Alexis Wright’s fiction, Aboriginal Realism, and the Sovereignty of the Indigenous Mind

Cornelis Martin Renes

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/ces/11325
DOI: 10.4000/ces.11325
ISSN: 2534-6695

Publisher
SEPC (Société d'études des pays du Commonwealth)

Electronic reference
Cornelis Martin Renes, "Alexis Wright’s fiction, Aboriginal Realism, and the Sovereignty of the Indigenous Mind", Commonwealth Essays and Studies [Online], 44.2 | 2022, Online since 25 February 2022, connection on 09 March 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/ces/11325 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/ces.11325

This text was automatically generated on 9 March 2022.

Commonwealth Essays and Studies is licensed under a Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.
Alexis Wright’s fiction, Aboriginal Realism, and the Sovereignty of the Indigenous Mind

Cornelis Martin Renes

1 The Swan Book, Alexis Wright’s latest novel, published in 2013, was well received by readers and critics and shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, Australia’s most important literary prize. The Swan Book is a further elaboration of Wright’s Indigenous literary universe that emanates from her connection to the traditional country of her people, the Waanyi, located in the Gulf of Carpentaria in remote Northern Australia. Wright’s critical engagement with “new times” and “end times” as expressed in Carpentaria (San Roque 2007, 4) also informs this novel, which was written during the renewed, assimilative oppression of remote Indigenous communities under the Northern Territory Emergency Response – also known as the Northern Territory Intervention or Invasion. Craig San Roque locates Carpentaria as a key text to resituate the human beyond a European epistemology (2007, 4, 10–13), and The Swan Book is no different. The novel forms part of a larger literary effort that employs the particularities of the Waanyi oral traditions to predict the destruction of the Australian continent by the impact of globalization, neo-capitalism, and climate change. In its projection of a political, economic, and climatic dystopia, The Swan Book reflects the Indigenous struggle to regain the environmental and social habitat the continent enjoyed prior to colonization but whose lack of balance in historical times keeps all life human and non-human in check. The Swan Book lifts Wright’s literary agenda onto another plane that transcends the more local concerns of Plains of Promise and Carpentaria, and aims to forge a more general understanding of mainstream Australia’s postcolonising state (Aileen Moreton-Robinson 2003, 30) and reluctance to engage with decolonisation. As a result, the marginalization and disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples have remained structurally embedded in Australian society.

2 Through developing a steady commitment with Indigenous country and community, Wright’s writing foregrounds the inherently political nature of literature and its
engagement with structures of power. As she puts it, “I want the truth to be told, our truths, so, first and foremost, I hold my pen for the suffering in our communities” (1998b, 2). She does not stand alone in this. Indigenous Australian literature has flourished over the last three decades, and by addressing the disruption and destruction of Aboriginal country and community tissue provoked by mainstream policies of genocidal character (Larissa Behrendt quoted in Moses 2005, 17), it has created a powerful intellectual space for Indigenous recovery. The auto/biographic genre of life-writing has documented Indigenous women’s exposure to dispossession and their removal to mission-reserves, their sexual abuse by white men, and the impact of mixed-descent child removals known as the “Stolen Generations.” This genre has been a popular way of vindication but there has also been an innovative move towards the expression of the Aboriginal life experience in experimental fiction, epitomized in Alexis Wright’s writing (Grossman 1998, 82–83), that will be the focus of this essay, and that Wright herself has coined Aboriginal realism/reality.

Fiction, “a truer replica of reality”

In her fiction, Wright veers away from documentary reflections on her lived experience and prefers to fictionalize Australia’s silenced Indigenous history. This choice is informed by the wish to prevent mainstream infringements of Indigenous privacy, as well as by the conviction that the artistic freedom provided by fiction is better fitted to convey truths about Aboriginality under white settlement than writing about lived individual and community experience, which may be interrogated under the bias of institutional history and statistics (Wright 2002, 13–15). Wright’s writing reflects a structural concern with the discursive links between knowledge, language, and power in the Australian context and with empowering strategies to deconstruct them. Thus, Wright experiments with Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms and content and adapts Aboriginal story-telling to the “new times,” to follow Craig San Roque’s cue, seeking inspiration in what has commonly been called the Dreaming or Dreamtime in English. The latter is “a literal translation from a single Aboriginal language (Arrernte)” (Ashcroft et al. 2009, 208) for the knowledge, at times secret-sacred, that informs the Aboriginal world experience.

