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REPRESENTING CLIMATE: LOCAL TO GLOBAL

Anthropocene Presences and the Limits of Deferral: Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*

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Literary criticism, particularly ecocriticism, occupies an uneasy position with regard to activism: reading books (or plays, or poems) seems like a rather leisurely activity to be undertaking if our environment—our planet— is in crisis. And yet, critiquing the narratives that structure worlds and discourses is key to the activities of the (literary) critic in this time of crisis. If this crisis manifests as a 'crisis of imagination' (e.g. Ghosh), I argue that this not so much a crisis of the absence of texts that address the environmental disaster, but rather a failure to comprehend the presences of the Anthropocene in the present. To interpret (literary) texts in this framework must entail acknowledging and scrutinising the extent of the incapacity of the privileged reader to comprehend the crisis as presence and present rather than spatially or temporally remote. The readings of the novels *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013) by Waanyi writer Alexis Wright (Australia) trace the uneven presences of Anthropocenes in the present by way of bringing future worlds (*The Swan Book*) to the contemporary (*Carpentaria*). In both novels, protagonists must forge survival amongst ruins of the present and future: the depicted worlds, in particular the representations of the disenfranchisement of indigenous inhabitants of the far north of the Australian continent, emerge as a critique of the intersections of capitalist and colonial projects that define modernity and its impact on the global climate.

At the outset of Alexis Wright's 2006 novel *Carpentaria*, a chanting voice announces: 'A NATION CHANTS. *BUT WE KNOW YOUR STORY ALREADY*' (1, emphasis in original). At the close of Wright's next novel, *The Swan Book* (2013), the appeal to the reader is framed differently: 'You had to hear these soothsaying creatures [the eponymous swans] creating glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land. Really listen hard to what they were saying' (329). This is an indigenous writer (Wright is a member of the Waanyi nation, Gulf of Carpentaria, Australia) calling upon the power of story-telling and calling out resistance towards listening. The shifting pronouns interpellate different voices, different audiences.

However: the ostensible shift in discursive frameworks between the two novels—nation/colonialism in the present of *Carpentaria*, to climate change in the future of *The Swan Book*—is, in a practice of 'really listen[ing]' (Wright, 2013: 329), a slight shift in emphasis rather than a radical shift in time, topic or trope. Together, Wright's novels suggest the ways in which climate change, and the Anthropocene, are only fantasies of the future insofar as they are truncated from the present. We do not, I argue in my readings of Wright, 'need' realist(ic) novels to articulate the Anthropocene of the present. We might actually be more in 'need' of the fantastic, or fantasies, to comprehend the limits of deferral, to critique the privileges that give rise to a *lack* of comprehension for the presences of the Anthropocene in the present.

In her Boisbouvier oration, held 29 August 2018, Wright argues:

> The world is becoming more in need of writers who can think far more deeply and bravely than ever before, to tell of the complexities, scope and connectiveness of our existence, to find the words and ways to express how we will live through the massive changes of global warming, in stories that can capture the imagination of far more people in the world, and in the hope that literature—these stories of ourselves—will have a role to play in helping to shape the future of our combined humanity (n.p.).

For Wright, a writer and professor, literature has a political potential: '[t]o be able to imagine, to be able to think about the mysteries of our world, frees the mind from

the burden of reality while it tries to understand what to do about it, how to think and write your way out' (2018: n.p.), as she states at the conclusion of her speech. These ideas, formulated as 'The Power and Purpose of Literature', inform my readings of the Anthropocenes in her novels.

In a review article called 'It's the End of the Field as We Know It (And I Feel Fine)', Molly Wallace asks, with Timothy Clark, Timothy Morton and Adam Trexler, whether thinking about books, poems, films, plays or art is an appropriate activity if the world is coming to an end. Such lines of argumentation are, I suspect, a manifestation of a kind of imposter syndrome prevalent in the humanities, which sees 'hard' sciences addressing the 'hard' questions. The activism that literary and cultural analysis engenders (and, through the classroom, multiplies) is, somehow, neglected: asking exactly those 'hard' questions, for instance, as well as approaching the frameworks which give rise to such questions, analysing the gaps in discourses and so on. Wallace, for her part, suggests 'most people are not, in their minds and hearts, climate-change deniers, but climate change continues apace, primarily because denial is, as Clark perceives, infrastructural' (2017: 574). What is at stake is not so much the edges of literary criticism blending into, or perhaps rather giving way to, 'real world activism', but, to quote Wallace, 'something that tackles denial at its base' (2017: 577). Here: the infrastructure of belief giving way to narrative.

