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"Other Horizons Exist": Irreducible Difference and Ethical Reading in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

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Abstract

In *The Swan Book* (2013), Alexis Wright facilitates productive communication while maintaining the ethical and political importance of irreducible difference. While there are readings of this text that I can and do produce, what is equally important are the moments when my reading cannot proceed, when my reading is stalled by irreducible difference and untranslatability. Close reading and the application of familiar critical frameworks such as postcolonial Gothic or magical realism produce valid political analysis and are an important aspect of my engagement with this text. However, always, *The Swan Book* pushes back, disrupting any attempt to produce uncomplicated or stable meaning, denying any delusion of knowability or transparency. Its complicated narrative form and opaque poetics create irreducible difference that encourages recognition of the limits of my own reading position. This recognition forms the foundation of an ethical reading practice that allows for communication and exchange but avoids reduction or appropriation of difference.

Alison Ravenscroft's work in *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (2012) provides the foundations for my argument for the necessity of recognising the limitations of my position as a white Australian reader of an Indigenous text. However, I find Helen Hoy's *How Should I Read These: Native Women Writers in Canada* (2001) to be a necessary counterpoint that allows me to extend Ravenscroft's explanation of how I *should not* read this text into a more productive theorisation of how I *might*.

I begin by presenting both feminist and postcolonial readings of the Gothic elements of this text, arguing that Wright uses Gothic tropes to assist in the production of meaning, adapting and manipulating them to create narrative and political critique. However, Wright also continually complicates and disrupts the application of this framework, undermining my attempts to convert the difference of this text into a knowable form.

Wright's use of multiple systems of knowledge and ambiguous poetic language creates a positive undecidability. While it is tempting to ascribe this undecidability the label of magical realism, ultimately it proves to be a limiting method through which to read *The Swan Book*'s ambiguous narrative mode.

Translation from the language of the text to the more familiar language of a critical framework is shown to be possible but always limited and limiting. I chart the effect these translations have on the text, and more importantly, the effect *The Swan Book*'s untranslatability has on my reading practice. By producing instances of communication that do not depend on stable and universal meaning, or that deny the existence of irreducible difference, *The Swan Book* inspires, and enables, non-appropriative and ethical dialogue.

Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

I have clearly stated the contribution of others to my thesis as a whole, including statistical assistance, survey design, data analysis, significant technical procedures, professional editorial advice, and any other original research work used or reported in my thesis. The content of my thesis is the result of work I have carried out since the commencement of my research higher degree candidature and does not include a substantial part of work that has been submitted to qualify for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. I have clearly stated which parts of my thesis, if any, have been submitted to qualify for another award.

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Keywords

Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*, whiteness, Gothic, postcolonial theory, magical realism, undecidability, ethical reading, translation theory

Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classifications (ANZSRC)

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Introduction

> I do not think it is right for me to ignore stories that have other ways of
>
> looking at the world.
>
> Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*" (87)

Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) is a complicated and demanding text, at once both intriguing and alienating. Its forthright political nature and obvious contemporary relevance invite me to work with the text and engage in discussions of environmentalism, feminism, land rights and Aboriginal self-governance. However, in *The Swan Book* there are narratives, passages, and even sentences, so opaque they disrupt, if not prevent, a construction of meaning. It is this tension—this pull and push—between invitation and alienation that drives my reading of this text. When presented with a ghost that does not haunt, or a crow that sings ABBA, or a virus that sits on a couch in a doll's house on the "beautiful sunburnt plains" (1)[1] of a woman's mind, I cannot help but wonder: how do I read this text? And specifically, what, if any, are my responsibilities as a white Australian reader with regard to this text? And how might I fulfil them? Is it possible for me as a cultural outsider to interpret and analyse without reducing or appropriating Aboriginal knowledge systems and experiences? And yet, even as these questions remain at the forefront of my mind, I am drawn in by Wright's lyrical style and overt politics, and begin searching for connections and meaning, tracing themes or examining the influence of literary traditions. By

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[1] To avoid complicating in-text citations, all quotations credited to Wright are taken from *The Swan Book* unless otherwise specified.

constructing analysis supported by close reading, and by theorising the importance and consequences of the ways the text complicates, destabilises and sometimes denies my reading, I argue that *The Swan Book* facilitates productive communication while maintaining the ethical and political importance of irreducible difference.

This thesis is concerned firstly with how Wright creates difference and, secondly, with how that difference influences my reading practice. I begin with a close reading of Wright's use of Gothic images and tropes and her complicated narrative form in order to outline and analyse the instability of meaning and knowledge in the text. I then turn to a more self-reflexive reading practice centred on theories of whiteness and translation to question how my experience of confusion and alienation might contribute to the development of an ethical reading practice. I argue that irreducible difference—that which disrupts my reading and denies my attempts to integrate the text into my field of understanding—is positive. It demands that I recognise the independent subjectivity of others; and, as a result, their non-identical equivalence with myself. Difference makes me aware of the limits of my own reading position; it reminds me there are things I do not know, languages I do not speak, lives I have not lived, and horizons I do not perceive. The difference I encounter in *The Swan Book* can be read as an effect of the contrast between Aboriginal and settler epistemologies; however, it can also be located in Wright's thematic and linguistic complexity and poetic opacity. These loci of difference are inseparable and Wright continually insists that knowledge is partial, localisable and multiple.

The Swan Book is Wright's third novel, preceded by *Plains of Promise* (1997) and *Carpentaria* (2006). Similar to *Carpentaria* in its modernist, lyrical style and complicated narrative, *The Swan Book* is set three centuries after the colonisation of Australia (around 2088). It follows the story of a mute and traumatised Aboriginal girl,

Oblivia Ethyl(ene), as she travels through an Australian landscape drastically altered by climate change. The novel begins with Oblivia living with Bella Donna, a European climate-change refugee who has found an unlikely home with the swamp people—a displaced Aboriginal community still living under Intervention in the north. Oblivia is taken south in the company of ghosts and genies after she is claimed by Warren Finch— the soon-to-be first Aboriginal President of Australia—as his promise bride. Warren is eventually killed and Oblivia returns to her traditional country accompanied by the swans that both guide and follow her throughout the text. Toni Morrison argues "the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably politically and irrevocably beautiful at the same time" ("Rootedness" 345). *The Swan Book* seems to accomplish this task effortlessly and has been described as a work of "urgent importance" (Williamson), "a bruising, beautiful, brutal narrative" (Webb) and a text that "explode[s] the possibilities of the novel" (Mills). Wright, a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria, has been actively involved in the political work of Aboriginal self-government and land rights since the mid-1970s. In the preface to *Grog War* (1997)—an account of the impact and control of alcohol in Tennant Creek commissioned by the Warumungu people and Wright's best-known non-fiction publication—Wright is described as having worked "extensively in government departments and Aboriginal agencies across four states and territories as a professional manager, educator, researcher and writer" (ii). However, in the 1990s the focus of Wright's activism shifted to the production of fiction.[2]

The inseparability of discussions of political realities from the fabric of Wright's text can be seen in the modes of scholarship her work inspires. Australian literary

