing in the small coastal town of Desperance, tucked away in the Gulf of Carpentaria. (37-38)

This passage demonstrates the equivocality of Wright's allegorical mode, and particularly her combination of Western and Aboriginal discourses ('The Politics of Indigeneity' 332).

Western discourse is here made manifest in Wright's use of meteorology and Greek mythology. According to the Bureau of Meteorology, there is no cyclone called 'Leda', although tropical cyclone Adel (Leda spelled backwards) swept the North of Australia in May 1993—as well as a severe tropical cyclone called Adeline⁶. More importantly, in Greek mythology Leda is the mother of Castor and Pollux, one of whom is fathered by the God Zeus when the latter takes the form of a (white) swan and rapes Leda (Leeming n.p.). This complex polysemy at play in Elias's creation story⁷ destabilises any attempt at fixing meaning, which is characteristic of Wright's 'poetics of uncertainty' (Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye* 69). The hybrid retelling of Greek mythology combined with the distortion of antipodean meteorology creates a strange hermeneutic echo, which is reinforced by the way Elias's mad chase unfolds and how his friendship with Normal Phantom, his allegorical brother, develops in the plot. Indeed, if the explicit connection between Elias's origin and the lightning is an implicit allusion to Zeus's powers, it is more importantly a reference to Dreaming stories and journeys of the Gulf⁸. Elias's story is vividly recounted, especially regarding the seafarer's embodiment. The antithetical phrase '[m]outh agape, hoarse throat yelling nothing but silence' has an aporic effect; it brings in Elias's body sensuously, and yet it resists any straightforward comprehension and is thus nearly impossible to imagine without a sense of anguish rising. This feeling is developed at the beginning of the second paragraph, where the hopelessness and absoluteness of Elias's loss of identity is stated explicitly. This strategy of appropriation and distortion is seen in Elias's embodiment: as Elias is indeed unable to tell his story of encounter, it is important to note that the 'Dreaming story' on the contrary is voiced. Indeed, whereas nothing comes out of Elias's mouth, in contrast, '[l]ightning fork[s] up from the sea, springing out of the *mouths* of sacred underwater locations' (emphasis added). It is as if European history were being retold from an Aboriginal perspective: as the European voice is literally silenced, as the Greek narrative is allegorically overwritten, the voice of the Law manifests itself in the storied journey of Elias.

In this eco-poetic journey, body, country, and story are coconstitutive. Indeed, Elias's first experience of Australia is inseparable both from the Aboriginal storytelling mode used to narrate it and from the world in which it takes place: as the narrator says, '[y]ou could tell that this man might be equated with the Dreamtime world' (43). Due to Elias's amnesia, only the voices of the storyteller and of the Pricklebush population remain to fashion the man's being anew. In this context, the Aboriginal notion of embodiment that subtends Elias's eco-poetic encounter is but an example of how the Pricklebush people 'buil[d] an identity for the one he [Elias] lost' (66). Indeed, '[a]lthough Elias never remembered his origins, he was able to acquire other people's memory. They gave him their imagination' (68). In turn, Elias is 'able to describe in vivid images how he had entered the atmosphere at sound-breaking speed and because his memory could not keep up, it was left behind. He told his story so persuasively he was able to convince people of just about anything' (68). In other words, Elias is presented with the Pricklebush story of origin, and he makes it his own when he recounts his first encounter with Australia. The ability of Elias to appreciate the perspective of the Pricklebush people serves by contrast to underscore the *inability* of the Uptown population to do so.

The incorporation of Elias in Dreaming stories of the Gulf has an important effect on the plot of *Carpentaria*. This is where the environmental component of Wright's counter-discourse comes into play: due to Elias's alienation from Uptown, to his mythic friendship with the Pricklebush protagonists Normal and Will Phantom, and to his exile from Desperance, Elias is targeted by the mining company that plunders the region of the Gulf. He is murdered and his corpse is left in a lagoon to draw Will Phantom out of his hideout. Elias's eco-poetic encounter with Australia sets in motion a series of events that are out of his control. As a stranger, an

alien, an exile, a liminal being that exists in between cultures, he becomes vulnerable; he is then an easy target for a ruthless, almighty, transnational corporation.