The consideration of scientific facts as a belief structure can be exasperating. George Marshall observes in *Don't Even Think About It*:

> When asked about recent weather in their own area, people who are already disposed to believe in climate change will tend to say it's been warmer. People who are unconvinced about climate change will say it's been colder. Farmers in Illinois [...] emphasised or played down extreme events depending on whether or not they accepted climate change (2015: 15).

Whilst literary scholars might not be adequately skilled to take to 'farming with ducks' (Wallace, 2017: 573, with reference to Timothy Morton), they have had ample training in deciphering, analysing, critiquing and contextualising narratives. In the Marshall vignette, note, for example, the conflation of 'climate change' with the absent precursor

'global warming', where it becomes apparent that the structuring of terminology ('warming') certainly has long-lasting effects. This vignette (indeed, the impetus of Marshall's book as a whole) signals the extent to which narratives frame our beliefs of the world around us, and, ultimately, how we interact in and with this world.

Climate change, and the Anthropocene, are such narratives. Narratives about what is happening in the world at a global scale. As narratives, they are open to interpretation. They offer frameworks for comprehension. So: a climate change 'sceptic' and an environmentalist will come to different conclusions as a product of other patternings of texts. A climate change 'sceptic' will truncate these patternings: extreme weather events then become indicative only of themselves—they are weather events, extreme but not without precursors—rather than indices of large-scale shifts; rises in temperatures are isolated from other data; and declines in temperatures are, conversely, connected to other data, to refute 'warming'. Climate change is coupled with, or uncoupled from, global warming, as the case fits. Such truncation is a multiple deferral: it defers context, defers responsibility and it also defers any recognition of the adverse ways in which such extreme weather events, for example, affect livelihoods. These deferrals are symptomatic of privilege, and evidence of (often unarticulated) narratives of uneven participation in, and unchecked exploitation of, climate. That is, climates, plural: 'cognitive, industrial, economic, affective, technological, epistemological *and* meteorological' (Colebrook, 2014: 11, my emphasis).

Climate change usually refers to shifts in weather patterns, or a global rise in temperature ('global warming') manifesting in local weather variations, ice melting (in the polar regions or in glaciers) and, consequently, rises in sea-levels. The Anthropocene emerges as something larger: a plurality of climates. For Claire Colebrook, the 'Anthropocene epoch' relies on a future fantasy of interpretation, that is, deferral and truncation:

> Man's [sic] effect on the planet will supposedly be discernible as a geological strata readable well after man ceases to be, even if there are no geologists who will be present to undertake this imagined future reading (2014: 12).

Deferral is, following this insight, an inherent feature of the Anthropocene. It can be traced through debates into the timeline of the Anthropocene and, consequently and in addition, through responsibility for the Anthropocene.

The frameworks and effects of particular Anthropocene narratives (as opposed to any number of *other* Anthropocene narratives) are contested and form a significant body of current academic work in the environmental humanities and beyond. That the debates of the Anthropocene led in the fields of humanities are concerned with the discourses of the Anthropocene is not surprising. The plethora of debates about the significance, meaning or interpretation of the possible markers for the Anthropocene, and consequently about the date invoked as the *start* of the Anthropocene, are debates about discourse, debates about narratives and debates about stories, as well as debates about interpretation. They give rise to climates—of all manner of kinds.

Accordingly, if 1610 is evoked as a start date, and the *drop* of carbon dioxide levels is proposed as a marker, it is about a story of the Anthropocene that coincides with European colonisation of the American continent (cf. e.g. Lewis & Maslin, 2015). This is a powerful story in that it asserts the unevenness of that *unsettling* prefix '*anthropo-*', pushing back against its insinuated universality. It is an unsettling that finds articulation in many other alternative names for the Anthropocene, such as the Capitalocene (Moore, 2016), the Anthrobscene (Parikka, 2014), the Chthulucene (Haraway, 2016) or even the Neganthropocene (Stiegler, forthcoming). I choose the term 'unsettling' with care: it works in conjunction with the patterns of (historical, continuing) settler colonialism suggested by this starting date, and grates against the Australian context of the novels by Australian indigenous author Alexis Wright.

If 1945 is chosen as a start date for the Anthropocene, or more specifically 16 July 1945, then another kind of marker is put forward: radionuclides. The date in July is accompanied by a specific site, Alamogordo, New Mexico, USA, and corresponds to the first detonation of an atomic device. More globalised radionuclides follow after this date, with thermonuclear weapon testing leaving 'a clear and global signature' (Waters et al., 2016) in the decade following 1952, in particular. Elizabeth

DeLoughrey's evocation of the 'Atomic Pacific' (2012) and, in another genre entirely, Isao Hashimoto's animation of the nuclear explosions from 1945 to 1998 (2011) speak to this frame and its ongoing and disastrous effects.