The Dreamtime of the totemic Ancestors is a set of origin stories and myths forming the environmental, cultural, and legal backbone of Indigenous society, and it is passed on and given in custody to its members as mnemonic “songlines” that record and map country as oral-aural culture. Some of these stories are secret-sacred and have only limited access. Rooted in, and giving shape to traditional country and society, the Dreamtime constitutes a holistic universe which the famous Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner called an “Everywhen” that enfolds the past, present and future (2009, 58). Thus the Dreamtime dynamically and non-hierarchically bridges a wide range of discursive fields which are separate and discrete in western discourse (Ashcroft et al. 2009, 208–9, after Deborah Bird Rose 1996, chapter 2). Because of their totemic, ancestral qualities, Wright’s characters dissolve the race, gender, and class categories of imported European epistemology, as well as create local habitats beyond neocolonial division and exploitation. A good example of the latter in Carpentaria is the way the local Elder Norm Phantom’s anger against the white occupants of his people’s land
changes into a storm that devastates the small port town of Desperance in order to recover a livable habitat.

Wright’s literary agenda reflects her long years of professional commitment to local as well as national Aboriginal activism, and thus she has written about the ways her community, the Waanyi nation, has been strongly affected by policies of cultural genocide such as dispossession, child removal, and assimilation into the mainstream (Wright 1998, 4). Wright followed Aboriginal protocol in writing the nonfictional Grog War (1997) and Take Power: Like this Old Man Here (1998) – which involves asking the local Elders’ permission to reproduce stories, seeking the Aboriginal community’s opinion on the final product, recognition of custodianship of knowledges etc. Dealing with community issues and politics, these incursions into non-fiction were written in answer to invitations by local Aboriginal organizations and generally well-received, while they offered Wright the opportunity to experiment with fiction; in Grog War she used a composite, imaginary Aboriginal family as the protagonists of her account, so as to reach a large audience without exposing her people to the invasive scrutiny of the mainstream (Wright, 1997a, ix; Grossman, 82–83). Later political developments have proven this strategy effective:

I felt literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth – not the real truth, but more of a truth than non-fiction, which is not really the truth either. Non-fiction is often about the writer telling what is safe to tell […]. I use literature to try and create a truer replica of reality. (2002, 13–14)

Wright contextualizes the sombre emotional and political drift of her first novel, Plains of Promise (1997b), within the frustrating struggle for Indigenous land rights in the 1990s, frustration which was compounded by the mainstream’s “ingrained, inherited racism” (Wright 2002, 12). This turned writing into “a way of consoling myself in this crisis of the mind to the very real threat we were facing as Waanyi people. I had hoped to achieve some recognition for our land” through political activism but in vain (Wright 2002, 12). It comes as no surprise that the title Plains of Promise displays dark irony in its celebratory white settler reference to Gulf Country, since the novel addresses the traumas of the Stolen Generations, dislocation, and dispersal. With Plains of Promise Wright sought “a good portrayal of the truth which [she] see[s], and that is the living hell of the lives of many Aboriginal people” (2002, 15). The novel’s publication coincided with the Federal Bringing them Home Report, which led to an official recognition of the trauma and destruction caused by the state policies of removing children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal families in most of the twentieth century. Thus, the report intended to help Indigenous peoples who had been forcibly removed to find their families, but Plains of Promise’s puzzling finale indicates that such aims are not easily achieved by those who have suffered the traumatic impact of colonization, and that healing also depends on a carefully balanced mix of self-definition, community acceptance and lived Indigenous experience. At the end of the novel the three female protagonists meet but mother and daughter are not told they are related and they go their separate ways, without understanding the significance of their reunion.