[2] Wright documents the reasoning behind, and challenges involved in, this shift in the non-fiction publication "Politics of Writing" (2002).

studies scholar Philip Mead, for example, integrates close readings of *Carpentaria* into a highly situated discussion of contemporary discourse about the social and economic reality of mining in "Indigenous Literature and the Extractive Industries" (2014). Other scholars have similarly brought an interdisciplinary perspective to Wright's fictions. In an article published in the *Australian Feminist Law Journal*: "Archiving the Northern Territory Intervention in Law and in the Literary Counter-Imaginary" (2014) legal and literary scholar Honni van Rijswijk reads *The Swan Book* as a "counter-archival text that interrupts law's archival practices and claims" (118). Alison Ravenscroft's acutely political criticism focuses on broader issues of postcolonial theory, particularly white reading practices of Indigenous texts, or, in the case of "Sovereign Bodies of Feeling—'Making Sense' of Country," white settler experiences of country. Though the specificity of Mead and particularly van Rijswijk have proved useful in formulating many of the arguments I have developed in this thesis, it is the broader theorisations of whiteness Ravenscroft presents that are most relevant to my own focus on the development of a non-appropriative relationship to difference.

In *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race* (2012) Ravenscroft argues for the positive acknowledgement of the limits of our own field of vision. She insists that there are elements of Indigenous texts that remain unintelligible to a white reader, that there are "places where reading cannot go on" (2), and she works against moves that erase or "cover over" these gaps in vision, these "place[s] where an other's strangeness cannot be tamed or assimilated" (1). Instead, Ravenscroft proposes that the acknowledgment of this irreducible difference is an important aspect of white-settler readings of Indigenous texts: "It is important to keep moving towards Aboriginal culture, art and law, but this is a movement towards understanding rather than an arrival. This is to argue for knowledge as always

provisional, not a thing one possesses but a position—a situation" (78). *The Postcolonial Eye* has been a somewhat controversial addition to Australian literary criticism.[3] I have found Ravenscroft's central argument—that my reading position is partial and limited—valuable; however, the negative premise of her text is limiting. Where *The Postcolonial Eye* is structured around examples of how not to read Indigenous texts, I am interested in questioning how, while still acknowledging the limits of my reading position, my act of reading can proceed. In this endeavour, I have found Helen Hoy's *How Should I Read These?: Native Women Writers in Canada* (2001) to be a constructive counterpoint to *The Postcolonial Eye*.

In *How Should I Read These?*, Hoy argues that "recognition of silences and impasses rather than quick cultural keys" is a "more useful critical stance" (78) for non-Native readers of Native literatures. She contends:

> Too-easy identification by the non-Native reader, ignorance of historical or cultural allusion, obliviousness to presence or properties of Native genres, and the application of irrelevant aesthetic standards are all means of domesticating difference, assimilating Native narratives into the mainstream. Along the way, they are a means of neutralising the oppositional potential of that difference. (9)

In comparison to *The Postcolonial Eye*, Hoy's text contains a greater focus on the importance of communication, and a more thorough questioning of the negative and silencing potential of a too strict insistence on irreducible difference. Furthermore, her ability to foreground the limits and privilege of her own reading position while productively engaging with the texts themselves inspires and enables the balance and interrelation I have attempted to produce between analysis founded on close reading

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[3] See for example responses from Anne Maxwell and Odette Kelada (2013) and Ken Gelder (2015).

and the importance of the places where my reading cannot proceed. Hoy denies an attempt or ability to read *for* Indigenous scholars, explicitly stating that her "intention is not so much to explicate the texts here, to provide normative readings, or to imagine how a cultural insider might read them," arguing instead that she necessarily reads from "one particular perspective, [her] own, that of a specific cultural outsider" (11). However, she still reads *with* Native Canadian scholars and authors, placing their texts beside her own "local, partial and accountable" (18) reading. Similarly, I would note that the epigraphs to my chapters, all of which are quotes from Aboriginal scholars and writers, are intended not as a claim to their reading position, but rather as a counterpoint to, and inspiration for, my own. This thesis is a working through of the concept articulated by Irene Watson in the epigraph to my second chapter: that there are other ways of knowing, that "other horizons exist." The work of these writers and thinkers is productive, stimulating and relevant, but also an active reminder of those horizons.

The relationship between the work of Ravenscroft and Hoy frames my articulation of the importance of acknowledging irreducible difference in my reading of *The Swan Book*. However, to more fully investigate how this irreducible difference might form the basis of a non-appropriative dialogue, I introduce theories of translation. The concept of translation allows for theorisation of the way meaning moves across and between modes of knowing. It provides a framework for considering questions like how does meaning move across systems of meaning? And how well? What is lost in the transition from one system of meaning to another? And what, if anything, is gained? Comparative literature scholar Sandra Bermann states "[t]ypically, translation is understood as the rendering of a text that is written in one language into another language. But it can also refer to the re-rendering of a single language" (439). I argue

that categorising my act of reading *The Swan Book* as an act of translation has the capacity to revitalise the reading process and foreground the difference of the text. My reading becomes a single and localisable relationship, between the language of the text and my language of interpretation (a language necessarily informed by my knowledge and experience), rather than a forgone, universal and stable process. Furthermore, this shift allows another avenue for working through the existence of "places where reading cannot go on": what does it mean if something is untranslatable?

My reading is inspired by the work of Emily Apter who, in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006), argues that grounding analysis in translational pedagogies can create a "new comparative literature" that "renews the psychic life of diplomacy, even as it forces an encounter with intractable alterity, with that which will not be subject to translation" (11). Apter begins with twenty theses on translation that are bookended by the paradoxical, or dialectic, statements that nothing is translatable and everything is translatable (xi–xii). The tension that this premise creates between the existence of difference and the basic requirement of communication and equivalence speaks to me of the central question of Hoy's text: how might we recognise the limits of understanding in the process of communicating (18)? Apter describes the "translation zone" of her title as "sites that are 'in-translation,' that is to say, belonging to no single discrete language or single medium of communication" (6). By extending this zone to include my experience as a white reader of an Aboriginal text, I am able to more clearly articulate how *The Swan Book* can be, for me, simultaneously translatable and untranslatable.

I begin with an analysis of Wright's use of Gothic form, charting first the ways she employs familiar elements and tropes to construct meaning and then highlighting the areas where the text exceeds the limits of the genre, creating a disruption in my

reading. I argue that Wright's use of recognisably Gothic elements, particularly the narrative structure of the Female Gothic, invites me to place *The Swan Book* in a relationship with that form, or language, of analysis. Through close reading of the text I argue that Wright manipulates the Gothic mode to create feminist and postcolonial critique, articulating the horror of historical and contemporary patriarchal and colonial violence. I also argue that recognisable Gothic tropes assist her in constructing the complex layers of meaning that create a holistic critique of social and political sources of violence. I then turn to instances of Wright's subversion of the Gothic mode, arguing that such moments force recognition of both the limiting and limited nature of the interpretive framework and also my own complicity in its application.