Waters et al.'s 'The Anthropocene is Functionally and Stratigraphically Distinct from the Holocene' offers a succinct and comprehensive discussion of the debates. The authors ultimately refrain from nominating one particular marker for the commencement of the Anthropocene. They note that the 'implications of formalizing the Anthropocene reach well beyond the geological community' (Waters et al., 2016: 145). Their open conclusion—with its insistence on the Anthropocene as resulting from the activities of, and simultaneously being witnessed by, 'advanced human societies' (Waters et al., 2016: 145)—is powerful in that it asserts responsibility as well as, through its very inconclusiveness, acknowledging a set of conditions that provide for the simultaneity of several narratives for the Anthropocene.

The multiplicity of narratives allows for a multiplicity of actions in a multiplicity of time frames, that is, in the past, present and future, and spreading unevenly across humans and non-human agencies. Accordingly, Stef Craps and Rick Crownshaw engage the plural in their introduction to the *Studies in the Novel* special issue on Climate Change Fiction in order to reference the various Anthropocenes that are imagined in the past, present and future (2018: 6). Their mobilisation of temporalities stops short, however, of identifying the unevenness with which the *present presences* of Anthropocenes affect the earth and its various inhabitants.[1]

Kyle Powys Whyte, an indigenous scholar working in the US, addresses this concern with his phrase 'Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now' (as the title of his contribution to *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities*). The phrase, with its wrapping-around of temporal frameworks, thinks the futurity of the Anthropocene as one that is not limited to the future (i.e. what is to come from the present moment), but *also* as a way of thinking about the present from a different (temporal) standpoint. In Whyte's analysis, climate change becomes the most recent iteration of

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[1] Craps and Crownshaw gesture in this direction, drawing on Stephanie LeMenager's essay 'Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre' as I will note below; however, I want to be more insistent.

anthropogenic environmental change, familiar to indigenous peoples from the past and the present, via histories, or narratives, of the past. Relationships with 'plants, animals and eocosystems', Whyte argues, are altering at a 'wrongfully rapid place' in the Anthropocene, but this is rather 'another kind of anthropogenic environmental change: climate destabilization' that follows from the anthropogenic environmental change enacted in (settler) colonialism (2017: 208).

If I call upon Anthropocenes (plural) as a framework for interpreting climate change, it is to note that these are *not only* temporally plural, but also spatially (not just geographically, as different entities in the same geographical 'unit' will experience Anthropocenes differently): climate change, Anthropocenes and anthropogenic environmental damage map over time and space unevenly. The global scale of the Anthropocene era should not be taken to suggest an evenness of Anthropocenes. Contemporaneous human actors (as one set of entities that inhabit the earth) do not experience, contribute to or feel the effects of 'the' Anthropocene in the same ways. We need many stories to account for this, as Waters et al. (2016) suggest. And, further, we need multiple interpretative practices that grapple with the effects of contextualisation and, further, privilege and responsibility.

If, for instance, radionuclides are taken to be the (singular) marker, agency and responsibility are readily deferrable to forums beyond the reach of most: governments of nations with nuclear capabilities. If the drop of carbon dioxide levels in 1610 is taken to be the marker, the historicity of the event may, contrary to its postcolonial/decolonial impetus, suggest agency and responsibility are likewise deferrable to a past era. Even taking plastiglomerate as a marker (Corcoran et al., 2014) harbours the danger of reducing the complexity of human entanglements in their environments to a single issue, even as this choice of marker shifts agency and responsibility to the large number of humans who partake of plastic practices. Similarly, changes in sea-levels or temperature—as two indices for climate change—runs the risk of reducing the complexity of human-induced environmental changes, for which 'Anthropocenes' act as a theorised shorthand, to a specific set of indices.

Such 'date debates' are only one strain of critical engagement with the narrative repercussions of the Anthropocene. Another strain addresses the unevenness

inherent in the '*anthropo-*' of the Anthropocene, pervasive within postcolonial, decolonial and critical race studies' critique of the Anthropocene (to name only some sites). This critique is particularly, but not exclusively, articulated as pertaining to responsibility, in both the sense pertaining to 'fault' and the sense of 'dealing with it'. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for instance, asks:

> Why should one include the poor of the world—whose carbon footprint is small anyway—by use of such all-inclusive terms as *species* or *mankind* when the blame for the current crisis should be squarely laid at the door of the rich nations in the first place and of the richer classes in the poorer ones? (2009: 216, emphasis in original)