Bella Donna, Nostalgia, and Western Narrativity

If in *Carpentaria* the figure of Elias and the interpretation of his arrival by both settler and indigenous populations serve to critique the 'great Australian silence' (Griffiths 138), in *The Swan Book* the figure of Bella Donna embodies 'western narrativity [and] historicity' (Moreton 5). Unlike Elias Smith, Bella Donna has not forgotten her past; rather, she is always caught up in narrative hypermnesia, continuously retelling her story, compulsively reminding her audience of her life lost to anthropogenic climate change. The contrast with Elias is reinforced by the fact that Bella Donna is not assigned an identity by the indigenous population; on the contrary, she is the one who gives her name to the protagonist of *The Swan Book*, Oblivion Ethyl(ene). Despite these differences, like Elias's, Bella Donna's encounter with Australia cannot be dissociated from her telling of this encounter, which is highly dramatised, as is made evident in this passage: 'As all stories begin with once upon a time, so the old woman always began her story, while looking into the levitating crystal balls she juggled' (24).⁹ By dramatising the European's act of telling to an extent that it becomes almost ridicule, the narrator draws attention to Bella Donna's storied encounter with Australia, and makes its narrativity impossible to overlook.

By paying close attention to Bella Donna's conception of materiality, one realises that the European migrant often confuses world of the story and world of the teller. As she herself explains, '*my story of luck is only a part of the concinnity of dead stories tossed by the sides of roads and gathering dust. In time, the mutterings of millions will be heard in the dirt...*' (17). Here, Bella Donna characterises her encounter with Australia as being mostly narrative. Besides, her life and the story of her life seem to be the same thing, for in her narration there is no clear distinction between reality and fiction, between the material and the imaginary¹⁰. Bella Donna's confusion of body and story is in keeping with Wright's use of Aboriginal understandings of embodiment. Therefore, Bella Donna's statements ought to be taken literally, not figuratively; the depiction of her storytelling practice becomes a strategy of counter-appropriation, whereby Australian Indigenous epistemology now underlies Western narrativity, and not the opposite.

This dramatisation of Western narrativity is reinforced when Bella Donna explains that '[t]he story of her people . . . was like the chapters in a nightmarish book' (26-27). In this simile, the collective life of a people is likened to a chapter in the book of planet Earth. The entanglement of environment, narrative and community on a large scale through the imagery of the book is reminiscent of *Carpentaria*, where the 'crossing of the continent . . . was a rigorous Law, laid down piece by piece in a book of another kind covering thousands of kilometres' (104). In *The Swan Book*, however, the simile is applied to a European people and thus carries a different meaning; indeed, by using the adjective 'nightmarish' to characterise the 'book', Wright subtly critiques the Western need for structure; in light of *Carpentaria*, this phrasing cleverly lays bare the more positive and fluid notion of Dreaming tracks in oral Aboriginal tradition.

Not only is Bella Donna's encounter with Australia linguistic as much as experiential, it is also embedded in a larger story of anthropogenic climate change, as is seen when she explains the circumstances that caused her exile:

Her country of origin, Bella Donna had claimed, was where people of the modern world once lived happily by doing more or less nothing, other than looking after themselves from one day to the next to fuel the stories of their life, but they were finished now. . . . She claimed that one day, some devil, not a person, but a freak of nature, went to war on her people. . . . [S]he had been asked to describe the inexplicable, of what happened to people affected by the climate changing in wild weather storms, or the culmination of years of droughts, high temperature and winds in some countries, or in others, the freezing depths of the prolonged winters. (25)