A decade of reflexive silence followed, except for the publication of Croire en l’incroyable (2000) and Le Pacte du serpent arc-en-ciel, an essay and a short-story collection (2002) that were published in French. During this time, Wright wrote Carpentaria as a way to cope with a deep personal and political crisis, and finally published the novel in 2006 (Wright 2002, 12). Carpentaria’s universe engages proactively with Aboriginal cultural
traditions by applying literary imagination to the transformation of Indigenous reality. Critics celebrated the novel’s innovative epic style and its empowered Indigenous universe as a remedy against the damage inflicted upon the land by western civilization.⁴ In a strange turn of fate, the announcement of the Miles Franklin Award for *Carpentaria* coincided with the start of the Northern Territory Intervention by the conservative Federal government on June 21, 2007, which evidenced the importance of an Aboriginal author winning Australia’s most important literary award with a novel that critiques any kind of European imposition on, control of, and exploitation of, Indigenous country. This coincidence illustrates the extent to which Wright’s fiction is tuned in with the everyday reality of her people. Her agenda shapes and hones the content of her latest novel to date, *The Swan Book*, which was published with the Intervention in full swing, and whose oppressive purposes the novel lays bare.

A shared agenda and a chant to Indigenous sovereignty

Wright’s people, the Waanyi, were expelled from their tribal lands around the Gulf of Carpentaria under the pressure of colonization (Wright 1997c, 1), and Wright turns to the force of narrative and the fictional imagination to hold on to a cultural heritage under threat by genocidal dispersal. As Philip Mead states, Wright is concerned with “the constitutive role of storytelling (in various modes, including conflictual) in Indigenous cultural life and land rights, and the difficulties of such narratives being heard or acknowledged within Australian social relations and political culture” (Mead 2018, 525). Thus, *The Swan Book* is Wright’s attempt to keep, recover and recreate the cultural memory and spiritual links to her “distant illusionary homelands” through narrative (Wright 2013, 4), and it follows in *Carpentaria*’s vein in adapting the epic form so as to establish an Indigenous sense of community. Wright carries out this process of adaptation to Indigenous needs, of hybridization of narrative forms to the limits of cultural conventions. She employs difference and incommensurability with mainstream understandings of reality as a strategy to protect her community and focus the scrutinizing gaze back on its non-Indigenous beholder. Thus, Wright makes it clear that she writes foremost for her own people but also wants to be heard beyond, by national and international readerships (2002, 19).

Aboriginal incommensurability, then, or the impossibility for the western, mainstream reader to penetrate the Indigenous universe, is more than a statement of cultural difference; it appeals to a specific politics of the Aboriginal body. Wright establishes the Aboriginal corpus, in the sense of body and oeuvre, through the multiple strands of oral narratives that meander back and forth, sideways and back, between the past and the future, the material and the immaterial, and the local and the continental, to circle and question each other, and to finally meet in a here and now where the “whole story” can never be totally told – in what was, is and remains a distinctly Indigenous universe. As Alison Ravenscroft remarked in relation to *Carpentaria*, the non-Indigenous reader is simply invited to trust the text, go with its flow and so accept Indigenous primacy in the Australian textscape as the prime condition for understanding and appreciation (see 2006, A2, 22). That is to say, white readers must learn to acknowledge unknown narrative territory and relinquish established reading practices and fictional interpretation. This then becomes the way to make sense of the textual landscape and
themselves. Similarly, Arnaud Barras follows Hans Jurgen Jauss’s post-structuralist, hermeneutic cue, insisting that the “context of reception and production” determines a text’s interpretation, and that “a work [can be] so aesthetically unique and powerful that it […] may […] alter the horizon of its readership” (2018, 2), placing The Swan Book in the category of such “horizon changers.”

Wright’s fiction, then, takes issue with the western interpretation of reality, whose scientific model of objectivity and materiality is at the heart of the traditional realist novel. Wright’s prose displays no straightforward chronology of beginning, development and conclusion, but employs laterality, repetition and circularity of plot situations and characters, merging as it were detail and essential information. Such union in complexity is integral to the author’s “quest to regain sovereignty over [her] own brain,” as she writes in the prelude to The Swan Book, in a section that deliberately confuses her voice with that of Oblivia Ethylene Oblivion, the novel’s female protagonist (Wright 2013, 4). Once she has arrived in a post-apocalyptic Melbourne, Oblivia describes mapping and navigating space as an emotional, intuitive logic that refuses the rationalization of time, energy and distance in order to find her place as well as way around. Her journeys through the city suggest an Aboriginal walk on Country in urban space to re-establish the link between body, spirit and country that is reflected in the writing of the textscape itself. The satisfactory outcome of her search depends on the refusal of rational navigation:

She told the Harbour Master and the monkey that an ordinary, logical route […] was not the point. If she had walked there herself in the most direct route possible, she would never have found the old genie’s shop on the long abandoned street where the city’s ghosts came at night, and which was best to release swans returning to flight. It was the desire she followed, of completing an arduous journey that allowed her to see the right perspective. (262)

Considering this metaphorical approach, The Swan Book reveals different layers of interpretation and multiple entry points that operate cross-culturally, spinning the black swan trope and its multicultural reference points to their maximum potential. In this sense the novel can never be a mere swan song, but operates as an open songline into an uncertain future, as Oblivia’s wandering also indicates.

Following this narratorial logic, The Swan Book draws upon the issues addressed in Wright’s earlier fiction and works them into a new tale of Indigenous hope and despair. Plains of Promise might be seen as “the Gothic prequel to Wright’s later apocalyptic works, which show what the heightened consequences are for continued cultural violence against Indigenous subjects” (Sefton-Rowston 2016, 359). Plains of Promise is recalled in the way The Swan Book addresses climatic disaster and the destruction of the life-giving, ontological relationship between Indigeneity and the land, animals and plants that inhabit it. Plains of Promise’s pulse regarding race and gender is also evident in The Swan Book’s traumatic description of dispossession, dispersal, removal and sexual abuse. Like that of Plains of Promise’s protagonist Ivy, Oblivia’s life is fraught with silence, madness, fear and oppression, and she is condemned to stay alone. Emulating Carpentaria, The Swan Book critically assesses the politics of Indigenous and non-Indigenous land management, and consistently shows how the western over-exploitation of natural resources generates catastrophic results. Informed by the Northern Territory Invasion and taking Carpentaria’s cue, The Swan Book is an indictment of the mainstream policies wielded to undermine the Indigenous fight for sovereignty and survival. The Swan Book addresses and rewrites Wright’s previous two
novels, which display the political arena as a mining field of private interests, but also chimes in with Kim Scott’s highly-praised and prize-winning first-contact history That Deadman Dance (2010). Yet, unlike Scott’s novel, The Swan Book produces a not-so-distant view of a dystopian future and so critically writes back to the present, while Scott addresses the unwritten history of promises and deceptions as they could have occurred in the first-contact context and so reflects on Australia’s contemporary cross-cultural complexity. In The Swan Book, Wright chooses the year 2100 as her point of departure and imagines the future of the Australian nation if neocolonial politics and Indigenous disempowerment, disenfranchisement and sell-out were to continue for another century from now. This Aboriginal take on narrative, which, when writing about Carpentaria she defines as “a spinning multi-stranded helix of stories [...] forever moving, entwining all stories together” (Wright 2007, 84), pulls together her three novels to date into a continuous narrative effort, displaying different faces of similar themes and interconnected strands. As she says, Indigenous story-telling “relates to all the leavings and returnings to ancient territory, while carrying the whole human endeavour in search of new dreams” and so intends to reach out to First Nations (Aboriginal) people, old settlers (Europeans) and new Australians (recent immigrants, often from Asia) alike (2007, 84).

11 The Northern Territory described in The Swan Book echoes the contemporary Intervention as the Federal army is put in control of allegedly dysfunctional Indigenous lives in remote black communities, exacerbated by harmful climate change, racist policy and neocolonialism. Against this backdrop the novel pits the arrival to political power of the first Indigenous-Australian Prime Minister, “The Spirit of the Nation” Warren Finch, and joins the very local story of the newly-named, badly-contaminated Swan Lake and its displaced inhabitants – reminiscent of Plains of Promise’s mission mob – to the national scene through Warren’s arranged marriage with Oblivia. An outcast in her community, the Aboriginal girl enjoys a special relationship with the Lake’s black swans, which have been displaced from the drought-ridden south. Their migration symbolizes the various manifestations of Indigenous genocide in the area and denotes the destructive consequences of western management of the land. The swans constitute an ambivalent expression of non-belonging, as they emulate the mysterious black crows in Plains of Promise’s Disappearing Lake, whose life-giving secret is the key to the novel’s dramatic action.