Other voices critique the purported evenness of the '*anthropo-*' by addressing other aspects. Audra Mitchell, in her analysis of Lewis and Maslin, stresses the 'links between the forms of agency, power and violence that have contributed to the Anthropocene' (2015: n.p.). For the Pacific Islands, as Peter Vitousek and Oliver Chadwick point out, the temporalities of the Anthropocene shift in various ways: among the 'last places reached by humanity', some of the islands have 'entered the Anthropocene early', despite 'no access to energy from the past (fossil fuels)' or 'borrowing from the future (discounting)' (2013: n.p.). For many, the effects of the Anthropocene are a present presence: an exercise of denial grounded in practices of deferral, in turn, predicated on privilege. As Rob Nixon asserts: '[w]e may all be in the Anthropocene but we're not all in it in the same way' (2018: 8).

The Anthropocenes demand imaginations insofar as they demand responding to others: a future other (which could be the self as an other in a different time frame); a related other (as in the repeated appeals to considering the welfare of one's children or grandchildren);[2] or a 'displaced' other, that is, a contemporaneous

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[2] The trope of appealing to children is problematic for its exclusionary workings. As Naomi Klein relates in 'The Right to Regenerate' (from *This Changes Everything*), her personal account of fertility issues led to resistance to these kinds of invocations:

other in the present. The externalisation of the sites of climate change to a temporal, geographical or otherwise coded 'other' is symptomatic of a radical refusal to acknowledge one's own privilege as complicit in, and inevitably contributing to, (the acceleration of) climate change, resource exploitation and other environmental modes of the Anthropocene.

The question of genre, taken up by Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement* (2016) where he argues for 'realistic' fictions to 'represent' climate change (cf. e.g. 27, 61), is itself a deferral: the onus of responsibility shifts from readerly practices that grapple with privilege, assumptions and responsibility, to the author, who somehow must find an 'appropriate' form for 'adequately' representing the Anthropocenes. Critical responses to Ian McEwan's *Solar* might act as a case in point (for a brief overview, see Berndt, 2017). At the same time, dismissing genres that reckon with the Anthropocenes through exactly these sites—for instance, science fiction or magical realism—speaks to a continuing reluctance to acknowledge the ways in which the Anthropocenes *already* manifest in present presences.

Stephanie LeMenager suggests '[t]he novelistic mode offers a method for making social worlds by modeling individual consciousness in relationship with imaginary but possible worlds' (2017: 223). Wright's assertions of the power of literature reverberates with such an attitude, and her novels, in traversing the otherising gestures often concomitant with critical interpretations of magic realist, science fiction and otherwise 'exotic' fictions, grapple with the present presences of the Anthropocenes for the ways they reckon with the limits of deferral. But: how to find the Anthropocenes? And how to read them?

'[I]f I was going through a particularly difficult infertility episode, just showing up to a gathering of environmentalists could be an emotional minefield. The worst part were the ceaseless invocations of our responsibilities to "our children" and "our grandchildren". [...] [W]here did that leave those of us who did not, or could not, have children? Was it even possible to be a real environmentalist if you didn't have kids?' (2014: 423).

My experience of academic conferences on environmental issues includes this issue being broached in a rather different way: I have witnessed well-known academics argue that it is impossible to be an environmentalist if you have children.

Explicit mentioning of climate change, one 'clue', often works to puncture the text: rather than a slow accretion or accumulation—which is the manner in which climate change is actually occurring—it requires a violence, an event or an eruption. Similarly, it appears that for media, extreme weather events, as a particular manifestation of climate change, are what garner attention. The severity of, say, a cyclone (particularly if it crosses into territories of the already-privileged, i.e. the USA rather than, say, Haiti) is more likely to receive media coverage than a scientific study that asserts, for instance, increased rates of bleaching of coral reefs. Nixon's insights into this phenomenon of the medialities of disaster are helpful in this respect, especially his articulation of 'slow violence' as 'a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence' that is not 'immediate in time, explosive and spectacular […] but rather incremental and accretive' (2011: 2). Reading practices for Anthropocenes figured as 'slow violence' might turn to the contrapuntal, following Edward Said, to eke out relations otherwise rendered hidden.

Such contrapuntal excavations, bringing relations and dependencies otherwise backgrounded to the fore, will certainly have their place in literary (activist) practices, pointing to the practices of deferral that constitute the (supposed absence of) Anthropocenes across a large corpus of texts. They can also be engaged in critiquing positions of privilege, a practice that reckons with such deferrals. My own privileges rest on ethnicity, race, class and geolocation, as well as the privileges of time to engage in such a critique and access to the tools, both physical and metaphorical (e.g. substantial, and costly, training), that allow for the articulation for such critique. The Anthropocenes' impact on my daily life is buttressed by these privileges.