To present a reading of a text while simultaneously arguing the importance of its unreadability seems counterintuitive or even impossible. However, it is this tension between communication and untranslatability that I am interested in exploring. I analyse both the Gothic elements and the narrative mode of *The Swan Book* by prolonged and detailed close reading because I am convinced the self-reflexive introduction of the limitations of my own reading position does not invalidate moments of close reading; rather it complicates and problematises them. Furthermore, I have found that in order to discuss productively the ways in which Wright undermines my reliance on familiar modes of reading, it is helpful to acknowledge and discuss the work that can be done with the more obvious and recognisable elements of her text. Wright works with existing frameworks, patterns and texts; adapting and manipulating them to create narrative and political critique; working with, and inviting me to work with, modes and arguments that are familiar to me. However, always there comes a moment when Wright goes further, does more, and to not acknowledge these moments of extension, this ambiguity and alienation, the moments where my reading is confounded

and my work necessarily undermined, is a devaluing of the power of the text. I argue that this power lies partly in the political work I can accomplish and partly in the text's ability to jam the process of mastery that is fuelled by my desire to "get" the text, to reach a final and conclusive understanding. I view my reading of the Gothic in *The Swan Book* as an example of a site that is in-translation, always simultaneously translatable and untranslatable, with communication and meaning produced within the relationship between those extremes.

In Chapter 2 I move from a discussion of Wright's use of Gothic form to a more general investigation of the ambiguity and difference at the heart of her narrative style. I argue that Wright articulates multiple and non-hierarchical modes of knowing and in doing so promotes an expansion of my understanding of what constitutes legitimate knowledge. In *The Swan Book*, Aboriginal knowledge sits beside and is inseparable from political critique, the literary tradition of swans, and poetic language and metaphor. I investigate how these different systems of meaning exist in the text and the instability of meaning in general (for example Wright's shifting application of the word "truth"). This ambiguity and instability prevent an easy interpretation of the text, making my reading an active presence that is localisable and felt. I then turn to an analysis of how I might read the existence of multiple forms of knowledge in the text. Building on the work of Ravenscroft, this inquiry takes the form of a critique of the application of the interpretive framework of magical realism.

In my third and final chapter my analysis becomes increasingly self-reflexive as I move from a close reading of descriptions of whiteness to a more thorough working through of my own reading position, and then to the role translation can play in developing a non-appropriative reading mode. I argue that Wright actively establishes whiteness as distinct and recognisable, making it visible as a racial category and

critiquing its status as the universalised and non-racialised norm. I expand on my use of the work of Ravenscroft and Hoy to argue the text encourages me to engage actively with my own privileged and limited reading position. I then foreground translation to work through whether or not the concept of irreducible difference that is presented by a recognition of the limits of my reading position is fundamentally unproductive. In applying translation theory to the dynamic of a cultural outsider reading *The Swan Book* two particular concepts have emerged as productive. The first is Antoine Berman's argument that ethical translation requires that difference be acknowledged and maintained and the movement between languages be felt rather than eliminated. The second is Souleymane Bachir Diagne's description of the lateral (as opposed to hierarchical) universal. The lateral universal dictates that the movement of meaning between systems occurs on a horizontal plane; there is no hierarchy of meaning leading ever upward to a single and stable truth. Rather, the universal exists only in the work of communication, the brief touching of loci of difference, the zones of translation.

Chapter 1

"music made from old bones": Manipulating the Gothic Mode

> I'd like to think that writing fiction is sometimes a way to explore, to
> rethink and possibly to retrieve or create something from between and
> behind the lines on the page. As such it can help the revitalisation and
> regeneration of an Indigenous heritage, in so far as it involves "shaking
> up" and making space within the most readily available language—that of
> the coloniser—for other ways of thinking.
>
> Kim Scott, "Covered Up With Sand" (123)

My reading of *The Swan Book* is driven by a tension between invitation and alienation. The recognisable elements of the Gothic form that contribute to the fabric of this text are, for me, one of its main sources of invitation. For example the familiarity of the image of a kidnapped woman locked in a tower makes me as reader feel positioned in the text, momentarily stable and sure. In this chapter I explore these moments of stability, taking both feminist and postcolonial readings of Gothic images and tropes to the limits of their interpretive capabilities. But, after invitation, comes alienation. While these readings are founded on evidence born of close reading, inevitably, I am presented with complications and denials that challenge and disrupt any simple application of a mode of critique. As a result, while Wright draws on the Gothic mode to assist me in the construction of meaning, she also resists and exceeds its patterns,

forcing me to acknowledge the limits of the interpretive framework I am tempted to cling to, and the limits of my own reading position.

For the purpose of this chapter I view the Gothic as a genre that centres on horror and excess. Typically, decaying historical settings and uncanny and supernatural occurrences combine with examples of transgressive sexualities, often in an attempt to articulate and exaggerate social and individual anxieties. In the Gothic genre, power is both seductive and oppressive, apparent certainties of identity and meaning are constantly destabilised, and repressed histories return to haunt the living.

This chapter is divided into four sections and follows the pattern of invitation, alienation, invitation, alienation. Though this structure presents some seemingly contradictory ideas, I echo Hoy's statement that "I was sometimes able to argue with conviction a specific reading . . . only because I knew that I would be going on within the chapter to disrupt the assumptions sustaining that reading" (25). I have chosen to follow the familiar path of analysis to its conclusion before presenting the elements of the text that complicate or challenge it for three reasons. Firstly, it makes for a clearer structure of ideas. Secondly, I argue that Wright does not entirely discard or reject the layers of meaning created by either a feminist or postcolonial reading of the Gothic; rather she contributes to, expands, and goes beyond these limited frameworks. Finally, though postcolonial and, particularly, feminist Gothic critique are well-established areas of scholarship, it is their relationship to *The Swan Book* and also their relationship to my own process of reading—their status as building blocks in my relationship with the text—that position them as productive fields of analysis.

In the first section, "Reading a Familiar Gothic," I argue that Wright employs a narrative framework strongly reminiscent of the Female Gothic and joins the established tradition of using Gothic tropes to create feminist critique. Figures like the

doppelgänger and narratives of capture and imprisonment serve to articulate the horror of female experiences of patriarchal power. In "Complicating a Gothic Reading" I critique the simplicity of this reading. Wright creates feminist critique with her use of the Female Gothic, but through a layering of Gothic images and their associated meaning she creates a more encompassing critique of the social and political factors that contribute to the production of violence. As well as linking domestic/private and state/public violence, Wright critiques white feminist readings of violent black masculinity through her ironic undercutting of Warren's role as Gothic villain.

In "Reading Spectrality" I return again to a familiar critical theme: the use of the Gothic trope of haunting to articulate silenced or forgotten realities of colonisation. Wright uses ghosts to reveal history but also to link past and present instances of invasion, foregrounding colonisation as a present and active force. However, readings of ghosts as the return of repressed histories are necessarily founded on a European psychoanalytic tradition. In "Re-Reading Spectrality" I question how I might read ghosts that do not frighten or haunt, but rather actualise a distinction between epistemological modes, or, perhaps more challengingly, ghosts that just are.

