Feathers Floating on Fading Dreams: Reading the Swans in Alexis Wright's The Swan Book

Krčan, Irma

Odsjek za anglistiku
Filozofski fakultet

Sveučilište u Zagrebu

DIPLOMSKI RAD

Feathers Floating on Fading Dreams:
Reading the Swans in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

(Smjer: engleska književnost i kultura)

Kandidatkinja: Irma Krčan

Mentorica: dr. sc. Iva Polak, izv. prof.

Ak. godina: 2021./2022.

Contents:

Introduction.....3
Climate Change on the Wing.....6
All in the Same Boat.....14
Of Rare Birds and Foreigners' *Dreamings*.....24
Becoming Fluent in Swan Talk.....34
Conclusion.....44
Works Cited.....45
Abstract.....49

Introduction

Published to great critical acclaim in 2013, *The Swan Book* is the third novel by Waanyi author Alexis Wright, without a doubt one of the leading Aboriginal literary voices of the 21st century. Just like its predecessor, *Carpentaria*, which won Wright the Miles Franklin Award in 2007, *The Swan Book* is a highly poetic work steeped in the Aboriginal Dreaming, a multi-layered epic dealing with a series of issues facing contemporary Australia, ranging from the continuing mistreatment of the Indigenous populations to environmental exploitation. However, *The Swan Book* takes its critique of these issues a step further by imagining a dystopian future world where not only Australia but also the entire planet is ravaged by climate change, Aboriginal Australians are forced to live in detention camps under military control, and thousands of refugees roam the world's oceans after being chased from their homelands by environmental catastrophes and nuclear wars. The storyline of the novel follows the mute Aboriginal girl Oblivion Ethyl(ene), Oblivia for short, who lives in a polluted swamp/detention camp in the Australian far north with her people, by whom she is treated like an outcast, and Bella Donna of the Champions, a European refugee who takes care of her and who rescued her from the trunk of the eucalyptus tree into which she fell after having survived a gang rape. Very early into the novel, these characters are joined by a great number of displaced black swans from faraway parts of Australia, with whom Oblivia immediately develops a special relationship. However, her life drastically changes when it turns out that she is the promised wife of the first Aboriginal president of the Republic of Australia Warren Finch, who comes to the swamp in search of her. Having effectively kidnapped her, he takes her to an unnamed city, marries her and locks her into a tower, where she remains until he is assassinated. Only then does she manage to escape and return to her swamp, all with the help of her black swans.

Interestingly, it is precisely black swans that constitute the novel's main source of inspiration, as indicated both by its title and its cover. Indeed, *The Swan Book* grew out of chance conversations about displaced black swans. As Alexis Wright explains in an interview

> […] when I started thinking about writing a book about swans, way back in 2003, I was

> living in Central Australia and people started telling me stories of swans that they had seen in the desert, sometimes on very shallow stretches of water. People were surprised to see them in these places, so far away from coastal and wetter regions of Australia. I am also from northern Australia and we don't have swans, so I knew nothing about them... well, back then I didn't. (Wright and Zable 30)

In the decade between 2003, when she became interested in swans and decided to write a book about them, and 2013, when *The Swan Book* was published, Wright certainly learnt a lot about swans. The extensive reading she did for the purpose of her narrative is clearly visible from the first to the last page of the novel, in addition to being evidenced in "A Note on Sources" at its end. As a result, the story of *The Swan Book* is packed not only with flocks of literal swans, but also with intertextual references to swan-inspired literature and art, which testify to their cultural and symbolic potency. As Nicholas Birns points out, "the totemic animal for Wright's novel is not simply the swan, but the symbol of the swan, with all the significance humans ascribe to it" (153).

Yet, Wright's swans do not simply form a poetic backdrop to the novel. On the contrary, as this thesis will argue, the figure of the swan, on all its levels of meaning, is crucial for understanding and interpretation of the major issues that *The Swan Book* addresses. Therefore, the chapters that follow will analyse Wright's swans: in the context of climate change and environmental degradation; as representing and drawing attention to marginalisation, displacement and (un)belonging, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; as figures of positive, productive cultural negotiation; and finally, as the agents of the swan story resulting from these processes. The first two chapters will focus on the role of the displaced black swans as the voice of the muted and alienated human and non-human agents, showing how these birds not only articulate their plight but also bind them together, thus highlighting the importance of mutual care and solidarity and proving Alexis Wright to be a successful storyteller of what she calls "the universal local" ("Teachings" 14:20), the one whose writing engages with the concerns of both her home and the whole world. The third chapter will explore the cultural potency of the swan; therefore, the discussion will be expanded to include the figure of the European white swan and to examine how its relationship with the black swans indigenous to Australia bridges the gap between the two cultures, resulting in the production of a new story. The fourth chapter will then provide a detailed analysis of this story, an analysis which, as the

story in question in fact proves to be that of *The Swan Book* itself, will reveal that the swans in fact function not only as major agents in the novel, but also as the key factor in determining every aspect of their story – the form it takes, the pattern which the plot follows, and, in a certain sense, even the language in which it is told. Ultimately, the thesis proposes that the successful creation of the swan story functions as a glimmer of hope in the novel's bleak, dystopian world, drawing attention to the importance of listening and engaging with stories governed and shaped by non-human voices, or, more generally, by all voices that are radically different from our own.

Climate Change on the Wing

As mentioned in the Introduction, Wright's principal inspiration for writing *The Swan Book* were stories about the repeated sightings of black swans in the parts of Australia where they do not normally occur. This phenomenon, albeit seemingly of little importance, hints at much bigger environmental problems: the swans' habitat, namely the coastal and wetter regions of the country, were no longer able to sustain them due to unprecedented drought in parts of the country that are normally wet, and floods in parts that are normally dry. Thus, the swans' displacement is in fact a direct consequence of the global man-made problem of climate change. As the author explains:

> I talked to traditional owners living along the coast and they were saying there used to be a lot of swans here and now there is hardly any and we don't know why. Well, we do know why. Global warming, perhaps? A change in weather patterns? And over many years, there had been human interference along rivers feeding into the sea, tampering with the flow of the water, and rivers dammed up, which ended up with silt and salt everywhere and other environmental damage. And so the swans just moved. We had taken them out of their habitat through environmental damage that has been mostly man-made, and the swans moved. (Wright and Zable 30)

In *The Swan Book*, Wright extrapolates from this real, contemporary phenomenon to imagine much more serious and widespread environmental degradation. Set in a futuristic Australia around the country's tercentenary, the story of the novel paints a vivid picture of the catastrophic global effects of climate change already at the beginning of the first chapter, which starts ominously by:

> *When the world changed*, people were different. Towns closed, cities were boarded up, communities abandoned, their governments collapsed […] Mother Nature? Hah! […] People on the road called her the Mother Catastrophe of flood, fire, drought and blizzard. These were the four seasons which she threw around the world whenever she liked. (Wright, *The Swan Book* 6)

In Australia, the workings of this "Mother Catastrophe" have resulted in the weather

flipping sides, in "swapping southern weather with that of the north, and this unique event of unrolling the climate upside down, left the entire continent covered in dust" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 18). One of the consequences of this change in weather patterns, as it is suggested, is that hundreds of black swans have been forced to seek shelter miles away from what used to be their natural habitat, in a polluted swamp in the Australian north, the home of the novel's protagonist, the mute Aboriginal girl Oblivia, and a place where no-one remembers ever seeing them.

Thus, these new arrivals are immediately established as figures of displacement, strangeness and alienation. Already when the first black swan appears in Oblivia's swamp in Chapter 1, it is clearly depicted as an incongruous sight. Indeed, wherever black swans go, there always seems to be a mismatch between them and their surroundings. In the swamp, they are set against the backdrop of a polluted swamp, dust and junk dropped in the lake by the Army, who have been using the ancestral country of the swamp people as a dumping ground for pieces of wreckage: "A large flock of black swans whispering to each other in their rusted car-body bedrooms all over the swamp whistle, glide and bump over the waves driven along by the sudden arrival of gusty winds" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 46). When they are later reunited with Oblivia in an unnamed city, they are even more out of place, with hundreds of them spending entire nights flying nervously and obsessively around the building where the girl is trapped, unsuccessfully trying to reach her. Even when Oblivia, on her way to the city with her kidnapper and husband-to-be Warren Finch, glimpses a few black swans in the desert, and the swans fly away immediately, one of Finch's three bodyguards says that "they belong somewhere else" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 195). Clearly, the strangeness of the black swans functions as a leitmotif: they always belong *somewhere else*. Additionally, the birds' external appearance accentuates the visual contrast between them and the dilapidated, polluted places where they are forced to seek refuge, since, as Birns indicates, "the swan has lyrical associations […] Swans symbolise beauty" (153). However, they also symbolise "beauty in distress" (Birns 153). Indeed, *The Swan Book'*s black swans are marked by great vulnerability too, as not only their presence seems incongruous wherever they go, but they also frequently get hurt. In the swamp, in addition to having trouble finding food and therefore depending on Oblivia and Bella Donna, a European refugee who takes care of her, to feed them, some of them get attacked and brutally killed by dogs. In the city, a large number of them are injured by street kids or by crashing into windows in an attempt

to reach Oblivia, and on the way back to the swamp through the dry outback, an even larger number of them drop to the ground from exhaustion and die. In fact, the swans' displacement and suffering, clearly exemplified and poignantly depicted, marks every step of the journey the novel narrates. It can be argued, then, that *The Swan Book* "allow[s] non-human things to shape narrative" instead of being "solely 'character-driven'" (26), a literary quality which Adam Trexler identifies as one of the defining characteristics of climate fiction, or, as he prefers to call it, Anthropocene fiction. Wright's novel truly constitutes a valuable contribution to this growing body of literature, effectively addressing the challenges that climate change as a topic poses to literary representation. Hence the usefulness of analysing the relation between the black swans and climate change within the framework of climate fiction.