12 The solution to dispossession, disenfranchisement and environmental destruction is sought in the unlikely union of Warren and Oblivia, a match once considered desirable but now rejected by the local Elders. As Oblivia has been gang-raped by an Indigenous group of teenage drug addicts, she is sexually tainted and no longer eligible for marriage. The local Elders’ decision not to marry the couple destined to lead the recovery of Indigenous society is a simple act of protection as the possibility to regenerate country is intimately linked to the purity of the sexual deed and of the female body. Indeed, we find Oblivia cast in dysfunctional, traumatic silence, oblivion, and madness. The dire consequences of Oblivia’s rape for Indigenous country and the general sense of tribal fragmentation are rewrites of the gendered and racial violence that inform Plains of Promise. In the latter novel, Ivy’s madness and outcast position are caused by the white Missioner Jipp’s sexual abuse of the young girl; yet, Ivy also bears traces of transgenerational trauma caused by frontier sexual abuse of Aboriginal women by white settler males. The impact of interracial violations past and present
causes the dramatic crises in *Plains of Promise* that centre on re-finding a new balance with country.

13 Elliot Pugnose’s rebellious attitude in *Plains of Promise* is reflected in the behaviour of Warren Finch, who in his search for Indigenous manifest destiny defies the Elders’ plans by imposing his marriage with Oblivia and abducting her to the City. In Wright’s harrowing vision, what remains of the once famous but now dismal “Garden City” of Melbourne has become a neo-capitalist dystopia where the lost, poverty-stricken homeless abound and the wealthy and powerful few hide in gated communities:

> a foggy maze of concrete industrial buildings, high-rise offices, factories and houses. In this closer glimpse of paradise, the girl could see that much of the city had cracked; the city was breaking up, as though the land beneath had collapsed under its weight [...] She saw no camp dogs hanging about these streets. No birds. There were only crowds of people moving quickly past one another with blank faces, and many others living in footpath ghettos, like people were in the swamp. They were begging for food. (Wright 2013, 208–9)

It is no wonder, then, that this post-apocalyptic version of Melbourne results in a deadly trap where Warren is assassinated shortly after their betrothal and his coming to power. By killing the first Indigenous President of the Nation, the novel expresses utter distrust in the results of political action when played along the rules of the “democratic” mainstream game. Significantly, Warren Finch falls prey to his own power-hungry, male-chauvinist career-making and, having made many enemies, hardly convinces as the Indigenous “saviour” of Australia (185).

14 Wright’s critical take on male Indigenous leadership going mainstream is evident in her choice of Warren’s family name. The Finch is a European songbird not native to Australia whose commonality and small aspect contrast with the size, grace and beauty of the native black swans. Wright teases this contrast out by reaching back to the Classics and citing the Roman poet Juvenal’s famous maxim *Rara avis in terris nigroque simillima cygno* (80). Translating as “a rare bird in the lands and very much like a black swan,” it states that a truly good person is as exceptional if not as impossible as a black swan, an animal that Europeans for many centuries believed not to exist. Wright cleverly refers to the first sighting of black swans by Europeans upon their arrival on the west coast of seventeenth-century Australia as a way of deconstructing the Eurocentric worldview. Until then black swans, like unicorns, had only been a myth in the West, a figment of the European imagination, but in the colonial encounter they proved to be a living, native Australian species. The Latin phrase is a metaphor for the intrinsic fragility of any system of thought in its dependence on premises that may be disproven, and so makes the case for cultural relativism. In the case of the black swan, its spotting would automatically question and invalidate the imposition of a western worldview on Australia. The phrase in its Australian context has a further colonial connotation in that it plays on beauty and skin colour. In the European imagination all swans were white, backed up by the historical records, but this was belied by the “discovery” of the dark Australian variant by the Dutch explorer Willem de Vlamingh in 1698, a colonial context to which Wright alludes in the novel (2013, 219).
“Aboriginal realism,” an epistemological approach to fiction