Reading a Familiar Gothic

In the first section of this chapter I read Wright's use of, and allusions to, the Female Gothic. Wright uses the framework to make meaning by drawing on my existing knowledge. Specifically, she contributes to an existing tradition of employing Gothic tropes in order to articulate the horror of female lived experience in a patriarchal world. I investigate the use of the figure of the doppelgänger as well as the ways in which

Wright builds the relationship between Oblivia and Warren around the generic action sequence of capture, imprisonment and escape. Furthermore, I am interested in the partial construction of Warren as a Gothic villain in both the mode of the eighteenth-century Female Gothic and, perhaps more strongly, the overbearing husband of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's late-nineteenth-century Female Gothic, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892). In approaching Warren as an archetypal Gothic villain I suspend, for a time, the racialised aspects of this claim. I return in later sections to explore how Wright disrupts this reading; however, it is my intention first to explore how Wright's text can be placed in a Western Gothic tradition and how that connection facilitates feminist critique. *The Swan Book* is steeped in world literatures, and precursor texts such as "The Yellow Wallpaper" or Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1877) are examples of those influences. I have chosen to begin with a moderately straightforward feminist reading of the Female Gothic as its familiar trajectory acts as a backbone, or an exoskeleton perhaps, holding together the churning, poetic chaos of the text.

 The Swan Book is at times gruesome and often bleak. The climate-changed world is desolate and decayed, full of broken things—from the ruined unidentified city populated by homeless youths and flocks of fruit bats, to the destroyed ecosystems whose macabre effects include the plagues of rats that are slaughtered by hunting owls, their bodies surrounding Oblivia's camp in their hundreds. As Bella Donna weaves together the myths of nations, telling what she calls "*the greatest love story this country has ever known*," she says of herself: "*I have become an expert on music made from old bones*" (46). Furthermore, Bella Donna's tale of "the swan with a bone in its beak" has a distinct Gothic quality. This image becomes a persistent motif and is a memento mori that points to the death and violence at the centre of the text. These images and tropes all contribute to *The Swan Book*'s Gothic overtones. It is sometimes challenging to pin

down the text's precise relationship to the Gothic as, unlike other contemporary Gothic texts (including others by Indigenous authors), it lacks overt and stereotypical signposts of the genre: vampires or vampiric behaviour, monsters, a historical setting, all fail to make an appearance. However, what ties this seemingly fragmented Gothic together and lays the foundation for a reading of *The Swan Book* in a Gothic context is the Female Gothic features of the central storyline. In a text that drifts and spirals, it is this narrative of kidnap and escape that provides forward momentum, its uncanny trajectory acting as a guideline in an ever-shifting terrain.

Margaret Carol Davison describes the early Female Gothic novels as based around a young heroine, lovely inside and out: "Assuming the starring role as persecuted maiden, she is transported to, and virtually imprisoned in, an ancestral Castle or manor home by the text's other star—the . . . Gothic hero-villain" (51). Early examples of the form are generally ideologically conservative. While the heroines are often courageous and creative, the texts as a whole generally act as thinly veiled conduct guides promoting piety, moderation and, above all, marriage. Oblivia is not of course a typical, swooning heroine but there are clear echoes of this plot development within *The Swan Book*: Oblivia as persecuted heroine, Warren as morally ambiguous hero-villain. Both the castle and manor house are evident, re-visioned in the Christmas House initially, but more strikingly as Warren's home, The People's Palace—the dilapidated tower of apartments in which Oblivia is imprisoned. Even the stereotypical night-time explorations of the haunted maze-like space of eighteenth-century Gothic can be recognised in Oblivia's excursions into the labyrinthine ruined city, following the owl, as they search for the genie's shop "on the long abandoned street where the city's ghosts came at night" (262).

John Frow argues that it is limiting to imagine texts as a "reproduction of the class to which they belong;" instead, it can be more helpful to think of texts as "performances of genre" (3) "where the relationship is one of productive elaboration rather than derivation or determination" (25). Wright elaborates on the Female Gothic genre, joining a long tradition of using Gothic tropes to create feminist commentary and critique. Take, for example, her use of the trope of the doppelgänger. After her arrival at the People's Palace, Oblivia begins to catch glimpses of herself on the television. She is always pictured with Warren Finch and always "with fingernails painted red or pale pink, speaking through lipstick, looking from eyeliner and orderly designed hair" (255). Oblivia has no memory of these events and no understanding of how she has been transformed into what she calls "the television wife." She "began to realise that he was stealing parts of her life for his own purposes" (255). As Euginia DeLamotte explains in an early study of the Female Gothic: "[t]he 'fear of power' embodied in Gothic romance is fear not only of supernatural powers but also of social forces so vast and impersonal that they seem to have supernatural strength" (17). In this example, a Gothic trope is used to articulate the complex reality of the commodification of the female body. Through the institution of marriage, Warren claims ownership of not just Oblivia's body but also her image. Furthermore, though she has no material capital to claim, their marriage facilitates Warren's possession of the political capital Oblivia represents as the perfect, smiling "promise bride." Drawing on the work of Simone de Beauvoir, DeLamotte argues women are "assigned definitions as objects in accordance with men's needs rather than invited to achieve self-definition as subjects in accordance with their own nature" (176). In the Female Gothic, the heroine's "characteristic experience of being taken for other than herself is in one sense simply this experience of being Other" (176). Wright's description of Warren's co-option is similarly emblematic of "this

experience of being Other." The split subject inferred by the doppelgänger also allows Oblivia to admire and sometimes even envy this perfect "television wife." This ambivalent reaction to the usurpation of her own being creates a secondary uncanny terror and conveys the disturbing power of the internalised male gaze. Through her use of the Gothic doppelgänger, Wright alludes to both the inherent Gothic power of patriarchal oppression and existing works of resistance, such as "The Yellow Wallpaper," in which the uncanny nature of the doppelgänger is used to explore the confinement and horror of the female experience of marriage and domestic space.

Wright also draws on the tradition of the Female Gothic in her construction of Warren as a Gothic antagonist. His assumption of this role is often ironic and to read him simply as villain is problematic. However, there are many instances in which Wright does draw on the existing Western Gothic tradition to critique patriarchy, providing me with existing and familiar narratives, characters and generic structures to assist in the production of meaning and critique. It is these instances that I outline below, returning to the limitations of this reading later in the chapter.