In his study *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, Trexler attributes particular importance to the notion of agency because it "allows an environmental critic to describe nonhuman things as actors in ecosystems, politics and novels" (23). This ties in with Adeline Johns-Putra's claim that the term Anthropocene "exposes the fallacy of human exceptionalism, reminding us of the entangled nature of human and nonhuman agency, and the vast and decidedly nonhuman proportions of human action" (26). As already illustrated, Wright shifts the reader's focus towards non-human actors by allowing the displaced and suffering black swans to shape her narrative, but it is not only the swans that are given more importance and authority by this shift: the birds' plight, in fact, functions as a synecdoche for the upset natural balance and the resulting harm to all non-human life. This means that, in effect, *The Swan Book*'s black swans function as the voice of the entire natural world, of the environment as a living, suffering agent that has the same status and importance as human characters. As Honni van Rijswijk indicates, "in *The Swan Book*, land and the natural world have agency and authority" (128). This leads the reader away from the dominant capitalist conception of land as nothing but a silent, lifeless source of profit, and brings them closer to the Aboriginal notion of Country[1], which anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose defines "not [as] a generalized or undifferentiated type of place" but "a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life" (7). Country is, indeed, a living and feeling subject; moreover, it is the source of Aboriginal Law, which is completely at odds with most non-Aboriginal laws because it focuses on the reciprocal

1 The word "Country", written with a capital "C" and usually with no definite article, is used in Aboriginal English to mark a distinctively Indigenous concept of the land.

care between human and non-human life and the sense of belonging to the land rather than domination and exploitation. In *The Swan Book*, Country and its Law are clearly reflected in the displaced black swans: "Though they were previously unknown in this environment, the swamp people thought that the swans had returned to a home of ancient times, by following stories for country that had been always known to them. Swans had Law too" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 67). Thus, as the story of the swans, whose Law is clearly violated in the face of climate change and who therefore suffer great harm, reads as the story of Country, the advantages of the Aboriginal perspective on the natural world, which emphasises the interconnections between all forms of life rather than focusing solely on human wants, become evident. As Jessica White puts it, "rather than dividing the world into human and non-human, with the former holding dominion over the latter, Indigenous people perceive that all elements of their country nourish each other because there is no site, no position, from which the interest of one can be disengaged from the interests of other in the long term" (150). The novel's black swans suggest that listening to their voice, the voice of Country, and, as Iva Polak puts it, "[conceptualizing] the land as the source of belonging and not the source of profit" ("Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*" 221) may be the only way to avoid, or at least mitigate, the frightening future scenario that *The Swan Book* narrates.

The displaced black swans also prove crucial in addressing one of the greatest challenges of climate fiction, what Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra call "the discrepancy between [the] enormous spatial and temporal scale [of climate change] and that of individual human experience" (10). In terms of spatiality, the planetary nature of the problem indeed makes it hard to translate its workings from the global macrolevel to the local and individual microlevels – a gap which Wright's black swans manage to bridge. This is due to the fact that, as the novel's great non-human narrative shapers, they are not portrayed as solely global figures, which means that they do not remain only symptoms of worldwide environmental degradation and strange travellers from far away. Rather, the swans become an important part both of the life of the swamp community, whose swamp even becomes known as the Swan Lake after their arrival, and the life of the protagonist, with whom they form an incredibly strong bond. Accordingly, the repeated sufferings which they endure at every major stage of the narrative are likely to appear to the reader as more concrete and tangible than descriptions of distant and large-scale environmental disasters. In other words, the swans function as the glue between the

story of the planet, the story of local circles and an individual story, allowing the problem of climate change to permeate all three of them and thus become easier to comprehend. As Polak points out, *The Swan Book* "can be read as a global, local and/or intimate story" ("Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*" 218), and the displaced black swans arguably have a big role to play in each of these stories. Thus, they prove themselves a major part of Wright's attempt to construct *The Swan Book* as a novel addressing "the universal local" rather than dealing with just one community or individual.

When it comes to the problem of grasping the enormous temporal scale of climate change, the black swans again prove useful in addressing it because of their distinctive relationship with time. As migratory birds, swans naturally function not within the framework of linear time, but of cyclical time. This is suggested early on, when the first swan appears and Oblivia hears "the music of migratory travelling cycles, of unravelling and intensifying […]" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 15). The introduction of the framework of cyclical time proves useful in the context of understanding climate change, as cyclical time denotes a certain atemporality; it means that past, present and future are intertwined rather than separate. This interconnection and interdependence of times makes it harder to dismiss climate change as a matter for future generations to deal with and to see it as less alarming only because it is gradual rather than sudden in nature. As such, climate change constitutes a perfect example of hyperobjects, or, in the words of Timothy Morton, who coined the term, "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans", that involve "profoundly different temporalities than the human-scale ones we are used to" (1). Arguably, then, as hyperobjects are so massively distributed in time, they are characterised by a kind of atemporality. This is in line with Morton's claim that "the aesthetic-causal realm in which hyperobjects appear to operate is in some sense nonlocal and atemporal" (46). Significantly, this atemporality of climate change evokes the conception of time characteristic of the Aboriginal Dreaming, defined by Christine Judith Nicholls as "a religion grounded in the land itself" which "incorporates creation and other land-based narratives, social processes including kinship regulations, morality and ethics", "informs people's economic, cognitive, affective and spiritual lives" and "embraces time past, present and future" (Nicholls), a conception of time that the 20th-century anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner aptly termed "everywhen" (58). This term can also be applied to Country, which is in itself an atemporal category. This shows once again how Wright employs the Aboriginal worldview and conceptions to sensitise her

reader to the problem of climate change. And as the voice of Country, the swans necessarily live and function, so to speak, by the Aboriginal clock, within the framework of Aboriginal cyclical time, which in fact makes them an atemporal category, just like Country. Cornelis M. B. Renes highlights this relation of the swans' cyclical atemporality to the Dreaming too, stating that in the closing chapters "the scene almost necessarily shifts to the eternal movements of the natural cycle: wet and drought, life and death alternate as behoove and the story of the disappearing and reappearing swans is cast in a timeless, distancing Dreamtime perspective of constant renewal" (10). However, the scope of environmental destruction wrought throughout the novel arguably casts doubt on the possibility of renewal, which is indeed normally inherent in natural cycles. This is why cyclical time and the eternal renewal it implies make climate change, which eventually interferes with this renewal, appear as a much more serious and far-reaching phenomenon than time divided in separate blocks. Thus, even if the narrative does not end on a completely hopeless note, the swans do leave the swamp and, although Stranger, the swan Oblivia takes care of, expects that, as migratory birds, they will eventually return, he waits in vain. This suggests that they are likely to have left for good and that further renewal may be impossible. Ultimately, there is no guarantee that the environment will be able to recover from the harm it has suffered.

Immediately established as strange, never-before-seen creatures who not only come from far away but are also characterised by a peculiar (a)temporality, the black swans are likely to evoke a kind of other-worldliness, as if they were celestial creatures. The novel does play with this idea, as not only is it known that the swamp people have been praying for a miracle before the birds' arrival, but the displaced black swans are also on multiple occasions associated with angels and heaven. When they first show up, "their murmurings to one another" are likened to "angels whispering from the heavens" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 15). When they have settled in the swamp and the water is littered with floating feathers, it looks "as though black angels had flown around in dreams of feeling something good about one another" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 51). When Oblivia is observing Christmas-themed miniatures in Warren Finch's safe house in the city, she thinks how "her swans might already be on their way back from heaven" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 218). Hence a temptation, on the part of both the reader and characters, to see the arrival of the swans as a sign from heaven, a divine intervention bringing the ultimate solution to all the problems, which subtly invites a comparison with

Biblical apocalypse. According to Rosalyn Weaver, Biblical apocalypse "is a revelation about the world, a new perspective uncovering what was previously hidden" (12), but it also "shows that the hope for [a] renewed world follows a time of disaster" (9). In such a bleak narrative as the one of *The Swan Book*, a version of Biblical apocalypse would in fact represent a positive development, which means that seeing the black swans as angelic figures descending from heaven to make things right after a time of suffering constitutes an act of hope. However, this hope turns out to be vain, as the connections made between the swans and the divine never go beyond the level of poetic associations. What these misleading suggestions in fact show is that the problems of the world *The Swan Book* creates, climate change in particular, cannot be solved by a sudden divine intervention. Accordingly, it soon turns out that the displaced black swans are no more celestial than human characters. Rather than being the hoped-for deus ex machina, their "angelic" feathers are no more than "sweet decoration", "[f]eathers floating on fading dreams" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 51) – a sad truth which is, in fact, tentatively hinted when the first swan arrives: "[…] the swan looked like a paragon of anxious premonitions, rather than the arrival of a miracle for saving the world" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 14). Interestingly, the character that is far more explicitly likened to such a miracle and on multiple occasions described as "a true gift from God" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 118), namely the first Aboriginal president of Australia Warren Finch, will prove to be a much greater disappointment than the swans could ever be.

This rejection of the possibility of divine intervention and therefore of a new and better world, albeit clearly incompatible with Biblical apocalypse, seems more in line with Weaver's concept of *secular* apocalypse. Secular apocalypse "frequently [over-emphasizes] disaster and judgment, ignoring or minimizing the themes of blessing and mercy that are of great significance in the Bible […], often [concluding] with the end of the world with authors unable or unwilling to anticipate a new world" (15). As Weaver explains, "there is no hope of a new world in secular apocalypses, which promise the destruction without the new heaven and new earth and imagine not utopia but dystopia" (15). However, it can be argued that Wright's novel in fact resists the label of secular apocalypse as well, that it resists the label of apocalypse in general, as it does not over-emphasise disaster and judgement or feature an identifiable period of ultimate catastrophes which could be perceived as the end of the world – or at least, if there is one, it remains unspecified. Indeed, as Anne Le Guellec-Minel remarks, Wright is

"particularly wary of the apocalyptic mode and what she terms the 'language of extinction'". In terms of depicting climate change, this decision proves to be particularly effective, as apocalyptic writing is in many ways inadequate to convey the complex nature of climate change and the era of Anthropocene. As argued by Adam Trexler, "apocalyptic writing typically describes horrors that are unmoored from the real causes and conditions of the Anthropocene" (118). Jessica White also praises the fact that *The Swan Book* avoids the apocalyptic mode in its representation of climate change, claiming that the "proximity of [the future Wright imagines in the novel] to our own might be a more effective means of conveying the dislocation that climate change will inevitably bring, rather than through narratives of apocalypse" (159).

Therefore, it can be argued that *The Swan Book*'s depiction of climate change is not only darker and more serious, but arguably also more accurate than an apocalyptic depiction would be. Instead of offering a promise of a renewed world or, in fact, any kind of narrative closure, the novel is markedly open-ended, mirroring the open-endedness of climate change: "Swans might come back. Who knows what madness will be calling them in the end?" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 334). In other words, the uncertainty that is implied at the beginning, when the first swan is described as a paragon of anxious premonitions, is reintroduced in the end, prevailing over any remaining hopes of divine intervention. Thus, Wright's black swans show there is no place for apocalypse in a world ravaged by climate change, that it is a problem with no quick, let alone divine, solutions.

All in the Same Boat

The previous chapter has shown that, at the literal level, the black swans are easily interpretable as tormented animals that have fallen victim to the ravages of climate change, and as such they ask to be read through the theoretical lens of climate fiction. However, since they are driven out of their natural habitat and perceived as figures of otherness wherever they go, they also function as a powerful metaphor for certain groups of people in contemporary Australia, those who have suffered displacement, alienation and marginalisation. Moreover, it can be argued that they are drawn to the characters representing these groups, and even develop a special bond with some of them. All of this shows that Wright's black swans effectively give a voice to the people to whom Australian society has denied one.