In this passage, the personal story of Bella Donna is reinserted in a larger process. The individual migrant narratives are embedded in the global scheme of events. This is realised because a devilish ‘freak of nature’—indeed Nature herself—acquires destructive agency and becomes the main character in both the story Bella Donna tells, and in the story she is living. In the story-world woven by Wright in *The Swan Book* and based on the entanglement of body, country, and story, Nature seems to behave like an ancestral being¹¹—although Bella Donna is not able to conceive of it in those terms. This strategy serves to insert anthropogenic climate change in an Aboriginal system of knowledge, the effect of which is both to appropriate Western narrativity—as environmental historian John McNeill reminds us, climate change is the result of the ‘big ideas’, the West’s grand narratives of progress and growth (McNeill 334)—and to offer the possibility of envisioning Aboriginal knowledge systems as valid ways of understanding the relationship between organism and environment.

After years and months of sailing restlessly, when Bella Donna finally reaches Australia, the connection between language and experience becomes even clearer: ‘by simply saying enough was enough, this old woman invaded Australia’ (31). The story of exile ends with a speech act that parodies early settlers’ definition of Australia as *terra nullius*. Moreover, after this speech act, Bella Donna ‘gathered up into a bag her old swan flute, a pile of books about swans, and those crystal balls. Then she walked straight across the Australian coastline and headed into the bush’ (31-32). By highlighting the fact that Bella Donna’s tools for storytelling are part of her first experience of Australia, Wright shows that the first experience of Australia cannot be disentangled from how Bella Donna will narrate it. In the context of the book and due to the forms of embodiment used by Wright, the speech act ‘enough was enough’ (31) is more than a parody of early settlers: it crystallises the links between story, body, country, and journey, between language and experience, between history and ecology. Indeed, in the eyes of the swamp people who witness the arrival of Bella Donna, and who here form an Aboriginal ecopoetic perspective on the text, these links are not symbolic, but material. Indeed, after her arrival in Australia, Bella Donna attempts to bargain her only possessions—her storytelling tools—for asylum; she attempts to bargain two ‘crystal balls, her swan books and swan-bone flute in a canvas bag’ (32). However, ‘[n]o one [from the indigenous population] would touch them. Everyone backed away, fearing contamination from what were plainly the sacred objects that locked in her story’ (32-33). The link between story and matter is here made manifest, but this materiality does not derive from Western metaphysics, but from the Aboriginal Law of the swamp people. By staging the swamp people’s interpretation of Bella Donna, Wright enables her readers to witness the arrival of the invading Stranger-figure—and thus the event of colonisation that Bella Donna embodies—with new eyes. The encounter of Bella Donna with Australia is thus transformed into a counter-discursive strategy whereby Western narrativity is immediately appropriated by Aboriginal storytelling, and is thus not permitted to subjugate the sense of self and place of the indigenous inhabitants.

Conclusion: Language and Experience, Narrative and Ecology

The plotlines of Alexis Wright's latest novels are subtended by environmentalist concerns: the pollution caused by a transnational mining corporation in *Carpentaria*, and the anthropogenic changes to the earth-system in *The Swan Book*. As the scope of Wright's environmental fiction passes from postcolonialism to transculturalism, it seems to echo the characterisation of the stranger. In *Carpentaria*, as an amnesic embodiment of Euro-Australian society, the figure of Elias and its function in the plot remind us that remembering history is a prerequisite to harmonious cohabitation, and that acknowledging the validity of the knowledge systems of indigenous populations is necessary. In that sense, the denial of colonialism leads to estrangement, alienation, exile and instrumentalisation. In *The Swan Book*, as a nostalgic embodiment of a cosmopolitanism perverted by capitalism, the figure of Bella Donna reminds us that the individual (hi)stories of the globe's citizens are enmeshed with one another, and that migration narratives are the foundation of settler societies. In that sense, nostalgia can be a creative agent of knowledge only when it is applied constructively.