The sinister power Warren holds over Oblivia is evident in their first meeting when Warren boards the boat on which she lives. Wright begins with a reference to the objectifying power of the masculine gaze. Oblivia, after realising that "a complete stranger had boarded the hull," feels that "her invisible life had been split apart by a strange man's presence in her home, and in that moment of visibility she felt ashamed of how she looked" (154). Ignoring Oblivia's obvious fear ("[s]he met him with a knife in her hands" [154]), Warren casts himself as a romantic hero, with a reference to Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*: "*You must be the swan maiden. His voiced teased. It amused him to cast himself in the story found across the northern hemisphere of the hunter who captures a mythical swan maiden in a marsh*" (154). However, Warren's role on

this occasion is far closer to Von Rothbart than Siegfried, as rather than love founded on trust, the relationship between Oblivia and Warren is founded from the outset on objectification, infantilisation and possession. Wright reiterates the capability of Warren's masculine gaze to relegate Oblivia to the status of passive object: "Warren Finch's gaze was like ice. A wall of ice in the way of running! . . . He looked her up and down like a cattle buyer" (155). DeLamotte argues that in the plot of a Female Gothic, the barriers presented to the heroine "are experienced as arbitrary but what they represent in reality is a set of boundaries that have an all-too-specific origin in the social and economic institutions of patriarchy and their psychological consequences for women" (27). In the case of Warren's "capture" of Oblivia, the barrier—the "wall of ice in the way of running"—goes beyond DeLamotte's arbitrary barrier to a completely metaphoric one. However, it too gestures to its "all-too-specific origin" in a system of patriarchal power that designates Warren as active subject and Oblivia as passive object. Wright consolidates the impression of Warren as a villain in the vein of Von Rothbart when, in the final lines of the passage, "[t]he swans' clamorous trumpeting made [Oblivia] realise that nobody ran from Warren Finch. Already he possessed her life" (155).

Wright further draws on conventions of the Female Gothic to construct a fuller and more informed critique of patriarchal power structures when she describes Oblivia's successive thoughts of, and attempts to, escape. These indicate a traditional Female Gothic plot in which "the Heroine must remain passive (or incompetent) in situations that call overwhelmingly for activity and decision" (Russ 50). However, as Michelle A. Massé argues in response to Joanna Russ's description of the passive heroine, in the Gothic plot:

Both the nightmare stasis of the protagonists and the all-enveloping power of the

antagonists are extensions of social ideology and real-world experience. The

silence, immobility, and enclosure of the heroines mark their internalization of

repression as well as the power of the repressing force. (688)

During her time in the country of the genies, Oblivia often contemplates escape, and

once actively (if somewhat absentmindedly) attempts it:

She remembers owls nesting in the ghost ships on the swamp and she gets up

and feels that she is starting to walk off towards home, which feels very close in

her mind, but Warren makes her sit on the ground. The plate of food is placed in

her lap. He repeats this exercise a number of times before she realises that she is

not going anywhere. (175)

In this sequence of events there is both the "the power of the repressing force" and an

"internalization of repression." I read the former in Warren's calm insistence, the

untroubled understanding that his authority is a foregone conclusion. The use of the

noun "exercise" contributes to this casual tone, creating the sense that his control is

nothing more than going through the motions, drilling a preordained scenario. Oblivia's

internalisation of this repression is clear in the "realisation" "that she is not going

anywhere." The choice of the word "realises," as opposed to "learns" or "accepts,"

indicates that her confinement is less an effect of an imposed authority, and more an

existing condition, of which she has only to be reminded. The repetition of the sequence

also highlights the futility of Oblivia's actions and the fact that "each attempt at escape

only brings [the Gothic heroine] again to something that cannot be evaded or exorcized

by her efforts" (Massé 689).

The role that "social ideology and real-world experience" play in Oblivia's

"nightmare stasis" (688) is perhaps more evident in an earlier scene. When she arrives

at their country, Hart, Mail and Doom (the three genies) set up a camp. However, on the first night, after eating a meal by the fire, Warren Finch drives Oblivia to a location some distance away to sleep. As they lie together on Warren's swag, Oblivia (though she is "nauseated by the closeness of this other person" [170]) resigns herself to the fact that "there was nowhere to escape in the dryness of the strange country that frightened her" (170). However, as the scene continues, Oblivia's fear and panic rise: "Her instincts keep telling her to run, she cannot stand being near him, feels like death to her, but fearing he would kill her, she remains frozen, barely able to move" (171). She considers murder and "reaches round to find a rock to slam into his head" (172). However, at that moment

> something happens. She forgets to act—either to run off, or to kill him. Does she change her mind? No, that was not it. Her mind changes itself. It is at war with action. Fights decision. She forgets to act when memories regain control of her brain, and instead of fighting, she escapes with a flood of thoughts running back along the song-lines to the swamp, and the language inside her goes bolting down the tree with all the swans in the swamp following her. (172)

Oblivia's actions are not restricted by outside authority; rather, "her mind changes itself." The "nightmare stasis" described by Massé is the result of "memories." With the use of the word "memories" Wright invokes the idea that Oblivia has been taught inactivity, that she has internalised repression to the extent that her own mind "is at war with action." However, Wright adds specificity to this idea through the introduction of the sustained poetic metaphor of the tree. Throughout the text, the tree, and more specifically its importance as a place of retreat for Oblivia, come to symbolise (among other things) the continuing trauma of Oblivia's gang-rape.[4] By introducing this image,

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[4] Evidence of the tree acting as retreat from Oblivia's trauma comes after Warren's appearance at the swamp. Confused and threatened she dives "into the sea tide of her mind" and sees there

Wright allows a connection to be made between Oblivia's sudden passivity or cessation

of action and the memory of that violence. In this way, as Massé argues, even if the

imprisonment or confinement seems unchallenged, the passivity of the Gothic heroine

can be read as an extension of histories and ideologies of violence and oppression.[5]

During these scenes of capture and attempted escape, the relationship between

Oblivia and Warren evokes the dynamic of the imprisoner and imprisoned of

eighteenth-century Female Gothic. However, Warren also uncannily resembles a

specific late-Victorian Gothic villain: the paternalistic and apparently supremely

rational doctor-husband of "The Yellow Wallpaper." As Davison argues, a central

tension in Gilman's text is "the medieval 'battle' between male authority and female

experience" (56). This tension is replicated in *The Swan Book* as Warren presents

himself as Oblivia's enlightened superior, infantalising her by altering or erasing her

lived reality. This discourse of rational paternalism creates an evocative similarity

between Warren and Gilman's John. On arrival in the city, Warren tells Oblivia:

> *You are going to love it here. You'll see. It will take a little bit of time but it will be*
>
> *better for us if you give it a chance.* He spoke philosophically, *so it is equally*

"the boys of long ago with their faces covered by white masks. . . . She saw the boys laugh from the blank space of their mouths. She felt relieved by hands pushing her down into the bowels of the giant eucalyptus tree where it was just stillness" (160). Evidence of the tree as safe space of psychological retreat can also be found on pages 51, 169, 172, 187 and 199. As well as being a space of retreat, the tree holds knowledge. Oblivia views it as a way of making sense of the world around her, believing that if she can find the "secret route back to the tree" she might find "answers to universal questions about how people should live" (72). Later it is revealed that the tree was "the oldest living relative" of the swamp people and that when it was destroyed by the Army their "stories were scattered into the winds. . . . They were too speechless to talk about a loss that was so great, it made them feel unhinged from their own bodies, unmoored, vulnerable, separated from eternity. They had been cut off" (79).

