



Book Review

Alexis Wright. *The Swan Book*. Atarmon, NSW: Giramondo, 2013. 338pp. ISBN 978-1-922146-41-0.

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“Alexis Wright’s latest novel: from Australian swansong to new Indigenous songline”

The Swan Book, Alexis Wright’s latest novel, further expands the fascinating Indigenous universe the Indigenous-Australian author of Waanyi descent has created over the past decade and a half. *The Swan Book* is a literary tour de force that critically engages with Western “end times” (San Roque 2007). Wright relies on the strength of her Waanyi ancestors’ oral tradition to create an apocalyptic view of Australia in the face of global warming, capitalist greed and the Indigenous fight for political power. Thus, *The Swan Book* is a political, economic and climatic dystopia struggling to regain the environmental and social balance the continent once enjoyed but that now has *all* human, animal and vegetal populations under threat, displaced and suffering.

One could read Wright’s three novels to date as a chronological triptych as they address the past, present and future of Waanyi society in Australia’s Top End respectively. Published in the year of the Bringing-Them-Home Report on Australia’s Stolen Generations, *Plains of*

Promise (UQP, 1997) critically revises the past of Aboriginal dislocation, dispersal and removal from traditional homelands in Northern Queensland. It addressed the collapse of traditional kinship structures through the trials and tribulations of three generations of Indigenous women up to the 1990s, painting an uncertain future for the survival of Indigenous society. Receiving the Miles Franklin Prize at the very start of John Howard's Northern Territory Emergency Response, *Carpentaria* (Giramondo, 2006) forges a Utopian promise for the future of Waanyi society out of the cyclonic destruction of a coastal mining town's economic, social and physical infrastructure on the Northern Queensland coast. Thus, it reinstates the creative powers of the Rainbow Serpent Dreaming to safeguard the survival of Indigenous society. Wright's latest novel, published with the Northern Territory Invasion still in full bipartite swing, boldly positions itself in the year 2100 and imagines what the Indigenous-Australian future will look like if present-day neo-colonialism, late capitalism and the social policies that hold them in place were to continue unaltered.

The Swan Book describes the control of Indigenous life at the Top End by the army, and the devastating effects of climate change, ingrained racial policy and late-capitalism on the Australian population at large, displaced and impoverished regardless of class or creed through incessant droughts and floods. Against this backdrop it pits the training for, and arrival to political power of the first Indigenous-Australian President and "gift of God", Warren Finch, against the isolated life of young Oblivia Ethylene Oblivion from his northern homeland. This Indigenous girl and lonely, traumatised gang-rape victim enjoys a special Dreamtime relationship with the lake's black swans, a native Australian bird recently pushed north from the drought-ridden south. Their migration mirrors the dire effects of Indigenous dispersal, disempowerment and death in the area but also denotes the devastating effects of the mainstream mismanagement of the land in general. The solution to these issues was once sought in the union of Warren and Oblivia, a match once considered desirable but which, after Olivia has been "meddled with" (she is violated by a group of Indigenous boys), is now rejected by the local Elders, who act out of a sense of protection towards the boy and girl once chosen to lead (the) country to survival and regeneration. This opportunity seems now forever lost with Oblivia cast in silence, forgetfulness and presumed madness. Yet their marriage, sought and achieved by Warren in his search to legitimise an Indigenous "manifest destiny", will force Oblivia to join him to the City, an apocalyptic version of what seems Melbourne or Sydney. Warren's strategy is initially successful and takes him to absolute power but ultimately undone by his assassination shortly after their betrothal. This causes Oblivia to flee back to what little is left of the Swan Lake in company of her flock of black swans so as to recover a—however incomplete—sense of belonging. Thus, the novel seems to express utter distrust in any political action in the face of the devastation wrought by the Western production mode and lifestyle, in clear reference to the current state of affairs in the Northern Territory.

As always, Wright peoples her novel with a host of extraordinary characters such as the old global nomad Bella Donna of the Champions, the healer The Harbour Master, the three highly-qualified Indigenous bodyguards-genies and the soothsaying monkey Rigoletto. *The Swan Book* also revisits the themes of Wright's previous two novels and merges them into a new tale of hope and despair that slowly expands laterally as well as progressively while analysing Australian society with Wright's sharp eye for ethical incongruence and inconsistency. The private universe of female suffering depicted in *Plains of Promise* joins the wider, critical environmental scope of *Carpentaria* in a new Dreamtime narrative which shows that the local and the universal are inextricably bound up in a fragile bind that, if not

respected, leads to disaster for all. Yet, written with the deep irony and firm engagement that characterises her style, Wright's latest does not read as a swansong of death and resignation but more like a critical songline into a possible future that sounds a warning against the invasiveness of Western thinking and modes of being. Wright employs imaginative fiction to shed the Western shackles that trap the Indigenous mind as if a virus. As the authorial voice announces in the novel's prelude (which finds an echo in Oblivia's on the novel's last page), in order to free herself of the contagion of the settler's way, her fiction creates:

illusionary ancient homelands to encroach on and destroy the wide-open vista of the virus's real estate ... I have become a gypsy, addicted to journeys into these distant illusionary homelands, to try to lure the virus hidden somewhere in its own crowded globe to open the door. This where it begins as far as I am concerned. This is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain (Wright 2013 4).

Work Cited

San Roque, Craig. "On Reading Carpentaria. A review of Alexis Wright's Miles Franklin Award-winning novel." *The Uses of Subjective Experience: A Weekend of Conversations between ANZSJA Analysts and Academics who work with Jung's Ideas*. ANZSJA, Melbourne, 20-21 October 2007: n.pag., n.p. Reading.

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