However, such self-reflective practices do not quite go far enough. They remain embedded in modes of reflective methodologies, which, following Karen Barad, are about 'finding accurate representations' and 'about the gaze from afar' (2007: 89). These gestures are functions of distance, and, crucially, generate deferrals. For Barad, however, maintaining distance is not requisite to objectivity. She instead insists that 'objectivity is about being accountable to the specific materializations of which we are a part' which 'requires a methodology that is attentive to, and

responsive/responsible to, the specificity of material entanglements in their agential becoming' (2007: 91). This means *not* 'reading against (some fixed target/mirror)' (2007: 90), which suggests something which is exterior to the text (that which is read against). Barad instead proposes 'reading through' (2007: 90). For this contribution, this means reckoning with the co-constitutive, or, in Barad's terminology, intra-active, ways in which reading practices and practices of critique emerge as a patterning of the climates of the Anthropocenes. I do this by reading Wright's novels themselves as co-constitutive (or intra-active).

In what follows, I engage in an interpretation of Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and—with, through—*The Swan Book*, to elicit an Anthropocenes interpretation in a diffractive mode. Rather than insisting on a genealogy of publication, or a primacy of emphasis, I read the novels for their shared concern for articulations of voice, their settings (north-eastern Australia) and their epic reach and syntactic confrontations, which broach other differences. Read together, they reckon with what Whyte recognises as a 'vulnerability to climate change as an intensification of colonially-induced environmental changes' (2017: 154).

Carpentaria really isn't a climate change novel, and not really the kind Ghosh had in mind: It very nearly wasn't published. Giramondo, an independent publisher, picked it up after it was 'rejected by every major publisher in Australia' (*AustLit*, 2017: n.p.) before it then went on to win the major award for fiction in Australia (the Miles Franklin) in 2007. Adam Shoemaker calls the novel 'the greatest, most inventive and most mesmerising Indigenous epic ever produced in Australia', and notes that it is 'contained by few categories: it streams from allegory to political parable, from magical surrealism to stark naturalism' (2008: 55). As Janine Leane notes, there are 'few familiar moorings for readers whose ethnocentric education presupposes that literature and history rely on inherently coherent and linear narratives' (2015: 151). *The Swan Book*, likewise, has been interpreted in terms of magical realism (Johns-Putra, 2018; Takolander, 2016); its setting in the (far) future might give rise to classifications of science, or speculative, fiction. Read together, ostensible differences between the novels, such as temporal setting ('present' vs. 'future') or

topic ('nationhood' vs. 'climate change'), emerge as a function of a particular kind of privilege that can reckon these as separate, and not inherently entangled, issues.

My reading works to resist displacement (be it temporal or spatial, or indeed generic), and does so in conjunction with (implicit) privilege. Some caution is in order, then, on my approach to the novels, specifically as an Australian of Anglo heritage reading indigenous writing. Alison Ravenscroft articulates such caution as follows:

> Rather than reading *Carpentaria* as a resource from which we can know others—as ethnography purports to be, for instance—we might read it as a novel that presents a white reader with its own quite specific qualities of unknowability, and undecidability (2010: 214).

As such a white reader, I find the caution necessary as a reminder of exactly those processes of deferral and compartmentalisation I critique above. I mobilise the 'otherness' of the novels as a key, using it as a resource, but attempting to stop before understanding the other *as* other. This quite often becomes a very self-absorbed activity, upholding dualistic thought whereby the (hyperseparated) other works to deny the relations through which the other constitutes and corroborates the self (cf. Plumwood, 1993, also Barad, 2007). Instead, reading such novels is an (enjoyable, difficult, challenging) exercise in critiquing my own privileges. In this era of Anthropocenes, it is a crucial step—but not any kind of endgame—in querying the narrative frameworks which create and maintain environmental crisis.

Reading *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* together in the framework of climate change and the Anthropocene suggests how contemporaneous others—present presences—are 'displaced': lost, forgotten and removed, as well as the more general sense of 'somewhere else'. The particular ways in which *The Swan Book* imagines a climate-changed future echo (back) through *Carpentaria*, through the patternings of a similar setting, within a similarly epically-voiced narration, suggest a present urgency. Resource depletion, extreme weather events, disenfranchisement and scavenging-for-subsistence are not, this juxtaposition suggests, future fantasies but are rather present predicaments.