[5] This strictly gendered reading of this passage ignores the importance of other avenues of power and resistance, specifically questions of colonisation and Indigeneity raised by the references to "strange country" and "song-lines." In later sections I will explore how this limited (but, I would argue, still productive) Western feminist mode of reading is complicated and critiqued.

important that you make an effort to do this for me and for yourself. You will find

that life will be better if you see things like this. (208)

Warren's patronising tone is a haunting echo of John's. On one occasion, after Gilman's

narrator intimates that she is not mentally well, John reproaches her:

'My darling,' said he, 'I beg of you, for my sake and for our child's sake, as well as

for your own, that you will never for one instant let that idea enter your mind. . . .

It is a false and foolish fancy. Can you not trust me as a physician when I tell you

so? (15)

In both cases, the male silences the female protagonist, creating a hierarchy of

experience that always devalues her reality. In many examples of the Female Gothic the

"fear of losing autonomy and identity is represented quite specifically as a lack of voice

and, therefore, authority over the self" (Davison 56). However, in *The Swan Book*, this

erasure or silencing is accentuated. Oblivia is mute throughout, but there are several

occasions when she and Warren seemingly engage in conversation. After their marriage,

and Warren's destruction of Swan Lake, Oblivia asks:

What about the genies? Haphazardly, she held up three fingers to his face,

and waved her other hand around, and blew mouthfuls of air.

There are no genies. Genies don't exist. The things you see here are what

exist. Nothing else. Trust me and I will show you everything you need to know.

Oblivia winced at Warren's denial, and stared at her three fingers while

slamming them into her other hand. (233)

In this exchange, Warren not only interprets Oblivia's voice, he also alters her meaning,

creating a purposeful mistranslation that violently denies her experience. Oblivia begins

to call Hart, Mail and Doom "genies" not long after they meet (162) and at this stage in

the text it has become their most common descriptor.[6] Though Warren's later answer to her question proves he knows to whom she refers ("*I told you they have been moved to town*" [233]) he initially undermines, and devalues, her system of meaning in order to assert his own: "*Trust me and I will show you everything you need to know.*" DeLamotte argues that the Gothic romance centres on the "difficulty of knowing and being known;" that "it is about the nightmare of trying to 'speak "I"' in a world in which the 'I' in question is uncomprehending of and incomprehensible to the dominant power structure" (166). Wright highlights the impact of this silencing power structure with Oblivia's physical reaction to Warren's epistemic violence: she "winced at Warren's denial." When she persists in insisting on her experience, Warren erases her memory with a kiss. This moment is evocative of a sleeping beauty myth (though the hero seals the spell with a kiss rather than breaking it) relegating her reality to the status of dream: "She started to disbelieve herself. Her memory was unreliable. Why would she have travelled over salt lakes? . . . The wedding seemed like a daydream" (233). In the Female Gothic "the personal concentration of the forces of violence tends also to be an embodiment of larger forces in another sense: mammoth social institutions whose power transcends that of any individual" (DeLamotte 17). With the Harbour Master's comment of "*A kiss to seal a dream with*" (a pointed re-writing of the lyrics of the Louis Armstrong song "A Kiss to Build a Dream On"), Warren's amnesia-creating kiss is linked to popular conceptions of romantic love. In line with DeLamotte's argument, Warren's individual power becomes an embodiment of larger social and political forces; in this case, the silencing potential of gendered power structures.

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[6] Except for references to "Edgar's music" (228-29), their names are not used after their disappearance in the desert (around 204) and they are only referred to as "the genies."

In the paragraph that follows the "*kiss to seal a dream with*," Wright states simply: "The truth was always forgotten" (233). With this line she expands her scope from an individual forgetting steeped in the discourse of romantic love to a broader concept of harmful cultural forgetting. It is this type of expansion, these moments of shift or subtle re-framing, to which I now turn.

Complicating a Gothic Reading

As I have argued, Wright employs a Gothic framework to construct gendered critique. However, there are moments when this reading is complicated or denied. She uses Gothic images to link and layer political critique that extends beyond a strictly feminist lens. Though, like many aspects of this text, these links are ephemeral, the repetition of these Gothic motifs invites connections across the text and contributes to Wright's holistic account of the social and political sources of violence, necessarily drawing historical and continued colonial violence into an analysis of Oblivia's individual experience. As well as complicating a gendered reading of the Gothic with these linked images, Wright also challenges a Western feminist lens through her ironic use of Gothic tropes, particularly the ambiguous construction of Warren as a villain. While drawing on the European tradition of the Female Gothic in the ways outlined above, Wright simultaneously critiques white feminist modes of reading black masculinity. Furthermore, by gesturing to a generic framework and then radically and ironically undercutting it, Wright highlights the constructed nature, and limits, of systems of meaning. She does not abandon entirely the existing mode of the Female Gothic; rather, to echo Scott, she shakes it up; she appropriates, adapts and makes room in the

language of the coloniser. In doing so, she foregrounds my fluency in that language and makes me aware of the limits of my reading position by critiquing the simplicity and inadequacy of the generic framework I have reflexively drawn on.

Gothic motifs provide Wright with a poetic framework through which she links images and histories of violence against women, creating a feminist critique that, while ambiguous, gestures towards the complexity of the social and political factors that inform that violence. In her chapter "Familiar Ghosts: Feminist Postcolonial in Canada" Shelley Kulperger argues that recent Gothic texts in the postcolonial context

> articulate the violence of domestic/private space not simply as individual,
> localized instances (within which a Western liberal heroic and privileged
> narrative of emancipation and fleeing female subjectivity takes place) but also as
> very much inseparable from wider state institutions and instances of colonial
> governance. (119)

Wright foregrounds this inseparability by using repeated images and symbols to connect both Oblivia's original trauma resulting from gang rape and Warren's threatened violence to a history of female victims and to the political and historical factors that have contributed to that history. In order to outline how these connections are formed, I will focus on one particular passage (181) and, through close reading, trace the Gothic images that appear throughout the text. One such motif is the "weather-beaten bones" (181) imagined to litter the desert, all that remains of missing women, or at least potentially missing women as: "Nobody knows. Nobody knows if their bodies, still dressed in their best going away dresses, were laying out there in the bush somewhere, buried in the sand, or whether their skeleton was standing up against a dead tree" (87). The ambiguity of this state of being "missing" is often injected with the

threat of masculine violence through the commentary of Bella Donna and the Harbour Master as well as through more subtle links to Oblivia's trauma:

> He and the old woman were both shouting over the distance to reach one another, reminiscing about the bad luck of the girls with the weather-beaten bones that lay scattered in places exactly like this. . . . They said their bones were like white chalk. *Odd, how these bones were scattered around the ground throughout the spinifex*. The girl's stomach nods, rolls, and nods again. She saw prowling dingos with white bones in their mouths wherever the sun's glare struck the horizon. The dead lady's voice reminded her that all men wanted was sex, *so how do you like that? It happened on refugee boats. It can happen in the mulga too*. The girl remembered there was an owl, a *julujulu* that once lived in the darkened hole in the roots of the tree. . . . Now she was reminded of its softness. (181)

There are three separate layers of meaning at work in this passage, each attributable to the image of bones in the desert. First, Bella Donna's exaggerated reference to masculine sexuality contributes to the impression that the bones are the remains of victims of male violence.[7] This impression is introduced in descriptions of women who "went missing on journeys with their husbands" (173) and is reinforced later in the text by the Harbour Master's angry questions regarding Warren Finch:

> *Couldn't he just have been like the men who killed their wives in the bush?* . . . *Skeletons left propped up against a tree somewhere. Sun bleaching bones with pieces of skin hardened to leather, and pieces of rag from their dresses fluttering in the wind. A bird picking about on her bones! Things like that!* (216)

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[7] The bones are explicitly identified as the remains of wives killed by their husbands on pages 201, 216 and 320.