In Wright's environmental fiction, strangers have no stable origins, for they are defined *in their relation* to Australia and during their encounter with Australia; consequently, Stranger-figures are polysemous. Like the other protagonists of Wright's novels, strangers are caught up in a whirlpool of stories and experiences, and their meaning very much depends on the context in which they are interpreted. This metonymic strategy forms the basis of an allegorical mode that gives Aboriginal populations a voice and legitimacy in retelling the moment of encounter. Through the figuration of Bella Donna and Elias Smith, we are made to realise that in the history of Australia, the position of Europeans is ambivalent; we are also made to realise that in relation to the ecology of Australia, the position of consumerist Westerners is problematic. The ecopoetic encounters of Elias Smith and Bella Donna with Australia thus enable us to reflect on the nature of the colonial processes of discovery, exploration and settlement, and on their effects on Australian history and ecology. The Stranger-figures I have analysed—whose experience is inextricably linked with the event of narration, and whose meaning is so clearly informed by Australian Indigenous forms of knowledge—makes plain that approaching 'Australia' nowadays cannot be done without taking into account the various discourses that have combined and coevolved in and around it. In reading *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*, one is reminded of two principles that underlie the environmental history of settler societies: the event of colonisation entailed a forgetting of the past, but also a rewriting of it. In this context, Wright's latest fiction unsettles colonialism and nationalism from an Aboriginal environmentalist perspective. In my opinion, her novels have become required texts for a postcolonial rediscovery of the continent.

NOTES

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² In ‘The Stranger’, Simmel explains that the figure of the stranger—or ‘the man [who] comes today and stays tomorrow’ (185)—is spatially included in a group, though socially excluded from it. In other words, the stranger is ‘fixed within a certain spatial circle—or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries—but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it’.

³ The term ‘great silence’ was coined by WEH Stanner in 1968 Boyer Lectures (Stanner, WEH. ‘The Boyer Lectures: After the Dreaming’. *The Dreaming and Other Essays*. Ed. R. Manne. Melbourne, VIC: Black, 1968 / 2009. 172–224.

⁴ Griffiths cites Greg Denning, Inga Clendinnen, Paul Carter and Anne Salmond.

⁵ The *Anthology of Australian Aboriginal Literature* (eds. Anita Heiss and Peter Minter, McGill-Queen UP, 2008) attests to the long tradition of Australian Aboriginal novelists and poets who have challenged the discourse of colonialism and imperialism.

⁶ Adeline occurred in April 2005, a year before *Carpentaria* was published.

⁷ Elias can be considered as both the allegorical offspring of Leda and Zeus and the son of the male Aboriginal lightning dreaming and female storm dreaming. Being the son of lightning and Leda, Elias can also be understood as one of the Gemini brothers, Castor and Pollux. This connection would tie him to Normal Phantom, the Aboriginal character whose knowledge of the sea and river is immemorial.

⁸ For more information on Dreaming stories of the seascape, see Ian McNiven’s ‘Saltwater People: Spiritscapes, Maritime Rituals and the Archaeology of Australian Indigenous Seascapes’ in *World Archaeology* 35.3 (2004): 329–349, and John Bradley’s ‘Wirriyarra Awara: Yanyuwa Land and Sea Scapes’ in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 98.4 (1999): 801–816). The National Museum of Australia references many paintings about lightning spirits in the cultural area of Arnhem such as ‘Namarrkon, the Lightning Man’ <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/barks/display.php?irn=45846>, and ‘Namaruon – Lightning Spirit’ <http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/barks/display.php?irn=18717>.

⁹ The phrase ‘once upon a time’ (*Carpentaria* 37; *The Swan Book* 24) suggests an intertextual parody of European storytelling.

¹⁰ The boundary blurring is complicated by the antithetical echo of the words ‘concinnity’ and ‘mutterings’, respectfully denoting the careful narratological arrangement of Bella Donna’s life *and* its chaotic inscription in a grander narrative of migration.

¹¹ The personification of Nature echoes the end of *Carpentaria*, where Will Phantom ‘realise[s] how history could be obliterated when the Gods move the country. He saw history rolled, reshaped, undone and mauled as the great creators of the natural world engineered the bounty of everything man had ever done into something more of their making’ (415).

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