The most obvious example of such a group would be Aboriginal peoples. Aside from the simple association stemming from the fact that the black swan is indigenous to Australia, Aboriginal Australians fit the description perfectly because they have been and remain a severely marginalised group in 21st-century Australia, facing a plethora of problems such as high rates of death in custody, poverty, difficulties in gaining legal recognition of native title rights to their land, casual racism, and many more. Moreover, in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century Aboriginal peoples from all over Australia suffered dispossession and systematic expulsion from their traditional lands as they were sent to faraway missions and reserves in order to be "civilised". Analysing *The Swan Book,* Temiti Lehartel indicates the novel's clear allusion to "the 'Restriction of the Sale of Opium and Protection of Aborigines Act of 1897' which depopulated regions and relocated Indigenous Australians to 'far away places as wards of the state' [...] to make land available for settler occupancy" (Lehartel). For these reasons, the plight of the black swans can easily be perceived as a metaphor for the troubles of Aboriginal Australians, both past and present. This connection has also been stressed by critics such as Ben Holgate, who claims that "the black, native swans, which are said to be 'banished' and 'gypsies', [represent] the plight of Indigenous people" (640) and Cornelis M. B. Renes, who writes that "the black swans' forced migration functions as a metaphor for the dire effects of Indigenous dispersal, disempowerment and death in the area" (8). This

metaphor is reinforced by the relationship between the displaced swans and the Aboriginal characters in Wright's novel, as the birds arguably gather around and identify themselves with these characters.

Significantly, even though *The Swan Book* is set in the late 21st century, the hardships of Aboriginal Australians in the future world that it constructs seem to have been aggravated rather than alleviated. This is clearly visible from the predicament of the Aboriginal characters in Oblivia's swamp, which is turned into a detention centre where both its traditional owners and the Aboriginal people relocated there from their distant lands are forced to live under military control. This in effect functions as the fictional continuation of the Northern Territory Intervention Emergency Response, which was launched in 2007 under the pretext of rampant child abuse in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, and which saw the then Prime Minister John Howard send in the army and introduce a number of dubious restrictive measures in Aboriginal communities. By seeking refuge in the dismal, army-controlled swamp, the swans develop a certain affinity with its inhabitants. This may seem more understandable in the case of the relocated Aboriginal people, who have, just like the swans, been forced into homelessness and are initially perceived as strangers in the swamp. However, the locals fare no better: in fact, they are as marginalised as the relocated people, because the racist authorities see all Aboriginal Australians as equally undesirable. Moreover, as the traditional owners of the swamp, or, as the army general in charge sees it, of "a convenient dumping ground for unwanted people" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 50), they also suffer a kind of displacement because, even though they live on their land, they cannot take proper care of it, nor protect it from governmental exploitation and mismanagement. This makes them, as Birns puts it, "symbolically homeless" (154), and therefore more akin to the swans than it might appear at first glance.

Yet, there is one person among them with whom the swans bond the most – Oblivia. This becomes crystal clear as soon as the first one arrives: as it fixes her with a stare, Oblivia becomes certain "that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 15). The fact that, of all the Aboriginal characters, the swans are immediately drawn to Oblivia is crucial because of the kind of Aboriginality she represents. Apart from being "symbolically homeless" like the rest of her people, she was gang-raped and afterwards renounced both by her parents and by her people. Thus, Oblivia is an outcast among the

outcasts, shunned, alienated and severely traumatised. As Philip Mead writes, Oblivia "seems to stand for the most brutally traumatised members of the Aboriginal population – withdrawn, almost mute, terrified, 'polluted' in the view of some of her own people [...]" (537). The fact that the swans identify with her more than with anybody else therefore means that they give a voice to the most traumatised Aboriginal Australians. And it is precisely the importance of voice and the swans' ability to give one to those who have been silenced and marginalised that is underscored through their relationship with Oblivia, as not only does her inferior position in society make her symbolically voiceless, but she has also been literally mute ever since Bella Donna pulled her out of the eucalyptus tree. And interestingly, the English word "swan" etymologically means "the singing bird", being derived from the Proto-Indo-European root *swen-, that is, "to make sound" ("Swan"): in other words, their very name marks them as distinctly "voiced" creatures. Therefore, it can be argued that a way out for the silenced Oblivia lies precisely in becoming "fluent in swan talk" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 69).

It is also interesting that not all the swan species in the novel live up to their etymology. In fact, the species of the white swan which Bella Donna remembers from Europe is called "the mute swan", a name that clashes with the aforementioned notion of "the singing bird", which is all the more ironic because it is a European swan species rather than an Australian one that contradicts the etymology of English, a European language. In his article on swan culture in Eurasia, Mark Brazil notes this contradiction as well. Having drawn attention to the swan's etymological relation with sound, even identifying it as "the base of the Latin word for a sound, 'sonus'" (Brazil 70), he points out that, in fact, "for the most part it was believed that swans were silent, or poorly voiced, and perhaps as much for that reason as any other, the swan bred and reared in semi-domestic form and thus which became most familiar, became known in English as Mute" (Brazil 74). In *The Swan Book*, Wright indeed gives a voice, and therefore the power to become voice-givers themselves, to the black swans more than to the white ones, limiting the latter to the realm of stories and intertextual references, and never introducing an actual white swan into the narrative. In contrast, black swans are physically present from the beginning of the narrative, they endure various hardships together with the characters and they communicate and connect with them, especially with Oblivia. Thus, despite the shared etymology, not all of the novel's swan species are equally "voiced".

It soon becomes clear that Wright's novel is anything but black and white, for the hardships that Oblivia suffers are not synonymous with Aboriginality in general. The swamp people's neighbouring Brolga Nation is a case in point. Not only do the Aboriginal people of the Brolga Nation live on their traditional country without army surveillance, but they are also allowed to have a certain form of self-government. However, there is a reason why they are in Canberra's good graces, which the narrator explains in a highly ironic manner:

> […] for whatever it took to deal with people from the outside world coming along with great ideas for fixing up the lives of Aboriginal people, or wanting to take something else from them, mostly in the form of traditional land and resources, they agreed by presenting themselves as being well and truly yes people who were against arguing the toss about Aboriginal rights. (*The Swan Book* 96)

To put it differently, the people of the Brolga Nation have sold out their culture, their country and their way of life, and therefore, having willingly given up all that Oblivia's people are desperate to preserve, they do not share any of their suffering. A true product of their nation and their greatest pride is Warren Finch, a young man who goes on to become the first president of the Republic of Australia, privileged, powerful and important. Yet, Finch severs all links with his culture and country and abandons his origins, becoming a distant, cold personage with little regard and compassion for people living and struggling on the margins of society, including his fellow Aboriginal people. As can be seen, the concept of Aboriginality in the novel is very complex and nuanced, which is also stressed by Iva Polak in her study *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction*, where she argues that

> for Wright's narrator Aboriginality as a generic term is as precarious as any other signifier, and may be devoid of meaning if not ethically grounded. Consequently, Aboriginality can also become a part of humanity alienated from its own origins. […] the alienation visible in the non-urban loci of *The Swan Book* comes from different centres of culture, because all cultures can become acultured when they cease to be *grounded.* However, the reader is constantly reminded that some people are forced into alienation, and some choose alienation by consciously replacing their locality with globality. (211-212)

The black swans play a crucial role in indicating the distinction between the characters forced into alienation and those choosing alienation. A good example is the fact that, as the representatives of the ethically grounded Aboriginality of Oblivia and her people, they are pitted against brolgas, which stand for the Brolga Nation. Yet, it is interesting to note that brolgas actually occupy a very important place in Aboriginal cosmogony and therefore feature in a great number of Dreaming narratives. As can be seen, the Aboriginal worldview and knowledge – the Dreaming – are inextricably linked with storytelling, a connection which the example of the brolga illustrates very well: as Michael J Connolly explains, Aboriginal people believe that the brolga used to be a girl of the same name who was a talented dancer and whom the evil spirit Waivera transformed into a bird (Connolly). Thus, it has become widely known as "the beautiful dancing bird" (Connolly). As such, the brolga is in stark contrast with the people who call themselves by its name, and especially with Warren Finch, a contrast which indicates the extent to which the Brolga Nation and Finch have become corrupted and estranged from their culture. The black swans seem to know this fact instinctively, as they are mistrustful of Finch the moment he arrives in the swamp to abduct Oblivia. For instance, when he has captured her and is rowing them back to his car, "their grey, black and white-tipped wings flapped frantically and they lunged with their long necks into the boat and bit Warren's arms as he rowed" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 160). Significantly, their incompatibility with Warren and everything he represents is foreshadowed already in his childhood, when he tries to rescue a black swan from drowning but fails. If the unfortunate swan is seen as symbolic of Oblivia and her people, or indeed the novel's forcibly displaced, dispossessed and marginalised people in general, then this accident can be argued to show not only that Finch, albeit Aboriginal, is not one of them, but also that, once he comes into power, he will in fact do nothing to alleviate these people's plight. Finally, one could even argue that his very name reveals what kind of person he will become before the reader learns anything else about him, as it refers not only to the finch, "a European songbird whose everydayness and small size contrast with the exceptionality and beauty of the native black swans" (Renes 9), but also to warrens, which are systems of rabbit burrows. This means that his name combines in itself a bird from Europe, from Western culture, and, even more significantly, the burrow of one of Australia's major pests, pests imported into the country from Europe at that, both of

which suggest that the future first Aboriginal president of Australia will truly lose all connection to his culture, people and country.

Yet, just as the swans' discordance with Warren Finch and his Brolga Nation denies their representation and voice to acultured, sell-out Aboriginalities, so it opens the door to certain groups who, despite being non-Indigenous, nevertheless suffer forced alienation. This is the case with refugees, a fact which shows that Wright's reader is asked to recognise not only the problems faced by Indigenous populations, but also the problems faced by different non-Indigenous people across the world, most notably the global refugee crisis of the 21st century. This crisis is mirrored by the tragic fate of the novel's boat people, described primarily through the stories of the Gypsy woman Bella Donna of the Champions, who is the only one of her group of European boat people to survive the perilous sea journey and reach Australia, or more precisely Oblivia's people's swamp, unharmed. Therefore, the swans' situation can certainly be read as a metaphor for the displacement and dispossession of refugees. Additionally, Bella Donna is the only character apart from Oblivia who truly connects with them, and who is "fluent in swan talk". In fact, Oblivia's people believe that it was Bella Donna who had called the black swans to their swamp. For, although her culture features white swans, in their absence Bella Donna feeds the black ones; she approaches them and tells them stories; they gather around her, listen and reply; moreover, they arguably take over her role as Oblivia's protector after she dies, rescuing her from the city tower into which Warren Finch has locked her and bringing her home. Jane Gleeson-White also pairs the displaced birds with Bella Donna, seeing them as "two species of climate-change refugees", both of whom "claim the outcast Oblivia" (33).