With every such allusion, though many are tenuous or subjective, the bones in the desert become more closely related to the threat of masculine violence. By establishing this connection Wright is able to allude to a history of violence with a single image. As well as temporally disparate instances of violence, Wright draws geographically disparate violence into a single narrative thread by grounding Bella Donna's understanding of violence in her experiences of refugee boats.[8]

The second layer of meaning I perceive in the "weather-beaten bones" passage is the connection drawn between the history of victims and Oblivia's fear of Warren. During the previous night, just after the passage in which she had imagined killing him, Oblivia imagines giant spiders weaving enormous webs above them, "setting a trap to encase them in the night" (173). As she falls asleep, this claustrophobic feeling of entrapment extends into her dreams:

> She lay flat beside him as he slept, and drifted into sleep with the thought of touching the walls inside her tree, and dreamed of a struggling swan enclosed by Warren's icy body while Old Bella Donna sang from afar—*A swan with a slither of bone in its beak*. (173)

To ascribe the image of a swan with a bone in its beak with any singular meaning would be to devalue the complexity of this text. However, in this passage, the image takes on Oblivia's fear and dread of Warren's proximity. The connection between this image and Oblivia's death (particularly in connection with her "love story" with Warren) is strengthened by Oblivia's thought late in the text that "Bella Donna's story must really be about the last swan arriving back at the swamp with one of her bones in its beak"

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[8] A purposefully narrowed scope has left the global violence of climate change that is explored in this novel largely unexamined by this thesis. However, I would briefly note that this global violence adds an extra dimension to the web of violence I outline here as Wright draws the effects of unchecked environmental change into her critique of colonial governance.

(320).[9] Furthermore, the swan is reimagined in the "weather-beaten bones" passage as "prowling dingos with white bones in their mouths" (181). In this way, Wright inserts the relationship between Oblivia and Warren into her previously established history of female victims.

The final connection I will draw from this passage is the link to the trauma of Oblivia's gang-rape. The narrative of her early life tells us that she was assaulted by "a gang of petrol-sniffing children" (93) and then fell or hid in "a hollow at the base of any old *eucalypti* tree" (85). When threatened, Oblivia's mind will often escape by returning to that space. For example, after Bella Donna's warning that "all men wanted was sex. . . . *It happened on the refugee boats. It can happen in the mulga too*" (181), the narration quickly shifts to the memory of the owl that lived in the roots. This remembered space is a retreat for Oblivia, perhaps even soothing as she feels the softness of the owl's feathers; however, the reference also reminds the reader of Oblivia's unusual story and therefore its origin in violence. In this way, through Gothic motifs and the gradual layering of attached meaning, Wright creates an intricate web of narratives of violence.

Throughout *The Swan Book* Wright connects this web of violence to a more general historical trauma. Teresa Evans-Campbell defines historical trauma as "a collective complex trauma inflicted on a group who share a specific group identity or affiliation—ethnicity, nationality, and religious affiliation. It is the legacy of numerous traumatic events a community experiences over generations and encompasses the psychological and social responses to such events" (320). In the context of trauma in American Indian and Alaskan Native communities, Evans-Campbell argues strongly for "a more complex understanding of trauma and trauma responses that can incorporate

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[9] The connection between the swan with a bone and Oblivia's death is also reinforced by the Harbour Master's description of Oblivia, dead in the desert with "*[a] bird picking on her bones*" (216).

long-term effects of multiple, catastrophic historical events and their impacts on multiple levels" (317). In its complexity, *The Swan Book* is in some ways a literary response to this call. After Bella Donna's death, the text reveals Oblivia's history in more detail. After finding her in a tree, Bella Donna takes Oblivia to her now elderly parents who

> were still fearful of welfare people like the Army coming back to plague them over their failure-to-thrive baby, and poking around with accusing fingers at their families' histories for evidence of grog harm on the little girl's brain—as if they didn't already know what happens to the inheritors of oppression and dispossession. It's not that shit happens as other people have said; it's the eternal reality of a legacy in brokenness that was the problem to them. (86)

In this passage, Oblivia's individual trauma is positioned within a larger system of violence; she becomes a reminder of this "legacy in brokenness." As van Rijswijk observes in "Archiving the Northern Territory Intervention in Law and in the Literary Counter-Imaginary," *The Swan Book* is "a story of relentless and interconnected harms" (125). Maria Kaaren Takolander argues it is in passages like this that "Wright signals how the assault on Oblivia is part of a larger history of damage done to Aboriginal people" ("Theorizing" 114). I agree and suggest that in fact Wright's choice of generic and politically charged terminology in some ways serves to erase the specificity of Oblivia's story, making her an all encompassing symbol of the inheritance of "oppression and dispossession." [10] In many ways, this insertion into a legacy of colonial

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[10] This politically charged language is evident in the parents' reference to "failure-to-thrive" babies and "grog harm" (86) which links to an earlier mention of "Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder" or "FASD" (82) by one of the swan people. In the same passage the ironic term "closing the gap baby" (82) is also used.

trauma erases Oblivia's individual experiences.[11] I align my reading of this silencing

with van Rijswijk's assessment of Oblivia's own muteness: "Given the legal and political

history of the figure of the 'abused Aboriginal child', it is impossible for Oblivia to tell

the story of her rape without it being read as a narrative of community or familial

dysfunction" ("Archiving" 130). Oblivia's parents deny her identity because they fear

"welfare people" will use her narrative to "start accusing them of drinking again" (86),

contributing to the image of dysfunction used to justify colonial governance.

Although individual and historical trauma may seem to be in opposition, Wright

articulates and connects narratives of both individual and historical trauma throughout

The Swan Book. It is the web of violence (outlined earlier in the close reading of the

"weather-beaten bones" passage) that allows Wright to articulate the violence of

Oblivia's individual story and connect it to the "legacy of brokenness" while still

avoiding conflating her with the figure of "an abused Aboriginal child." For example,

directly after her parents' conflation of Oblivia with a colonial legacy of harm comes the

first description of the desert graves (87), followed by Oblivia's flight into the hollow of

the tree (88). The proximity of these passages means these three images of Oblivia—as

representative of colonial oppression, as female skeleton in the desert, and as

traumatised girl in a tree—are layered, revealing "the enmeshment of public/state and

private/domestic violence" (Kulperger 119). To reduce Oblivia's individual experience

to a vague "destiny" or a symbolic stand-in for historical events would be to silence her

and erase her narrative. However, as van Rijswijk argues:

> To tell the story of an isolated rape would not only demonstrate a
>
> misunderstanding of the nature of harms—particularly the interrelation of

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[11] This impulse to erase Oblivia is repeated often in this section. For example the people searching for her "were saying quite frankly, *Why can't she stay lost? All this searching and searching*, they claimed, *and the only thing discovered was shame*" (85).

sexual violence with colonialism, poverty, and structural racism—it would also

reinforce law's habit of instrumentalising sexual violence in law's own violence

against indigenous subjects. ("Archiving" 131)

The layering of meaning created through a web of images that is the focus of the

analysis here shows how the Gothic tradition in women's writing allows Wright to

present an individual narrative of sexual violence inseparable from a history of colonial

violence.