Desperance, *Carpentaria*'s main setting, is from the outset a site of shifts and changes. It became a 'waterless port' when, 'during a Wet season early in the last century, […] the river simply decided to change course, to bypass it by several kilometres' (Wright, 2006: 3). Note how agency is afforded to the workings of the land (or water, as the case is): the river has *decided* to change course. As Lynda Ng suggests, this aspect of the novel (where land becomes a 'dynamic translocal process' rather than a 'fixed locality'), which finds culmination in the cyclone at the close, is demonstrative to the extent to which (static) notions of place are 'doomed […] to such disasters' (2013: 117). And not just this: static notions of any number of categorical patterns of thought are exposed as vulnerable to disaster.

Reading *Carpentaria* as a tale of the present, but simultaneously as 'a novel capable of embracing all times' (Wright, 2007: 81), is to understand the tale through the rubrics offered by the oral framework of the novel. Lynda Ng notes that the 'method of transmitting knowledge in an oral culture […] allows the information to be personalized, adapted, and made relevant to the time in which it is being re-told' (2013: 122–23) is crucial to reading for what she terms 'translocal temporalities' in the novel. Geoff Rodoreda stresses this point, noting the Preface establishes the story in its entirety as an oral tale. He further argues that the non-Aboriginal reader is marginalised by the embedding of the narrative into an (written approximation of an) oral narrative: 'it is this outside-the-frame-position that Wright *invites* her non-Aboriginal readers to take up; they are asked to be content to remain at the periphery of a grand Australian story, just listening in' (Rodoreda, 2018: 187). This displacement is greatest for the white reader, Rodoreda argues, who is not used to having to adopt this position. In the context of this reading, the temporal 'presentness' of *Carpentaria* is, like the river upon which Desperance was once established: shifting.

In *The Swan Book*, this displacement is furthered through a temporal shift. *The Swan Book* is clearly set against a back-drop of climate change. 'Mother Nature' is rendered 'Mother Catastrophe of flood, fire, drought and blizzard' (Wright, 2013: 6), and the earth is ravaged by weather, extinction, death and humans desperate to survive:

> In every neck of the woods people walked in the imagination of doomsayers and talked the language of extinction.
>
> They talked about surviving a continuous dust storm […], or they talked about living out the best part of their lives with floods lapping around their bellies; or they talked about tsunamis and dealing with nuclear fallout on their shores and fields forever. Elsewhere on the planet, people didn't talk much at all while crawling through blizzards to save themselves from being buried alive in snow (Wright, 2013: 6).

Its renderings of a world different to that of the contemporary world—most noticeably, its temporal setting in the future of the Australian tricentenary, so around the end of the current century—are not completely different from what the contemporary reader may be familiar with, but extrapolations of a present, speculative. Cornelis Martin Renes suggests the novel creates 'an apocalyptic view of Australia in the face of global warming, capitalist greed and the Indigenous fight for political power' (2014: 126), bringing together climates of different kinds (political, economic and atmospheric). In its setting, in the far north of eastern Australia, *The Swan Book* forms an extrapolation of a different kind of present: the narrative present established by *Carpentaria*. This enveloping of the fictional present into a fictional future is crucial in my reading of the two novels, as it entangles the environments of the two novels. The climate change novel (*The Swan Book*) becomes intertwined with the other (*Carpentaria*), shifting the 'othered' temporality closer to the present. For the disenfranchised, not just in the speculative future of Australia, the separability of such factors must seem an academic exercise at best.

Reading the novels together brings forth an awareness for the way in which exactly such displacements are crucial in the context of reading for climate change, for the Anthropocenes: firstly, for the way in which climate change and the effects of the Anthropocenes are figured as something that happens 'elsewhere, to other people' (or 'elsewhen, to other people'), insofar as the reader is privileged. Secondly, for the way in which *weathering* the effects of climate pattern unevenly through displacements, where *weather* is both political and atmospheric (pertaining to the

environmental atmosphere, first and foremost, but also in a more ethereal sense): Colebrook's concatenation of climates.

The political climate, specifically the nation, figures strongly in both novels. Many critics have analysed *Carpentaria* in conjunction with the nation (e.g. Joseph, 2009; Leane, 2015, Renes, 2014; Rodoreda, 2018; Ng, 2013, by way of the translocal) and its troubling of the relations between the indigenous inhabitants of this part of the world (northwestern Queensland) and the colonisers (and other settlers: Wright includes the Afghan traders Abdul and Abdullah as the agents of first contact to the communities of the far north). In *The Swan Book*, politics of the south intrude onto the people of the north in a myriad of ways with the bombing of the Swan Lake peoples by the leader of the nation being the most explicit. The aftermath of the Intervention, as the Northern Territory National Emergency Response (NTNER) legislation in 2007 has come to be known, forms one of the most prominent frameworks; biting references to governmental attitudes towards boat people are mentioned, too, forming critique as fiction directed at contemporary Australian politics (Rodoreda cites an interview with Wright, where she articulates a parallel between Indigenous and refugee detention, 2018: 195).