However, the connection between the swans and the refugee characters goes beyond their closeness with Bella Donna: they also share the fate of the many unfortunate people whom Oblivia joins as they make their way northwards from the city, hoping to find a new home in her swamp. Wright offers the reader a most poignant, sombre description of this terrible journey:

> So for days, sometimes weeks, the lines of humanity walked knee-deep in yellow billowing water, and if the predictions were wrong, waist-deep or up to the neck of children, which left each person to figure out how to keep carrying the burden of treasured belongings. […] The line was struggling to stay together after days and days of

> tiredness and hunger, many falling by the wayside, unable to go on, with no one to help them. (*The Swan Book* 306, 309)

Oblivia's black swans, flying overhead, leading her home, go through very similar troubles: hunger, disorientation, exhaustion, and ultimately death. In a way, they even share with the refugees the traumatic experience of people smuggling, as Oblivia smuggles the cygnet Stranger in her jacket, hiding him from the hungry people and savage dogs. But unlike the people smugglers, who only help the refugees because they are paid to do so and often abandon them or fail to protect them from harm, Oblivia takes good care of Stranger and brings him to the swamp safe and sound.

As can be seen, Wright's alienated Aboriginal characters and non-Aboriginal refugee characters are closely connected, as the reader's focus is shifted from shared skin colour or ethnicity towards shared human experience. The novel's black swans prove instrumental in this shift, as they stand for and identify themselves with members of both groups, thus binding them together. In this way, the novel reflects circumstances very specific to contemporary Australia, a country notorious for its poor treatment not only of Aboriginal peoples but also of asylum seekers, with an exceptionally harsh and dehumanising offshore processing policy. Indeed, as David Farrier writes, "the convergence of asylum and (post)colonial concerns are nowhere more starkly illustrated than in settler Australia's insistence on the infrahumanity[2] of its indigenous [sic] and asylum-seeking populations" (21). According to Farrier, what is crucial for this convergence is the mechanism of the camp: in fact, as early as the 19th century, settler Australia founded internment camps "the purpose of [which] was to reconfigure the indigenous [sic] person, as Tony Birch has said, as 'a landless and homeless refugee'" (50). A similar practice is observable in Australia's response to asylum seekers: "the arrival of new potential settlers by boat carried [...] 'an unsettling echo' of colonial Australia's origins" (Farrier 49). Significantly, in *The Swan Book* Wright also highlights the convergence between Aboriginal people and refugees by making effective use of the

2 Farrier's understanding of the term "infrahuman" stems from a postcolonial reading of Giorgio Agamben's concept of homo sacer, that is, "a figure in Roman law not invested with any political rights, who may be killed without consequence" and of whom the refugee is "the contemporary exemplar" (Farrier 9). More precisely, it is based on Paul Gilroy and Achille Mbembe's "investigations of the (post)colonial infrahuman" as "a necessary corrective to Agamben's de-racialized homo sacer" (Farrier 21). Gilroy describes the notion of the (post)colonial infrahuman as follows: "The insubordinate native, always closer to death and scarcity, stood at the epicentre of governmental action, [and] the colony [was] identified as a special kind of place [whose] necessary reliance on divisions within humankind […] demanded and institutionalized the abolition of all conceptions of citizenship as universal entitlement" (qtd. in Farrier 40).

camp motif, as the detention camp in the swamp, with its harsh living conditions and constant surveillance, echoes both the 19th-century internment camps for Aboriginal people and the contemporary immigration detention facilities in places like Nauru and Christmas Island. In fact, this fictional detention camp functions as an excellent example of Michel Foucault's heterotopias of deviation, which he defines as "those in which individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (25). In other words, the people perceived by the racist authorities and mainstream as deviant members of Australian society, like Aboriginal people and refugees, are forcibly placed in the camp.

However, the swamp can also be read as a place of refuge for some characters, an instance of what Foucault calls crisis heterotopias, that is, "privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis" (24). The swans constitute a clear example of such individuals, since they, as non-human agents, are not bound by any man-made law or restriction to stay in the swamp: rather, having lost their natural habitat, they seek in it a new home, a place to belong where a new story would be created for them. Similarly, Bella Donna's crisis consists in the loss of her homeland in Europe, which has led her to seek shelter in the swamp too. Moreover, in her specific case this crisis of belonging is reinforced by the fact that she is not only a refugee, but also of Romani heritage, and the Romani are a people to whom contemporary Europe has been particularly unwelcoming, forcing them to become perpetual nomads. This fact is mirrored by Bella Donna's tragic position as what can in effect be described as a double outcast, for not only did she lose everything when the continent was ravaged by environmental disasters to such an extent that she had no other choice but to leave, but also before that she had been forced to roam Europe because she was not allowed to settle anywhere permanently. Therefore, she certainly shares with Oblivia's people the experience of being displaced and dispossessed in one's own home, which is why it seems fitting that she will eventually find refuge and be accepted precisely in Oblivia's people's swamp, where the traditional owners will welcome her with the words: "Here! Stay! Have a go! We don't mind" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 32). In fact, it is only in the swamp that the displaced characters' sense of belonging can potentially be reshaped and reconfigured and the problems of dislocation and homelessness worked out, which, as the case of Bella Donna has just illustrated, has to do with the fact that the characters whose

home it really is, namely Oblivia's people, have experienced alienation themselves and can therefore truly understand and sympathise. As Nicholas Birns argues, *The Swan Book*

> depicts Indigenous people tending and shepherding a commonwealth in which non-Indigenous people who share their values can also gather. This is not just a utopian countercultural community, however. […] it is a mansion in which "acts of love" have been practised, and where vulnerable animals and people have been sheltered. (151-152)

Clearly, the swamp/camp functions as an ambivalent site of (un)belonging, of marginalisation, alienation and structural violence on the one hand and of tolerance, acceptance and solidarity on the other. It is certainly the closest to a safe haven that Wright's dystopian world offers, which is why its destruction by Warren Finch – whose decisive role in this incident is deeply ironic – comes as a shock to the reader. Once it is gone, all its previous inhabitants are left equally helpless, and Mead's statement that "in a flooded hemisphere, a nationless world, there are no places to belong" (536) seems confirmed. The only argument against it lies in the eventual creation of a story for the displaced swans who have none when they first come to the swamp, which suggests that, in a world marked by radical unbelonging, Oblivia's destroyed country has nevertheless become a place they can call home, even though it is uncertain whether they will ever return there. Therefore, it is through the acceptance of the black swans into Oblivia's swamp that the effects and importance of solidarity between marginalised groups are most clearly articulated.

As it has been argued, Wright's swans bind displaced, marginalised groups of people together not only metaphorically, by displaying their common traits and thus highlighting the similarities between them, but also by bonding with different characters from these groups, especially Bella Donna and Oblivia. The relationship that is established among them as a result is one of strong solidarity: the "unwanted" stick together, accept and try to understand each other's worldviews, ways and beliefs, which can be interpreted as Wright's reflection of "the Indigenous view of how different belief systems can flow together" (Wright, "A Question of Fear" 146). This solidarity is most visible in the life of the swamp/camp community and is again highlighted by the swans, one of its greatest beneficiaries, who gain a new story and for whom a crisis heterotopia becomes a new place to belong. By building relationships of global, borderless solidarity,

Wright again addresses and draws attention to the importance of "the universal local", but also stresses the role of the marginalised in the shaping of what Homi K. Bhabha describes as "world literature", the terrains of which, as he puts it, consist in "transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – these border and frontier conditions" (12). However, her inclusion of non-Indigenous as well as Indigenous people in her swamp/camp community, especially of the European refugee Bella Donna, also functions as a powerful wake-up call. It shows that, if the human mistreatment of each other and of the planet continues as it is, no one will be spared from the disastrous consequences, not even those who now live in comfort and safety and have the upper hand over the less fortunate ones. In a world ridden with environmental catastrophes and wars such as the one of *The Swan Book*, a world which may soon become a reality, we are all, as Wright puts it, "in the same boat" (Wright and Zable 29).

Of Rare Birds and Foreigners' *Dreamings*

In the first two chapters, the analysis has focused almost exclusively on *The Swan Book*'s displaced black swans. However, very early into the narrative these black swans are set against the figure of the European white swan, which makes it possible for Aboriginal and Western culture to interact and negotiate their differences, an important process necessary for the creation of a new swan story.

Even though, as it has been argued, actual white swans are never introduced into the narrative, citations and allusions to white swan folktales and works of literature and art are abundant. And as it is obvious from the beginning, the figure of the white swan is directly associated with the character of the European refugee Bella Donna of the Champions, whose stories testify to the symbolic importance of the white swan motif in Western culture. This is confirmed by Brazil in his article on white swan culture, where he writes that "in the West there is a romantic attachment to swans, and there are dozens of myths and folktales surrounding them" (79), a romantic attachment that also shows in the works of many Western poets, such as Yeats, Baudelaire and Whitman. And indeed, in *The Swan Book,* white swans can easily be read as a metaphor for Western culture, a relation that is particularly highlighted by the story of Bella Donna's survival, which is nested in the first chapter. As she relates, she and her people, after being forced out of their homes by war and environmental disasters, were found and rescued from a snowy mountaintop, where they were starving and freezing, by none other than a mute swan. This swan was automatically interpreted by Bella Donna and her people as a good omen, a guardian angel and, as they followed it to the sea, a protector of sailors, which is very much in line with European folklore: "In some regions, [swans] are considered able to foresee the future, in others, they are portents. Their appearance over the sea betokens quiet and favourable travel for sailors" (Brazil 69). In addition to folktales, Bella Donna's people immediately drew a parallel between the swan and W. B. Yeats' poem "The Wild Swans at Coole", as well as Richard Wagner's opera *Lohengrin*. As her story goes:

> The sinking into the well of memory about swans on that day was remarkable. Back! Back! And even further back, remembering how this very creature was descended from a Knight Swan, which of course convinced them of their own relationships to the swan's

> *descendency*. Someone yelled to the swan flying above – *Lohengrin*. A chorus, remembering Wagner's opera, replied – *The knight Lohengrin arrived, in a boat drawn by a swan*. History! Swan history! Quicker! Quicker! Remembering this, and remembering that; and there it was, the swans loved and hated through the ages in stories laid bare by this huddling melee of the doomed trying to find warmth on frozen moss. (Wright, *The Swan Book* 28-29)

Clearly, Bella Donna and her people raised the rescuing swan to the level of a symbol, seeing it more as abstract than concrete. This is also visible from Bella Donna's claim that, by following the swan, they "*followed the idea of living*" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 29). In fact, it can be argued that they followed what they saw, and what the reader soon comes to see, as the embodiment of their entire tradition and culture.

However, these tradition and culture are challenged when Bella Donna ends up in an Australian swamp thousands of miles away from Europe, where white swans are nowhere to be found and where, instead, there is an overwhelming number of black swans. The black swan functions as the exact opposite of the European swan, not only because of its colour, but also because it is part of, and stands for, Indigenous culture in opposition to Western culture: it highlights what Renes formulates as "the existence of an incommensurable Indigenous world on Australian soil" (9). As animals native to Australia, black swans have lived alongside Aboriginal people since time immemorial. As Robert Fuller writes, "their distribution is almost Australia wide, except for the far north" (239) – an important exception, as it has already been argued, since the novel's black swans end up precisely in the far north – which is why they are known by many Aboriginal groups and therefore feature, just like brolgas, in many Dreaming narratives. A good example of the swans' relationship with Aboriginal people can be found in Fuller's study on the astronomy and songline connections of the saltwater Aboriginal peoples of the New South Wales coast, where the black swan is "a totem animal/bird" (Fuller 238) and where, accordingly, there is an important "long-distance songline" called the "Black Swan songline" (Fuller 238). A concept specific to Aboriginal culture, songlines can be defined as "oral representations of landscapes that were created by the culture heroes of that geographical region and can extend into the night sky" (Fuller 5). And, as Fuller stresses, songlines are indeed "designed to be sung": "singing them as they are travelled refreshes the story and the land" (184, underlined in the original). The fact

that Aboriginal groups in different parts of Australia, the New South Wales coast being just one example, have black swan songlines not only proves these birds to be an integral part of Aboriginal culture, but also shows the extent to which the two cultures, with their different ways of telling (swan) stories, are at odds with each other.