Through the black swans, Wright not only highlights the existence of an incommensurable Indigenous world on Australian soil, but she also illustrates the incongruence and inappropriateness of Warren’s arranged marriage with Oblivia. Inseparably connected to the Lake’s black swans through the Dreaming, Oblivia’s strong natural connection and outcast status as a human are poised against Warren’s materialistic, self-interested drives and convictions. Wright ultimately debunks the myth of powerful Indigenous male leadership in the description of Finch’s funeral rites, a “Travelling Road Show” commercialized for the tourist industry and grounded in the iron laws of capitalist production and consumption (2013, 284). In a chapter aptly entitled “The Ghost Walk” (293), Warren’s body is readied for:

A last lap of honour […]. The coffin was soon popped in the deep freezer of the Fresh Food People long-haul semitrailer attached to the Mack’s cab – now painted up in blue, red and white, as though draped with the nation’s flag […]. The See You Around journey was for all people who bothered to stand out in a chilly night, or in the midday sun, if they cared enough to line the streets just to watch the Spirit of the Nation roaring by […]. The clockwork nature of the thing was to keep the Fresh Food People’s schedule of deliveries to its supermarket chain throughout the country. (294–97)

Warren’s assassination triggers off Oblivia’s flight back to the Lake in company of her flock of black swans as there is no life for her without the nourishing links with country she had to forsake when coming to the dystopian Garden City. Thus, the last chapters of the novel see Oblivia’s safe return to the Swan Lake after a long, hazardous journey accompanied by the swans.

From this moment on the scene shifts back to the eternal movements of the natural cycle as wet and drought, life and death, end times and new times alternate. The story of the disappearing and reappearing swans is cast in a timeless, relativizing Dreamtime perspective of constant renewal, which takes us back to Elliot Pugnose’s waterbird fable that finalizes and summarizes Plains of Promise (Renes 2002, 87–89). The Swan Book’s epilogue equally concludes with a mythical tale that ties the end to the beginning and emulates the cycle of life:

Having lived in the dry country for several thousands of years, the ghostly spectre of the drought woman had seen as many generations born and die and when those beautiful swans rose up one day to the skies and disappeared, it broke the water lilies and weed-covered lagoon, pulled itself out of its resting place, and filled the atmosphere from coastline to coastline of rotted tree stumps, flat plains, or solemn river bends across the country. (Wright 2013, 330)

The disappearance of the swans denotes a disturbance in the natural cycle that is only remedied after the cycle of droughts has been broken:

Then [the ghostly spectre of the drought woman] continued in the southerly direction the birds had flown. In its far-flung search for the swans, the slow-moving drought left behind smouldering ashes and soil baked by the dryness, and the whole country looking as though it had been turned over with a pick and flattened with a shovel. When the swans were found, the drought turned around on its hot heels and howling winds, while fires blew smoke across the lands on fast moving currents, and came back to the swamp. (330)

Finding inspiration in the world of songlines and Dreamtime, Wright’s fiction reaches beyond what has been ill-defined as magic realism in Aboriginal literature. In a 2002
article on *Plains of Promise* I argued that the difficulty for western readership to give full meaning to the Indigenous world captured in Wright’s writing denotes an essential incommensurability of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal universes, and this makes it impossible for the Aboriginal Dreamtime to be incorporated as simply “magic.” Such an assimilative realist manoeuvre falls short of considering the Indigenous world on its own ontological terms. Indeed, Wright’s Indigenous reconfiguration of the western genre of the novel goes right against a universalizing Enlightenment conception of scientific rationality and verifiable reality and questions the bases of the western worldview. The philosophical and political challenge for Wright’s non-Indigenous readership is to not reason away the existence of other epistemologies, which would be paramount to re-colonizing the Other; and to not deconstruct all ontology of presence – the possibility to embody an identity – so as to achieve decolonization. In effect, Wright’s novels urge us to let go of a privileged European standpoint and open up to O/other epistemological, spiritual and material presences (Renes 2002, 98).