In *The Swan Book*, protagonist Oblivia's home country, officially called Swan Lake (Wright, 2013: 49), is initially a swan swamp (with the murky, muddy associations that brings with it) before becoming a swan 'desert', a 'sand-mountain country' (Wright, 2013: 334). The 'Swan Lake' people are described in contrast to the 'Brolga Nation', who have been (mostly) successful in their bid for self-governance: mostly, because the Swan Lake country was initially covered by the treaty, but became a 'heart-breaking trade-off' when the 'swamp people's part of their traditional estate, the Army's property and dumping ground' was 'deleted from the treaty' (Wright, 2013: 105). The Brolga Nation, in further contrast, have been able to secure some financial security through, amongst other economic activities, mining royalties (Wright, 2013: 118). In this way, Wright's depiction of Indigenous communities is differentiated (as previously in *Carpentaria*). Crucially, this differentiation emerges in access to, or exposure to, resources and waste: material manifestations of the unevenness of privilege and consumption.

In *The Swan Book*, the transformation of Swan Lake (a swamp) into a sandy desert is facilitated by an act of destruction. Warren Finch, in his role as President of Australia, has the swamp blown up, thus preventing his now-wife, Oblivia, from returning to her homeland. This bomb echoes the different, yet similarly destructive, act of destruction in *Carpentaria*: Will Phantom's monkey-wrenching detonation of a mine site, aided by a 'willed' gust of wind.

This theme, of material resources and waste, acts as a framing motif in *Carpentaria*. The beginning of the novel and the ending are permeated with junk, debris and all that is left after order. The house of protagonist Will Phantom's childhood is constructed out of and decorated with refuse salvaged from the rubbish tip by his mother (Angel Day). Waste is collected by Angel Day at the beginning of the novel, from which she is (just) able to forge an existence. The site of the house is on the outskirts of the town of Desperance, as is the tip. The marginalized forge existences out of leftovers. Waste is also accrued at the end of the novel, in the form of an island upon which Will Phantom finds himself stranded, which Laura Joseph writes of as an 'archipelagic model of floating matter, set in motion by the fury of the cyclone', 'the creation of an ancient regeneration' (2009: 6).

The island is comprised of all sorts of objects, jetsam, thrown 'overboard' with the force of the cyclone from the troubles of Desperance: 'The waters poured dead fish. Sodden spinifex grasses. Sticks. Green wood. Branches. Plastic. Plastic Malanda bottles. Green bags tied up with rubbish' (Wright, 2006: 492–93). Will must engage in this debris, this waste, to forge his survival, in a manner that echoes the behaviour of his mother on the rubbish tip before him. The debris island and the rubbish tip: both constitute sites of contradicting claims in *Carpentaria*. Will's destruction of the mine, a site of continuing colonial damage in Australia to peoples and land alike, is a further example. Junk's omnipresence in the novel points to its site of origin and the semiotic processes through which it became junk: sites of the abject, of what has been rejected and carefully cordoned off from day-to-day lives, deferrals of material expunged to make order.

Through the renderings of materiality—in particular junk, debris and ruin—*Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* bring forth visions of a world where climate

changes continuously. Both novels thus articulate a sense of country which diverges from an understanding of land as an 'inert territory (*terra nullius*) available for exploitation and profiteering' (Gleeson-White, 2013: 3) or as a resource, from which wealth can be abstracted but also for dumping junk: that is, for the generation of value, or for the abandonment of the unvalued. Ruin informs the environments, the atmospheric *and* political climate, of both novels, manifesting as both noun (the ruin/ruins) and verb (to ruin).

In *Imperial Debris*, Laura Ann Stoler engages with ruin as not 'what is left' but rather 'what people are left with'. 'We are schooled,' Stoler argues,

> to be alert to the fact that ruins hold histories, that ruins are the ground on which histories are contested and remade. Still, the nominative form of a 'ruin' does less work than 'to ruin' as an ongoing process. Ruins can represent both something more and less than the sum of the sensibilities of people who live in them. Instead we might turn to ruins as epicenters of renewed collective claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate both despair and new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected collaborative political projects (2013: 14).

Kathryn Yusoff uses the phrase 'ruination of the future' to elicit this kind of material archive, where the 'accumulation of new mineralogical arrangements and organic-inorganic composites in the flow of geologic matter provides the evidential base for the Anthropocene' (2017: n.p.). Waste, ruins, ruination: These are not sites that novels can only articulate in modes of fantasy, science fiction or magical realism. These are sites that constitute the lives of (deferred, externalised) others in our present and presence.