Wright's choice to convey the differences between the cultures through the two swan figures proves all the more suitable when one considers a very particular image of these birds in Western thought. In fact, for a very long time, Europeans did not believe that black swans existed. As Bella Donna informs both Oblivia and the reader, "*it was the Feast of the Epiphany in 1697 when the crew of Willem de Vlamingh's Dutch ship claimed to have seen superstition come to life, when they saw alive, two black swans — a beautiful pair, swimming off the coast of Western Australia*" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 81). However, until the 17th century, black swans were considered an impossibility, nothing more than a false and foolish fancy. Indeed, the Roman satirical poet Juvenal is well-known for his maxim "*rara auis* [avis] *in terris nigroque simillima cycno* [cigno]" (Watson 128), which would mean, in English translation, "a bird as rare on earth as a black swan". According to Linda Daley, this erroneous perception of the black swan as "the very figure of impossibility" (313) continued until 1697, when they became, as she writes, a "sign of *mistaken* impossibility" (313). And arguably, this mistaken impossibility has continued to haunt the Western perception of the black swan ever since. Examples abound: in his 1843 book *A System of Logic*, John Stuart Mill proves that "the uniform experience [...] of the inhabitants of the known world, agreeing in a common result, without one known instance of deviation from that result, is not always sufficient to establish a general conclusion" (297-298) precisely by taking as an example the old erroneous belief that "all swans were white" (298). Europeans drew this conclusion prior to the discovery of Australia because of the fact that nobody in the world known to them at that point had ever seen a swan of any other colour but white, only to be proved wrong in the late 17th century. A much more recent example is Nassim Nicholas Taleb's 2001 theory of black swan events, which he describes as "[outliers], as [they lie] outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to [their] possibility" (xvii). Clearly, even though their existence was proved long ago, in Western culture black swans are still surrounded by the aura of improbability, unexpectedness and uncertainty: therefore, it can be argued that they are perceived as a deviation from the norm constituted by the white swan, as both aberrant and subordinate.

This in effect reveals the Western opposition between the white and the black swan to be essentially hierarchical, which means that it can be argued to function similarly to what Jacques Derrida terms classical philosophical oppositions, which, as he contends, are not characterised by "the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather […] a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand" (41). Clearly, in Western thought the white swan has the upper hand over the black swan, a hierarchical relationship which can be read as a metaphor for the self-perceived superiority of the West, and which, in the case of Australia, can be translated as the opposition between the colonising and the colonised swan species, that is, between the white swan introduced into the country by the settlers and the native black swan. The tension between them, and the threat posed to the black swan by the invading white swan, are very accurately depicted by Kevin Gilbert in his artwork *Colonising Species*, which features a white swan holding in its beak a lifeless, bleeding black swan. This hierarchical opposition, then, is precisely what Wright sets out to dismantle in *The Swan Book*.

This dismantling starts with the great clash of cultures which inevitably occurs in the swamp microcosm when the displaced black swans come into contact with Bella Donna's white swan stories. What is crucial about this clash is that, in a necessary process of interaction which ensues, the incommensurable differences come to be successfully negotiated without any of the two cultures being negated or subjugated by the other. This is mainly due to the fact that, in Wright's dystopian literary world, a world which is falling apart, Western culture is losing its position of a dominant culture and becoming as vulnerable as other cultures: therefore, it is forced into a relationship of interdependence, rather than domination and submission, with Aboriginal culture. Thus, the white swan can no longer be viewed as a straightforward symbol of colonial power: rather, as Cahill writes, allusions to the non-Aboriginal tradition of white swans "create ambivalence as they parody and place under pressure the authority and superiority of prevailing narratives". This evokes Jean-François Lyotard's well-known concept of grand narratives, to which, as he explains, modern sciences make an explicit appeal in order to "legitimate the rules of their own game" (xxiii), to which "justice is consigned [...] in the same way as truth" (xxiv), which aim at "unification" (37). Arguably functioning as the driving force of modern Western history, grand narratives in fact serve to forcibly totalise disparate entities in order to achieve a unified whole and to impose one universal truth: a power which Wright denies to the white swan stories in her novel as she rejects the notion

that Western narratives, or any narratives for that matter, can or should be used as a means of such legitimation and totalisation. This subversion of grand narratives and of the imagined superiority of the West is conveyed principally through the character of Bella Donna of the Champions, whose white swan stories embody the vulnerability of Western culture and who therefore plays a crucial role in the process of cultural negotiation, paving the way for Oblivia's syncretic swan storytelling and, consequently, the production of a new swan narrative.

It is arguable that Bella Donna constitutes the most ambiguous character of Wright's novel. Certainly, because of her European background and the white swan stories with which she fills Oblivia's receptive mind, she can be read as a coloniser figure. For instance, Maria Takolander describes Bella Donna as "destructive", arguing that she "not only heroically 'discovers' Oblivia, just as white Australians are said to have discovered their continent, but also sets about saving her from her people's ways in a manner that ironically resonates with the treatment of Aboriginal people throughout Australia's colonial history" (114-115). However, a simple identification of Bella Donna with European colonisers would be problematic for many reasons. To begin with, as a displaced refugee, she is a very unlikely figure of destructive power and authority. In fact, when she first comes to the swamp, anxious to be accepted and given shelter but "terrified that she would be taken back down to the beach and thrown into the sea" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 32), she is very much aware that she is at the mercy of the local Aboriginal people and feels more like their inferior than their superior. Accordingly, Oblivia's people immediately recognise her as an unfortunate outcast rather than a figure of colonial superiority:

> Two laws, one in the head, the other worthless on paper in the swamp, said she was an invader. But! What could you do? Poor Bella Donna of the Champions! The sight of her made you cry. She was like a big angel, who called herself the patroness of World Rejection. She wasn't some renegade redneck from Cammoweal or Canberra. (Wright, *The Swan Book* 32)

By constructing the novel's main representative of the former colonisers' culture as "the patroness of World Rejection", Wright effectively strips it of all its power and "confronts the Western world with the prospect of its own extinction", to use Lynda Ng's words.

What is at stake here, in fact, is not only, as the previous chapter has shown, the life of individuals or peoples, but of cultures as well: not only does the future that Wright imagines threaten survival, but also survivance, which Lucy Neave defines as "the persistence and endurance of a culture as well as people" (5), arguing that *The Swan Book* prioritises "a sense of 'survivance'" instead of "disaster, catastrophe and crisis endured by its characters" (5). Neave draws on the work of Native American novelist and literary scholar Gerald Vizenor, who describes the concept of survivance as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination and oblivion", as "the continuance of stories" (1). In other words, survivance "is entangled with narrative" (Neave 5). It can be argued, therefore, that Bella Donna tells her white swan stories not to subject others to her authority, but to try to save from oblivion what has remained of her culture, of which she is the only surviving member: it is more of an act of seeking help than an act of violence. Thus, she draws the reader's attention to the problem of the stories that are lost when there is no one left to tell them, stressing that her "*story of luck is only a part of the concinnity of dead stories tossed by the sides of roads and gathering dust*" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 17).

Interestingly, the fact that Bella Donna's stories are centred on the white swan only further undermines her position and efforts to attract the attention and interest of the swamp people, as white swans, despite their great cultural significance in Europe, have no meaning in Aboriginal culture and no place in the lives of Aboriginal people. Indeed, from their point of view, it is not a black swan that is "rare on earth", to use Juvenal's words, but a white swan. And, as already indicated in the previous chapter, Wright chooses not to introduce an actual white swan into the narrative, consciously denying white swans the authority, the voice, that the very concrete and tangible black swans have. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Oblivia's people challenge Bella Donna's European stories, often complaining that they are irrelevant to them and that they "*need* [their] *own practical measures to safeguard* [their] *culture*" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 35), even proclaiming them to be lies. Thus, in Wright's swamp microcosm, the white swan definitely loses the upper hand over the black one as the hierarchy that the West has constructed around them is subverted. However, despite the white swan's vulnerable position in the swamp, it is worth noting once again that Oblivia's people do not reject and silence Bella Donna, but let her stay with them and tell her stories, which they then challenge and bring into question: an act of tolerance which is important because it opens

European culture to a challenging, transformative and eventually productive interaction with Aboriginal culture.

Yet, Bella Donna's role in the process of cultural negotiation, that is, of the two swan figures' negotiation, becomes even more significant with the sudden appearance of the displaced black swans, whom the absence of their Dreaming narratives in the Australian North pushes to seek people who could create a story for them, that is, to seek storytellers, which inevitably leads them to Oblivia, but also Bella Donna. In fact, Bella Donna turns out to be the first person to reach out to them, which is visible from the interaction between her and the swans that was mentioned in the previous chapter, where she tells them stories and they gather around her, listen and reply. Therefore, rather than using her white swan storytelling to negate or overpower the black swans, she offers them her stories as a basis for a new narrative of their own, which, owing to Oblivia, they really will become. As Polak argues, "the function of Wright's Bella Donna is not to invade the North with non-Aboriginal swan lore, but to pave the way for new narratives meant for black swans" (*Futuristic Worlds* 201). It can even be argued that, in a way, it is precisely Bella Donna who makes the first step towards the creation of the new story, as "one day Bella Donna's old storytelling voice told the girl: *A black swan flies slowly across the country, holding a small slither of bone in its beak*. But then she hesitated, perhaps realising she was deviating from the white swan she had been longing for" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 44). Clearly, despite being an ardent voice of Western culture, Bella Donna can hardly be described as a clear-cut example of a coloniser. Rather, with her complex, constantly evolving stories, she shifts towards the space between the two cultures, which is poetically summarised by the statement that "it was a foreigner's *Dreaming* she had" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 16). This could be read as disapproving, even scornful, but is more likely to be inclusive, suggesting some similarity between Bella Donna's stories and Aboriginal Dreaming narratives and thus highlighting her ability to bring the two cultures closer together.