Alison Ravenscroft makes a similar argument in *The Postcolonial Eye*, which takes Roland Barthes’s “death of the author” one step further by highlighting how reading is an active process of self-definition as well as meaning-making. She analyses how in the reading process white people may construct themselves, however innocently, against the Aboriginal Other and so confirm a western prerogative of knowledge. Ravenscroft sees the epistemological fault line she uncovers as a form of “postcolonial blindness” that frames the Aboriginal Other through the white gaze and fixes the Aboriginal as an inferior, uncivilized receptacle for western improvement (2012, 19). Postcolonial blindness is grounded in the cultural prerogative of western civilization, and so exported and used as an assimilative epistemological matrix to understand a manifestly different world, a manoeuvre that gives rise to serious discursive conflict. The manifestation of cultural incommensurability in the cross-cultural encounter puts the colonial project and its persistence as neo-colonialism under pressure and scrutiny. The issue for western readers is whether we allow our view of the world to be questioned, while avoiding a situation in which such epistemological relativism becomes a new postmodern law, as the Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson points out (2003, 32).

**Conclusion**

*The Swan Book* forms part of a larger project to decolonize people’s minds and worlds by rewriting the embodied Australian experience of time and place along Indigenous parameters, from within the Aboriginal community. The Indigenous scholar, poet and writer Jeanine Leane has pointed out that Wright has informally used “Aboriginal realism” as a generic term for recent Indigenous Australian fiction that fits this decolonial, deconstructive purpose (2015, 155). Aboriginal realism seems an appropriate Australian alternative for the term magic realism, which risks assimilating the discrete world of magic into realism, fantasy into reality, the ideal into the real, and the Other into the Self from the perspective of western reason and normality. As a genre, Aboriginal realism posits Indigenous life experience as the basis for an Australian epistemology, in which Dreaming narrative flows from a sovereign universe whose spiritual and material effects question the legacy of the Enlightenment. It is in
this epistemological tension of a fraught “cultural interface” (Nakata 2007, 199) that Wright’s “distant illusionary homelands” may rematerialize (Wright 2013, 4).

With Plains of Promise, Carpentaria and The Swan Book, Wright has successfully engaged in a critical rewriting of the novelistic genre through the application of Aboriginal realism – that is, the world as seen through the Dreaming – to fictional content, form and structure, which explains the difficulty the non-Indigenous reader may find in accessing her texts. Wright tells – and must tell – her truths in an Indigenous, or better, Waanyi manner; hence Oblivia’s comment that a straight route from the People’s Paradise, her new “home,” to the magic/genie shop in the City is not the point, but how one arrives from one point to another emotionally (Wright 2013, 261). And in a similar manner Wright tells and retells her stories in Aboriginal fashion, progressing in lateral, circular ways that look at the same or similar events from different angles to reach an overarching sense of truth. Whereas Wright’s first novel initially received a mixed welcome (Sharrad 2009, 57–58), Carpentaria scored the highest literary honours in Australia, with reviewers highlighting the need to “trust” the author’s prose to gain access to the story (Ravenscroft 2006, 1; San Roque 2007, 19). The Swan Book’s bid for Aboriginal realism requires the non-Indigenous reader’s patience, attention, and openness of mind to a manifestly different, defamiliarizing world of (literary) experience in order to reap its multiple rewards.

Alexis Wright is a major voice wording an evolution in writing from Indigenous life-writing to fictions “truer than the truth” (Wright 2002, 13). Written with the irony and engagement that characterize her style, Wright’s latest novel is, rather than a swansong, a critical songline into a possibly empowering future for Australia’s Indigenous communities. Wright uses the power of imaginative fiction and genre to shed the shackles that trap the Indigenous mind. Just as the main character Oblivia announces in the novel’s prelude, in order to free herself of the contagion of the settler’s way, Wright has created a “sovereignty of the mind” out of:

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

This is a bold step forward in her commitment to an Indigenous politics of writing that equates the literary imagination to the sovereignty of the mind, as is also evident in her latest volume of non-fiction, a lengthy biography of, and homage to, the late Aboriginal activist Tracker Tilmore, published as Tracker in 2017.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


RAVENScroft, Alison. 2006. “When the Narrator’s Art Matches the Magical Storytelling.” The Age, 19 August: A2, 22.