Following from the cyclonic conclusion of *Carpentaria,* which leaves the main setting an island of debris at the close of the novel, Alexis Wright's 2013 novel *The Swan Book* posits a future world where sovereignty, knowledges and modernities clash. The protagonist of *The Swan Book,* Oblivia, such clashes coalesce into traumas: the trauma of being raped by 'members of a gang of petrol-sniffing children' (Wright,

2013: 93) is the most obvious. Her 'quest to regain sovereignty' (Wright, 2013: 4) over her brain, ravaged by a virus described as a 'nostalgia for foreign things' (Wright, 2013: 3) or as a 'virus lover living in some lolly pink prairie house in her brain' (Wright, 2013: 334), when all she desires, in one of the only passages with the agency of a first-person narrative 'I,' is to know 'what it means to have a homeland' (Wright, 2013: 4), also constitutes a trauma. As Adeline Johns-Putra argues, 'Oblivia's violation is a synecdoche for the violation of Aboriginal country, people, and ontology' (2018: 34–35) and her 'muteness is linked to an alternative, ecocentric reality' where 'the voices it opposes are representative of what is conventionally accepted as "reality" in anthropocentric and Eurocentric terms' (2018: 35). And, as Johns-Putra, and Maria Kaaren Takolander before her have suggested, climate refugee Bella Donna's 'discovery' and intended 'rehabilitation', as well as her naming the protagonist *as* Oblivia, are more than suggestive of similar patternings from Australia's colonial past.

Sovereignty of land is, in *The Swan Book*, contingent on sovereignty of mind. Oblivia's virus, and its obsession with media images of what *should be* desirable (for a 'girl', this is clearly items of 'lolly pink' [e.g. Wright, 2013: 5, 334] articulated both in the prelude and the closing paragraphs of the novel), might thus be interpreted, in the context of a reading for the Anthropocenes or climate change, as the extent to which the environment is contingent on mental frames. In other words, the extent to which relations with the environment are not going to shift to become less destructive until mental paradigms (so material desires, commodity fetishes, all of that which drives the '[not so] Great Acceleration') have shifted. 'Lolly pink'—read here as a placeholder for consumerism—gets in the way of this: the impressive power of (advertising) narratives to shape engagements with the worlds thus, paradoxically, finds expression in her silence.

The silence of *The Swan Book*'s protagonist folds back into my reading for climate change. It gives rise to a pause—as silences are want—to consider my own silences, my own privileges. The traumas from which it arises, and its resistance, in its consequentiality ('oblivion'), puncture my reading, as much as the 'announcement' of

climate change as a foil: it folds back, then, into my reading of *Carpentaria*, as a novel of the present and of (unknown? unwilled?) presences. The contrast between the junkscape and ruins littering both novels and the pervading insistence of the silence (of *The Swan Book*) and the accusative frame narrative (of *Carpentaria*) entangle to reveal a complicity that is uncomfortable, edgy and threatening. These are the criteria for climate change fiction, more than generic considerations, catalogues of disasters or 'realism'.

The deferrals that give rise to climate change and the Anthropocenes are limited, spatially and temporally, but are also limiting: without reckoning with the extent to which the Anthropocenes are present presences, what will we do? Wait for Colebrook's future geologist to diagnose our ruins? In Wright's novels, climate change gives way to a world that extrapolates on present and past—a future that is not divorced from but predicated on the matters of resource (mis)management, disenfranchisement, displacement and the overarching projects of nationhood and neoliberalism. As Kyle Powys Whyte suggests, 'Indigenous peoples challenge linear narratives of dreadful futures of climate destabilization with their own accounts of history that highlight the reality of constant change and emphasize colonialism's role in environmental change' (2018: 225). The 'fantastic' elements of *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book* emerge as readerly fantasies, entertaining deferrals that refuse to recognise, or reckon with, the present presence of the Anthropocenes.

Rather than merely tracing a change in the weather (the smallest increment of climate change), Wright's novels then stress the material and discursive interrelations of the Anthropocenes stretching across and through various dimensions. Barad asks 'How to disrupt patterns of thinking that see the past as finished and the future as not ours or only ours?' (2007: x). My interpretation of Wright's novels argues that *Carpentaria*'s climactic climate diffracts through *The Swan Book*'s climate changes, giving rise to 'imaginary but possible worlds' (LeMenager 2017, 223) that interrogate the limits of deferral. The novels' generic resistances, epic scopes and shifts through time and space merge into a biting critique of the intersections of capitalist and colonial projects that define modernity and its impact on global climates.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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