However, if the process of swan negotiation begins with Bella Donna, it is with Oblivia that it truly unfolds and achieves success. In fact, it can be argued that Oblivia constitutes the very site of negotiation between the two cultures' swan figures. This is due to her unique position: treated as an outcast by her community after the gang rape, Oblivia does not know any of her people's traditional stories. On the other hand, she knows all of Bella Donna's European swan stories, as the old Gypsy woman has raised

her. Indeed, she clings to Bella Donna's "foreigner's Dreaming" throughout her trying journey as Warren Finch's promise wife: when he comes to abduct her, she fights back by reciting Bella Donna's stories, and when she ends up locked in the tower in the unnamed city, she finds comfort in Bella Donna's books. As can be seen, white swan stories play a very positive role in Oblivia's life, acquiring, as Arnaud Barras argues, "a performative, healing and creative power" (7). Yet, this does not mean that she has rejected or forgotten her own culture. Quite the contrary, the time she spent trapped in the bowels of the eucalyptus tree before Bella Donna rescued her has turned her into "one of the few remaining custodians of traditional knowledge" (Holgate 639-640). In fact, the eucalyptus tree in question is "a sacred tree where all the stories of the swamp [are] stored like doctrines of Law left by the spiritual ancestors" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 78), and she tapped into the "primordial memory" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 7) stored in its roots. The tree later gets destroyed by the army, but its ancestral knowledge survives in Oblivia, which, despite her status in the community, gives her the potential to become a great Aboriginal storyteller. This potential gets realised with the arrival of the displaced black swans, who need precisely a new Aboriginal story, and whose companionship will inspire and direct Oblivia's storytelling. Significantly, the content of the new story will be based on and shaped by none other than Bella Donna's white swan lore. Yet, at the same time, this material has to be seriously rethought and reworked to fit the black swans, a task which has a very liberating effect on Oblivia herself, since it can be argued that, by fulfilling it, she is gradually "[regaining] sovereignty over [her] own brain" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 4), which she identifies as her objective in the preface. Oblivia's reflections on Bella Donna's white swan books illustrate how this rethinking and reworking is done:

> *The wild swan's death-hymn took the soul of that waste place with joy.* Was this wasteland the swamp? [...] Shakespeare's *Sweet Swan of Avon! What a sight it were...* where a Mute Swan, or Whooper Swan, flying ten thousand leagues, had taken the old swan woman's people across the sea. But her mind turns away from that vision, and returns to anticipate how her own black swans from the swamp were moving over the country she had travelled […] (Wright, *The Swan Book* 240)

Thus, drawing on the primordial memory of her culture and using Bella Donna's European knowledge as a source of inspiration and foundation for her work, Oblivia

becomes “a bridge between cultures” (Polak, *Futuristic Worlds* 201), “an embodiment of the dialogue between foreignness and indigeneity [sic]” (Barras 11). Indeed, it can be argued that it is precisely the liminality of her position at the intersection of European and Indigenous culture, that is, her closeness to both the white swans of Bella Donna’s stories and the displaced black swans in search of Dreaming narratives and her capacity for different kinds of storytelling, that proves crucial for the negotiation of the opposing swan figures and the production of a new swan narrative. As Jessica White writes, in *The Swan Book* Indigenous and European culture “should be considered in concert, which Oblivia manages to do” (151).

By giving the liminal Oblivia the task of swan negotiation, Wright draws the reader’s attention to the two cultures’ interstices, to the space in between, portraying them as necessarily interactive, unstable and changing and thus showing that, despite all their differences, “cultures are never unitary in themselves” (Bhabha 35-36). And as Wright’s novel shows perfectly well, the contact point, the basis of interaction, lies in the telling and exchange of stories: stories build bridges between cultures. For this reason, the choice to build the novel around the two swan motifs proves particularly shrewd: as figures of great significance in their respective cultures, the white swan and the black swan effectively highlight the differences between them, but, being so prevalent in their cultures’ stories, they also function as an ideal vehicle for cultural negotiation. As it has been shown, in *The Swan Book* this negotiation is a markedly positive process, departing from the stereotypical antagonism between the coloniser and the colonised, the conqueror and the conquered, and eventually giving rise to a new swan story, which is central to the novel. This story, then, evokes the notion of synergy, which denotes “the product of two (or more) forces that are reduceable to neither […]”, emphasising “the positive and energetic aspects of the process of transculturation” (Ashcroft et al. 229). This will become evident in the next chapter, which discusses how the newly created story can in fact be read as an inventive Aboriginal retelling of the globally famous swan maiden narrative.

Becoming Fluent in Swan Talk

Having dedicated the third chapter to the nature and function of cultural negotiation in Wright's narrative, the focus of the analysis now shifts to the swan story created as a result thereof. The narrator draws attention to its successful creation at the end of the novel, after Oblivia and Stranger's return to the swamp, concluding that "[t]his might be the same story about some important person carrying a swan centuries ago, and it might be the same story in centuries to come when someone will carry a swan back to this ground where its story once lived. Well! Talk about acts of love" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 333). In other words, not only has a new story been created for the displaced swans, but it is also revealed that the story in question is actually the one the reader has been reading all along. In fact, if one is to examine the beginning of the novel closely, they will notice that the reader is informed of that already in the Prelude, the only part of the novel narrated by Oblivia herself, as she addresses the reader from the destroyed swamp, wondering "which splattering of truths running around in my head about *a story about a swan with a bone* will last on this ground" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 1; emphasis added). The story that she refers to is none other than the story of her relationship with the black swans, namely the story of the novel. Therefore, it seems that Oblivia "makes herself [the swans'] story-giver", as Annette Hughes puts it, by becoming both the story's protagonist and its author.

This dual, somewhat contradictory role gives a sense of the swan story's highly complex and unconventional narrative style: it folds into a spiral rather than being linear in form, it is very fragmentary, it is scattered through several narrative levels and told by very puzzling, ambiguous and even misleading narrators. In fact, as Polak argues, "[t]he kernel complexity of *The Swan Book* resides in the construction of the narrator" (*Futuristic Worlds* 197). Already at the beginning the reader gets a good sense of this complexity, as the narrator immediately reveals herself to be in highly unstable mental state, starting the Prelude with the startling statement: "Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 1), identifying the virus as "nostalgia for foreign things" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 3). As she continues,

> [h]aving learnt how to escape the reality about this place, I have created illusionary

> ancient homelands to encroach on and destroy the wide-open vista of the virus's real-estate. […] Without meeting any resistance whatsoever, 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. (Wright, *The Swan Book* 4)

As this passage shows, Oblivia has withdrawn into the world of her imagination and, having become addicted to journeying there, is increasingly getting lost in it. And with the virus imposing itself on her thoughts, her sense of reality seems to be warping. Therefore, it can be argued that Oblivia's narration is very unreliable, and that, consequently, the swan story she struggles to preserve in her mind may be but a figment of her overactive imagination, that her relationship with the displaced swans, her journey to the city and back, have never happened outside of her virus-ridden brain. However, the reader never gets the chance to ascertain whether this is the case or not, as, without further explanation or warning, they are plunged into what is presumably the swan story in Oblivia's head, and are left in the hands of an anonymous heterodiegetic narrator. In fact, what happens here is a jump to another narrative level, a hierarchical violation that exemplifies Gérard Genette's concept of metalepsis, or, as Brian McHale would put it, a "disorienting transgression of narrative logic" (119). The rest of the novel does not get less disorienting: not only are there gaps in the narrative, leaving the reader to wonder, for example, how Warren Finch has got assassinated and why Oblivia thinks she is responsible for it, but it is also focalised through many different characters, ranging from Oblivia to the monkey Rigoletto, as different perspectives constantly intertwine and compete with each other. As for the identity of the narrator, even though they are very much present and frequently address the reader, it is never revealed. Finally, towards the end, there is another break in narrative continuity as the narrator intrudes to inform – or rather, remind – the reader that the swan story created for the displaced swans is in fact the one they have been reading. Thus, the story shifts to a new narrative level, one that is strangely reminiscent of the beginning, as it also features Oblivia roaming the destroyed and deserted swamp and fighting the virus in her head. And even though the reader cannot be completely certain that the last narrative level and the first one are one and the same, which is why the novel remains open-ended in that sense, the story can be argued to fold into a spiral, or what Douglas Hofstadter would call a "Strange Loop". The "Strange Loop" phenomenon, as he explains, "occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or

downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started" (10).

Evidently, the way in which the story is narrated makes it difficult for Wright's reader to suspend their disbelief and get immersed in the fictional illusion of the novel, as it clearly violates its own rules. In fact, all the writing techniques used, from unreliable narration to fragmentation, from metalepsis to multiple perspectives, draw the reader's attention to the fact that *The Swan Book* is actually a novel revolving around a story and its creation, exposing the artificiality of Wright's narrative and revealing it to be self-referential in nature. And since, as Mark Currie argues, dependence "upon a certain construal of fictional devices as self-referential, or metanarrative in function" (5) is one of the defining features of metafiction, *The Swan Book* can easily be analysed as a metafictional novel. In the words of Patricia Waugh,

> metafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words, the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction. (43)

As *The Swan Book* simultaneously creates a swan story and finds elaborate ways to make a statement about it, it is clearly a metafictional work, which is why it can even be argued that certain elements of the novel recall postmodernist writing, since 'metafiction' has "consolidated its place in the critical lexis as a descriptor of postmodern fictional preoccupations" (Currie 1), even though Currie is also quick to point out the shortcomings of this generalisation. Indeed, according to Geoff Rodoreda, Alexis Wright is one of the "indigenous [sic] novelists who have written monumental works influenced by postmodernism and postcolonialism", as she is "doing something 'unconventional' with her fiction" (346). The metafictionality of the novel is without a doubt exemplary of the postmodernist unconventionality of Wright's literature, just like her commitment to represent and give a voice to displaced and marginalised groups, both human and non-human, a commitment which reflects "a postmodern concern for the multiplicity and dispersion of truth(s), truth(s) relative to the specificity of place and culture" (108), as Linda Hutcheon puts it. As can be seen, the influence of postmodernism on *The Swan*

Book can hardly be denied.

However, the novel's constant emphasis on the centrality of the swan story and its creation, together with the nonlinear and unconventional narrative techniques, can also be associated with Aboriginal storytelling and Dreaming narratives. Indeed, despite all the postmodernist elements of her writing, the greatest influence on Wright's fiction is still to be found in Aboriginal culture and the Dreaming. In fact, the uniqueness of her writing lies precisely in the ways in which she connects and enriches Aboriginal storytelling, both its form and content, with non-Aboriginal elements, but never ceases to be grounded in her culture. The swan story illustrates that perfectly. First of all, its spiral form, its narrative meanderings and eventual conclusion at what closely resembles the point of departure are in fact highly characteristic of Aboriginal storytelling, since they reflect the non-linearity of the Aboriginal concept of time. This is also signalled by the narrator's suggestion that "[t]his might be the same story about some important person carrying a swan centuries ago, and it might be the same story in centuries to come when someone will carry a swan back to this ground where its story once lived" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 333). In other words, this story might be the same story about somebody else carrying a swan in the past and in the future, meaning that it cannot be fixed in time, but is set in what W. E. H. Stanner would call "everywhen". Another important feature of the story that clearly shows its groundedness in Aboriginal culture is its close relation to Oblivia's country, the ravaged swamp: the story in fact becomes an integral part of it. As the narrator states, "[t]here is a really big story of that ghost place: a really deadly love story about a girl who has a virus lover living in some lolly pink prairie house in her brain […]" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 334). However, most importantly, the swan story shares the Dreaming narratives' ability to relate living beings, not only humans, to a place, to Aboriginal country, and thus give them a place to belong: in fact, the reason why the swan story is created in the first place, as it has already been stated, is to resolve the displaced black swans' crisis of belonging, to inscribe them into Oblivia's country and its Dreaming.