NOTES

1. In his study of *Carpentaria*, the psychoanalyst Craig San Roque praises Wright’s novel for engaging productively with “the bruising truth […] that Australasia and Oceania are locations of ‘end times’ for many, and ‘new times’ for others,” and that one feeds into the other. The nucleus of (western) destruction and (Indigenous) renewal in *Carpentaria* is the port town of Desperance, whose culture is based on the land’s exploitation by mining. Its infrastructure will be completely destroyed by the Aboriginal Elder and leader Norm Phantom, whose anger with mainstream society takes on ancestral proportions and turns into a devastating storm.

2. A conservative government led by Prime Minister John Howard intervened in the Northern Territory with a military and police task force on June 21, 2007, after insistent rumors and reports about child sexual abuse in its remote Aboriginal communities. The Intervention, also called Emergency Response or Invasion by different factions in Australian society, has lasted ever since with bipartite support, forcing new policies of assimilation onto the Indigenous population in remote communities. For detailed criticism of these governmental actions, see Altman and Hinkson 2007.

3. In a keynote given at the 2013 congress of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (ASAL), which I attended, Leane used the term “Aboriginal reality” and quoted Wright to cover this ground. In a 2015 article Leane uses the term “Aboriginal realism,” taking Alison Ravenscroft’s cue from a 2010 essay: “Some people call the book magic realism but really in a way, it’s an Aboriginal realism which carries all sorts of things” (220, my emphasis). Ravenscroft in turn cites from Jonathan Dart, “Alexis' Book Helps Break the Mould” (2007). Since my reference seems
more informal, I have used the phrase Aboriginal realism in this essay, although that invokes the primacy of the written.

4. See also Wright (1998c, 75) and Wright (2001a, 225–26).

5. The *Bringing them Home* Report says at the end of Part 2, chapter 2: “Nationally we can conclude with confidence that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities in the period from approximately 1910 until 1970” (n.p.).

6. See the praising reviews by Davison 2006; Devlin-Glass 2007; McFadyen 2006; Perlez 2007; Ravenscroft 2006; Sharpe 2007; and Sharrad 2008.

7. Juvenal, who wrote between the late first and early second century AD, included this maxim in a misogynist satire on Roman women. The Latin original is to be found in line 165 of his “Satura VI” or Sixth Satire.

---

ABSTRACTS

The Indigenous Australian author Alexis Wright has developed a novelistic oeuvre that experiments with written forms of fiction, and paints an Aboriginal universe that does not need European epistemology to sustain itself. Rather, it questions western values, certainties, and convictions and problematizes the western way of seeing and doing in the island-continent. Her latest novel, *The Swan Book*, in manifesting its spiritual and mystical connections to the holistic universe known as the Dreamtime, foregrounds this epistemological turn, which is premised on the ontological relationship Aboriginal people have with “Country,” their traditional land. Alexis Wright’s fiction, which she herself has called an instance of “Aboriginal reality” or “Aboriginal realism,” as opposed to magic realism, is an epic *tour de force* that juxtaposes the Indigenous and European traditions in startling ways but also speaks across a cultural divide – the discursive gap between colonized and colonizer, belonging and non-belonging, assimilation and sovereignty – which this essay will address.

INDEX

*Keywords*: Alexis Wright, Carpentaria, Indigenous Australian literature, Aboriginal realism (genre), Dreamtime, intellectual sovereignty

AUTHOR

CORNELIS MARTIN RENES

University of Barcelona

Cornelis Martin Renes, PhD, Associate Professor for English Studies at the University of Barcelona, Spain, specializes in postcolonial literatures from Australia, New Zealand-Aotearoa, and South Africa. He is the co-director of the University of Barcelona’s Australian and Transnational Studies Centre (CEAT) and the editor of the Centre’s online journal *Coolabah*. He was the chair of the European Association for Studies of Australia (EASA) from 2015 to 2019. His
recent publications include “Alexis Wright’s The Swan Book: Swansong or Songline?” (The European Legacy, 2021) and “Inside and Outside the Body Politic: Fortress Australia, Europe, and Spain” (Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research, 2021).