As Dreaming narratives frequently centre on non-human characters, the reading of the swan story as a variant of a Dreaming narrative makes it easier to perceive one of its essential characteristics: its pronounced swan-orientedness, which goes beyond the centrality of the displaced swans as characters or the pervasiveness of references to swan inspired literature and art. In fact, the swan story is governed and shaped principally by

the swans, they are active agents in the creative process. This connection between their great authority over Wright's narrative and the Aboriginal worldview, which emphasises the interconnections between all living beings rather than focusing only on humans, has already been indicated in the first chapter, where it is discussed in the context of climate change. As it has been argued there, Wright allows the black swans to shape her narrative in order to give a voice to Country, to non-human life. Yet, it is the analysis of the swan story that really reveals the scope of their authority and gives insight into the exact ways in which they shape the narrative, proving and illustrating how every aspect of the swan story – the form it takes, the pattern which the plot follows and even, in a certain sense, the language in which it is told – is in fact determined by them. Thus, the reader becomes fully aware of the lengths to which Wright goes to make the swans the key factor in the shaping of the story and, automatically, of the entire novel.

When it comes to the form the story takes, its non-linearity can in fact be argued to be modelled directly on swans, or, more precisely, on their flying formation. Rather than flying in a straight line, swans fly in a curved shape, often one that resembles the letter "V", and take turns in leading the flock ("Can Swans Fly"). Similarly, the swan story curves rather than unfolds in a straight line as narrative levels change just like the swan in the leading position of the flying formation. In a way, it can be argued that, in creating the story, Oblivia has emulated Bella Donna's technique, and Bella Donna "told stories the way swans fly" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 45). Moreover, the story's non-linearity can also be considered from the perspective of the swans' own atemporality as well as the atemporality of the Dreaming in general, since, as the first chapter has shown, swans, as migratory birds, naturally function within the framework of cyclical time. This notion is reinforced by the swamp people's feeling that "the swans had returned to a home of ancient times, by following stories for country that had been always known to them" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 67). This means that their story might in fact have been *re*created after having been forgotten a long time ago, that it follows a cycle of constant appearances and disappearances which matches the swans' migratory cycle. Thus, the swans decide their story's form: yet, they also decide the pattern in which the plot develops, as, under their influence, the story departs from its folkloristic model and shapes into a very singular love story.

Indeed, if one takes a closer look at it, it becomes clear that the central part of the swan story largely mimics the swan maiden folktale, which exists in myriad versions

throughout the world but is particularly famous in Europe – a narrative choice which serves as another indicator of the birds' centrality and authority over the novel. In her book-length study on the swan maiden folktale, Barbara Fass Leavy summarises it as follows:

> [The story of the swan maiden] is that of a being from a supernatural realm who is constrained to marry, keep house for, and bear children to a mortal man because he retains her animal covering, an article of clothing, or some other possession without which she cannot return to the otherworld. When she regains her prized belonging, she flees her husband and children. (3)

Even though this may seem unconnected to the swan story of *The Swan Book* at first glance, there are several common points. First and foremost, due to her special relationship with the displaced black swans, Oblivia may well be seen as the story's swan maiden. What is more, there is arguably a supernatural aspect to Oblivia's character, which, according to Fass Leavy, is one of the traditional swan maiden's defining characteristics. A good example of this supernatural aspect of her character is the fact that Oblivia is guided and advised by two ghosts who frequently appear around her, the ghost of the deceased Bella Donna and the ghost of the Harbour Master, a nomadic Aboriginal elder of Asian heritage who used to spend time with Bella Donna and Oblivia in the swamp before disappearing without explanation, only to reappear later as a ghost. Also, Oblivia spent a very long time, years and years, in the roots of the eucalyptus tree before Bella Donna rescued her, only to be discovered alive and still a young girl. And according to Bella Donna, Oblivia has not aged since – as she tells Oblivia: "*Your time stands still*" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 82). Indeed, it can be argued that Wright reinforces the idea of Oblivia as a phantasmagorical, elusive character, as unstable as a will-o'-the-wisp, as implied by the Prelude title, "Ignis Fatuus". For example, the reader learns that "the locals [the swamp people] acted as though she never existed, was too unimaginable, unable to be recognised and named" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 80). All this clearly adds to her image as a being from the otherworld. Furthermore, in the chapter entitled "Swan Maiden", which constitutes a direct reference to the famous folktale, Oblivia is informed that she is the promised wife of Warren Finch and is forced to come with him against her will. As Polak notes, "Warren Finch reflects the hunter from the swan maiden narrative in

many aspects. His awkward 'proposal' or parodic courtship relates to the hunter marrying the abducted swan maiden. He simply informs Oblivia that they are already married through country and law […]" (*Futuristic Worlds* 208). Thus, the swan maiden, namely Oblivia, is "bound to [her] mortal [captor]" (Fass Leavy 33). And although she does not, strictly speaking, keep house for him, nor does she bear him children, Finch nevertheless "introduces a highly ambivalent notion of domesticity, since Oblivia ends up trapped, waiting for him in the People's Palace. Hence, the rest of the narrative tackles the way in which Oblivia can find a way out of this 'fierce marital struggle' and return to her country" (Polak, *Futuristic Worlds* 208). And she indeed escapes: as it has already been indicated, the swan story ends with Oblivia and Stranger returning to the swamp. Clearly, then, the plot of the swan story reflects the basic pattern of the folktale. However, it also features significant departures from this pattern, mostly because it has a love relationship in its focus, a love relationship in which the black swans play a crucial role.

Indeed, the very idea of love contrasts with the nature of the swan maiden folktale, which, as Fass Leavy points out, "is only deceptively romantic" (33), as "[the swan maiden's] usually unambivalent relief in getting away challenges the romanticized view of love and marriage held by those who extol the tragic beauty of the tale" (39). And while it is undoubtedly true that there is no love between Oblivia and Warren Finch, who play the roles of the folktale's two main characters, the love around which Wright's version of the story revolves comes from an entirely different relationship: the one between Oblivia and her black swans, which develops and becomes central to the story before the character of Warren Finch is even introduced. This is in contradiction to the traditional swan maiden folktale, which "[makes] the husband's journey the central point of the narrative" (Fass Leavy 39). The swans' relationship with Oblivia proves to be crucial in changing the dynamic between the swan maiden and her captor: it can be argued that they undermine the position of Warren Finch and, in turn, empower Oblivia, as their strong bond with her prevails over the forced marriage, eventually enabling her escape. In a certain sense, Finch can even be said to help with this escape himself by deciding to bring Bella Donna's books about white swans with them when he abducts Oblivia, because, through the reading and rethinking of these texts, she is able to keep the link with her swans strong. In fact, he does the exact opposite of what he would be expected to do as the swan maiden's captor: instead of depriving Oblivia of a prized belonging, he makes sure she keeps her treasured books and has access to them

throughout her captivity. Moreover, Finch then ends up assassinated in mysterious circumstances which are left unexplained as the story of Oblivia and the swans develops further without him, which is a definite proof that he is secondary to them. As can be seen, Oblivia's swans effectively govern the plot, not only tipping the scales in favour of the female gender, which is arguably depicted as subordinate in the traditional folktale, and in favour of the specific Aboriginality that Oblivia represents, but also drawing the reader's attention to a different, frequently overlooked type of love relationship, one between humans and the non-human world. By shifting the focus to this type of love, Wright makes a case for its importance and the positive impact it can have, being marked, as the case of Oblivia and her swans proves, by equality and mutual benefit. Clearly, then, the swans dictate how the swan maiden narrative is retold and reshaped into a very unconventional love story.

Yet, Wright takes the swans' role in the creation of their story one step further, as it can be inferred from the narrative that the swan story is created not in any human language, but in swan talk. For Oblivia does not speak until she learns the language of the black swans, until she becomes "fluent in swan talk" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 69). The Epilogue proves that she has succeeded in doing it, as it describes her conversations with the swan Stranger after they have come back to the swamp. In fact, at the end of the novel Oblivia is heard whispering

> *kayi, kayi kala-wurru nganyi, your country is calling out for you*, which they described was just like listening to a sigh of a moth extending out over the landscape, or a whisper from the scrub ancestor catching a little stick falling from a dead tree, although nothing that could truly be heard – just a sensation of straining to hear something, which understandably, was how anyone should whisper on this spirit-broken place […] (Wright, *The Swan Book* 334)

From this description, it can be deduced that Oblivia is whispering in a non-human language, namely the language of black swans that she has learnt. And it can be argued that her words are in fact addressed to the land itself, as the swan language enables her to communicate with it and read it, just as her swans do. Indeed, their language lessons, so to speak, prove very valuable: in fact, Oblivia would never have created the swan story if the swans had not taught her their language, as she refuses to use any human language.

This is why, in effect, the swans make the very process of creation possible. Moreover, as they arguably determine the original language of the story, they also determine the ways of thinking, the behaviours, the reality governing the story: accordingly, as Liz Shek-Noble writes, it "becomes the task of humans to reorient themselves to the different 'languages' that non-human animals use to communicate their place in the Dreaming" (3). It is precisely by telling the story through the prism of these ways of thinking, behaviours and reality that Wright gives her reader the paradoxical sense that, even though they are reading it in a language they know, the novel in front of them is in fact written in a non-human language not previously known to them, a language they have yet to learn, and which requires a considerable effort on their part.

As the analysis of their story has shown, the black swans' function in the process of its creation is much more that of a major determinant than that of a mere source of inspiration or passive beneficiaries. By allowing them to have the final word on what is told, how it is told and even in which language it is originally told, Wright can be said to effectively allow the swans to become, as much as it is possible, the creators of their own story, almost authorial figures, and thus, as Shek-Noble puts it, "displace a Western anthropocentric framework which subordinates [the] will and intrinsic value [of non-human animals] to that of human beings" (1). Accordingly, the novel poses a challenge to its readers, who are asked to leave their comfort zone and allow the swans to set the rules and guide them through the story which some of them may find unstable and confusing. Yet, it undeniably exists, it has been created and has inscribed black swans into Oblivia's country's Dreaming, and therefore it is without a doubt a stable entity, perhaps even the most stable entity that the reader of *The Swan Book* is offered. This fact is reinforced by the novel's title, *The Swan Book*, as "book" denotes a solid object, making the story seem very material and concrete. Hence, the creation of this story can be said to offer a glimmer of hope in the otherwise bleak, dystopian narrative: hope of survival, since it illustrates how, even in a world that is falling apart, safety, acceptance and a place to belong can be found far away from home, but also hope of survivance. In fact, the successful production of the new swan story proves that Aboriginal culture is creative enough, flexible enough and vibrant enough to overcome the threats posed to it, ranging from the continuing mistreatment of Aboriginal people to the destruction of the land. Yet, it is not only Indigenous, but also non-Indigenous culture of whose continuance the story raises the hope, as it is a complex product of both. As can be seen, all may not be lost in

Wright's novel, the fading dreams have not faded completely, but if and only if the reader is willing to make an effort and "orient themselves ethically to others whose embodiments, minds, and ways of life may be (radically) different from their own" (Shek-Noble 3), which refers primarily to non-human voices, but can also be extended to marginalised, frequently silenced human voices. For if dystopian scenarios such as the one that Wright's novel warns about are to be avoided, more people should become, like Oblivia, fluent in swan talk, and allow their minds to become, like hers, "mansions for the stories of extinction" (Wright, *The Swan Book* 333), as the example of the swan story clearly shows that saving stories from extinction means saving lives and cultures from becoming extinct themselves.

Conclusion

As can be seen from the analysis, Wright's swans are truly multifarious figures which operate on many different levels and offer great insight into all the major aspects and issues of the novel. They are a paragon of anxious premonitions giving a voice to the exploited environment, to suffering Country; they are representatives of marginalised groups which they bind together in a relationship of solidarity; they are a bridge between two entirely different cultures, putting them in an interaction marked by equality and productivity rather than antagonism; finally, they are creative figures who govern and shape their own story. Indeed, it can be said that, just like Oblivia's storytelling, Wright's writing is guided by swans: accordingly, the readers of her novel are also encouraged to let themselves be guided by swans, and to make an effort to truly read *The Swan Book* as the swans' story, and not necessarily a human one.

Wright's masterful use of the motif of the swan reveals its great richness, especially when it comes to its cultural and symbolic potency, but it also shows the possibilities that open up when non-human creatures are put in the focus of a literary work. *The Swan Book* thus functions, as it has been shown, as a work of both poignant climate fiction and playful metafiction, as different genres, topics and narrative techniques are brought together through the figure of the swan, merging into a novel whose inventiveness and complexity stand out not only on the Australian literary scene, but on the contemporary literary scene in general. Ultimately, this also testifies to Wright's writing genius, as she leads her readers into uncharted territory and challenges them on their ways and beliefs, confronting them with a text which raises questions and offers no easy answers, no easy way out. Yet, she makes one thing clear: in the fictional world that *The Swan Book* constructs, which is becoming more and more similar to our own, what little hope there may be left lies in the hands and minds of those who are fluent in swan talk.

Works Cited

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies.* Routledge, 1999.

Barras, Arnaud. "The Law of Storytelling: The Hermeneutics of Relationality in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book.*" *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2015, pp. 1-12.

Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture.* Routledge, 1994.

Birns, Nicholas. *Contemporary Australian Literature: A World not yet Dead*. Sydney University Press, 2015.

Brazil, Mark. "Swan Culture." *Journal of Rakuno Gakuen University*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2003, pp. 65-83.

Cahill, Michelle. Review of *The Swan Book*, by Alexis Wright. *Mascara Literary Review*, Dec. 2013.

"Can Swans Fly? (What You Need to Know)." *Birdfact*, 11 April 2022, https://birdfact.com/articles/can-swans-fly. Accessed on 25 September 2022.

Connolly, Michael J. "Brolga." *Www.kullillaart.com.au*, https://www.kullillaart.com.au/dreamtimestories/Brolga. Accessed on 16 June 2022.

Currie, Mark. "Introduction." *Metafiction*, edited by Mark Currie, Longman, 1995, pp. 1-18.

Daley, Linda. "Fabulation: Toward Untimely and Inhuman Life in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*." *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol. 31, no. 89, 2016, pp. 305-318.

Derrida, Jacques. *Positions*. Translated by Alan Bass, The University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Farrier, David. *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary Before the Law*. Liverpool University Press, 2011.

Fass Leavy, Barbara. *In Search of the Swan Maiden: A Narrative on Folklore and Gender*. New York University Press, 1994.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Diacritics*, vol. 16, no. 1, translated by Jay Miskowiec, 1986, pp. 22-27.

Fuller, Robert S. *The astronomy and songline connections of the Saltwater Aboriginal peoples of the New South Wales coast.* 2020. UNSW Sidney, PhD dissertation.

Gilbert, Kevin. *Colonising Species*. 1989. *The Museum of Australian Democracy*, https://collection.moadoph.gov.au/objects/2013-0435/.

Gleeson-White, Jane. "Country and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's The Swan Book." *Australian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology,* vol. 6 (Summer), 2017, pp. 29–38.

Goodbody, Axel, and Adeline Johns-Putra. "Introduction." *Cli-fi: A Companion*, edited by Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 1-17.

Harper, Douglas. "Etymology of swan." Online Etymology Dictionary, https://www.etymonline.com/word/swan. Accessed 9 June, 2022.

Hofstadter, Douglas. *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid.* Penguin, 1980.

Holgate, Ben. "Unsettling narratives: Re-evaluating magical realism as postcolonial discourse through Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book.*" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 51, no. 6, 2015, pp. 634-647.

Hughes, Annette. Review of *The Swan Book*, by Alexis Wright. *The Newtown Review of Books*, Feb. 2014.

Hutcheon, Linda. "Historiographic metafiction." *Metafiction*, edited by Mark Currie, Longman, 1995, pp. 71-91.

Johns-Putra, Adeline. "The Rest is Silence: Postmodern and Postcolonial Possibilities in Climate Change Fiction." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2018, pp. 26-42.

Le Guellec-Minel, Anne. "From *Carpentaria* to *The Swan Book*: finding a voice to narrate and resist the threat of extinction in Alexis Wright's latest work." *E-rea : Revue D'etudes Anglophones* vol. 18, no. 2, 2021, http://journals.openedition.org/erea/11860.

Lehartel, Temiti. "Perception Revitalisation and Resistance in *The Swan Book*." *Alexis Wright,* special issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2022, https://journals.openedition.org/ces/10428.

Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge.* Translated by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

McHale, Brian. *Postmodernist Fiction*. Routledge, 1989.

Mead, Philip. "Unresolved Sovereignty and the Anthropocene Novel: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book.*" *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 42, no. 4, 2018, pp. 524-538.

Mill, John Stuart. *A System of Logic. eBooks@Adelaide*, 2016.

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World.* The

University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Neave, Lucy. "Alexis Wright's *The SwanBook* (2013) as 'crisis fiction'." *Textual Practice*, 2021, pp. 1-19.

Ng, Lynda. "Alexis Wright's 'Vision Splendid': Aboriginal Economics, Climate Justice, and a Gaian World Literature." *Alexis Wright,* special issue of *Commonwealth Essays and Studies,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2022, *https://journals.openedition.org/ces/10776*.

Nicholls, Christine Judith. "'Dreamtime' and 'The Dreaming' – an introduction." *The Conversation*, 22 January 2014, https://theconversation.com/dreamtime-and-the-dreaming-an-introduction-20833. Accessed 3 September 2022.

Polak, Iva. "Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*." *Cli-fi: A Companion*, edited by Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra, Peter Lang, 2019, pp. 217-222.

---. *Futuristic Worlds in Australian Aboriginal Fiction.* Peter Lang, 2017.

Renes, Cornelis M. B. "Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*: Indigenous-Australian Swansong or Songline?" *Humanities*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2021, pp. 1-12.

Rijswijk, Honni van. "Archiving The Northern Territory Intervention in Law and in the Literary Counter-Imaginary." *Australian Feminist Law Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2014, pp. 117-133.

Rodoreda, Geoff. "Sovereignty, Mabo, and Indigenous Fiction." *Antipodes*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2017, pp. 344-360.

Rose, Deborah Bird. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness.* Commonwealth of Australia, 1996.

Shek-Noble, Liz. "'One Red Blood': Multi-species Belonging in Alexis Wright's The Swan Book." *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2022, pp. 1-12.

Stanner, W. E. H. *The Dreaming and Other Essays.* 1953. Black Inc. Agenda, 2009.

Takolander, Maria Kaaren. "Theorizing Irony and Trauma in Magical Realism: Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2016, pp. 95-122.

Taleb, Nassim Nicholas. *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. Random House, 2007.

Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change.* University of Virginia Press, 2015.

Vizenor, Gerald. *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence.* University of Nebraska

Press, 2008.

Watson, Lindsay, et al. *Juvenal, Satire 6*. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

Waugh, Patricia. “What is metafiction and why are they saying such awful things about it?” *Metafiction*, edited by Mark Currie, Longman, 1995, pp. 39-54.

Weaver, Rosalyn. *Apocalypse in Australian Fiction and Film: A Critical Study.* Critical Exploration of Science Fiction and Fantasy 28. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011.

White, Jessica. “Fluid Worlds: Reflecting Climate Change in *The Swan Book* and *The Sunlit Zone*.” *Southerly*, vol. 74, no. 1, 2014, pp. 142-163.

Wright, Alexis. “A Question of Fear.” *Tolerance, Prejudice and Fear: Sydney Pen Voices, the 3 Writers Project*, edited by Christos Tsiolkas, Gideon Haigh and Alexis Wright, Allen & Unwin, 2014, pp. 129-169.

---. “Teachings from Australian First Nations author Alexis Wright.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Global Landscapes Forum – GLF, 12 June 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=zPyArkSi-VQ.

---. *The Swan Book.* Constable, 2016.

---, and Arnold Zable. “The Future of Swans.” *Overland*, 213, 2013, pp. 27-30.

Abstract

The thesis offers a close reading of the figure of the swan in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, a multi-layered futuristic novel dealing with a series of issues facing contemporary Australia, ranging from the continuing mistreatment of the Indigenous populations to environmental exploitation. Yet, according to the author herself, the main source of inspiration for the novel were precisely swans, that is, chance conversations about displaced Australian black swans, which, as she learnt, were sighted in parts of the country they do not normally inhabit. Indeed, the story of the novel is packed not only with flocks of literal swans, but also with intertextual references to swan-inspired literature and art, which testify to their cultural and symbolic potency. However, as the thesis argues, Wright's swans do not simply form a poetic backdrop to the novel: on the contrary, the figure of the swan, on all its levels of meaning, is crucial for the understanding and interpretation of the major issues that *The Swan Book* addresses. In order to illustrate this, the four chapters of the thesis analyse the role of Wright's swans in addressing climate change and environmental degradation in the novel; their importance in representing and drawing attention to marginalisation, displacement and (un)belonging, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal; the swans as figures of positive, productive cultural negotiation; and finally, the swan story created as a result of this process, which, as it in fact proves to be the story of *The Swan Book* itself, reveals that the swans in fact function not only as major, active characters in the novel, but also as the key factor in determining every aspect of the narrative. Ultimately, the thesis proposes that the successful creation of the swan story functions as a glimmer of hope in the novel's bleak, dystopian world, drawing attention to the importance of listening and engaging with stories governed and shaped by voices radically different from one's own.

Key words: *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright, swans, storytelling, Aboriginal Australian literature, climate fiction