I turn now from the ways in which Wright expands and complicates my reading

of *The Swan Book*'s Gothic elements to an analysis of her use of irony to disrupt this

reading and to make the process of reading felt and acknowledged. I return to Warren's

status as a Gothic villain as an example of how, after assisting me to construct meaning

around a familiar frame, the text critiques the simplicity and inadequacy of that frame.

Van Rijswijk argues that in *The Swan Book*, "[t]hrough irony and humour, Wright

stretches the rules of genre until they break" ("Archiving" 127). By "heaping one genre

on top of another" she makes the reader "aware they are reading and interpreting

through particular genres, and the effects of different genres in creating legal and social

realities" (127). By disrupting my application of certain elements of genre Wright makes

me aware of the limits of my chosen mode of reading. In other words, by preventing a

perfect translation of Warren into the role, or language, of a Gothic villain in the

Western feminist tradition, Wright makes clear the constructed nature of that language

and my complicity in its (until now) unquestioned application.

This instability of meaning exists in the tension between the signposting of

Gothic tropes already outlined and Wright's ironic critique of racist assumptions of

violent black masculinity. During the desert section of the text there is a passage in

which the genies link Oblivia with Warren's previous sexual partners and judge that, in

taking Oblivia, "*[w]hat he went and done now is a wrong thing*" (170). These comments combine with Warren's previous actions and Oblivia's fear to create the feeling that he poses a threat to her. However, at this time, when the threat of sexual violence seems to be most present, Wright creates an ironic reversal with Warren's statement that "it was easy to decide not to touch her. Perhaps he never would. What did it matter? Nobody would accuse him of being a paedophile or a rapist. Number one rule of his forefathers" (172). Though Warren's casual tone is unsettling ("What did it matter?"), with this statement Wright refers to a history of white Australian use of fabricated or exaggerated narratives of violence to justify oppressive techniques of colonial governance and reclassifies the reading of Warren as Gothic villain as one such fabricated narrative.[12] In *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* Linda Hutcheon outlines the role of the reader, or "interpreter," in the creation of irony. The interpreter, she argues, "may—or may not—be the intended addressee of the ironist's utterance, but s/he (by definition) is the one who attributes irony then interprets it: in other words, the one who decides whether the utterance is ironic (or not), and then what particular ironic meaning it might have" (11). As the interpreter of the ironic layering of the figure of the Gothic villain, I am drawn into the production of meaning. As that production of meaning relies on the assumptions I have made through my knowledge and interpretation of the Gothic mode I am made aware, not only that I am "reading and interpreting through particular genres" (van Rijswijk, "Archiving" 127), but that those interpretive frameworks are limited and limiting.

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[12] This critique is reiterated by Oblivia after Warren's death as she contemplates her own death and the stories that will be told about "[t]he missing First Lady. The enigma. . . . She would become a legend in the bastions of Australian civil society . . . just as long as it appeased the dark theories of a discipline that kept on describing Aboriginal men as dangerous and violent. They would speculate about her bones in absentia . . . so they could experience the sensation of charging Warren Finch posthumously with incest, pornography and raping a child" (320).

The ironic juxtaposition of Warren as Gothic villain and racist stereotypes of black masculinity is perhaps clearest in Bella Donna's relationship to Warren. After the genies disappear Bella Donna accuses Warren of their murder: "The old woman was talking loudly, starting to accuse Warren of every travesty, until she got around to what she really wanted to say, *you killed those nice boys*" (201). Oblivia too is entertaining the possibility that Warren killed the genies, but the Harbour Master reframes this as "the old dead woman putting things in the girl's mind" (201).

> *Girls were thrown overboard—I told you that. Girls were left to die in the bush. . . .*
> *Unwept girls, all killed by their husbands.*
>
> The Harbour Master turned controversial, snubbing Bella Donna's ghost, which was raving on like a mad woman about how the Aboriginal killer husband Warren Finch would end up killing Oblivia too. . . . The Harbour Master swung away from the old woman's spirit every time she came close to him, calling her,
> *Liar. What you think all Aboriginal men are violent or something?* (201)

Bella Donna creates an image of Warren as violent by linking him to her existing narratives of violence (girls thrown overboard, girls left to die in the bush).[13] However, the Harbour Master critiques her assumption and her application of her own knowledge, experience and expectations surrounding violence is shown to be a harmful reading practice.[14] Here Wright critiques a model of white feminism in which "relations between Indigenous women and white women are analysed through the white woman's

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[13] These narratives of violence are in turn linked to the literary history that Bella Donna consistently draws on by her panicked attempt to stop her own erasure from the narrative by reciting lines from Yeats's, "Leda and the Swan" (202). While the meaning of this addition is complex and multiplicitous, I read it as supporting evidence that Bella Donna's narratives of violence are linked to ideas of canon, genre and Western modes of meaning.

[14] There is of course an added complexity to this argument as Warren *is* violent toward Oblivia, and Oblivia has previously been a victim of violence committed by black men. However, I argue that Wright critiques the exaggerated nature of Bella Donna's accusations and the way in which she justifies and acts on her assumption.

filtered lens, a lens which is blind to the way in which white race privilege manifests itself in and through these relations" (Moreton-Robinson "Tiddas" 67). Again, Wright draws my own reading practice into this critique by reminding me of the inadequacy of a reading of Warren as simply a villain. My privileging of a Western feminist Gothic tradition is comparable to Bella Donna's act of relying on her own narratives of violence to form a reading of Warren.

The tension between Bella Donna's reading of Warren as villain and the Harbour Master's accusations of racism contributes to Wright's ironic use of the figure of the Gothic villain. However, like much in *The Swan Book*, there is yet another layer of meaning to be considered. In her text *Irony*, Claire Colebrook argues that "[i]f it is the case that an author or speaker can be other than what they manifestly say, it is also the case that complex forms of irony can make the recognition and existence of this distanced authorial position impossible to determine" (160). Wright's relationship to the Gothic form is one such example of complex irony. It is the Harbour Master who accuses Bella Donna of racism, but it cannot be argued that he represents the "distanced authorial position" as he both narrates the genies' murder by assassins and then blames "Bella Donna's ghost for killing [them]. He really had it in for her" (204). Furthermore, though the narrative of a history of violence can be seen to originate with Bella Donna,[15] it eventually exists independently of her and, as I have argued, is an important aspect of Oblivia's story. As a result, Wright's sometimes-ironic use of Gothic tropes does not serve to nullify entirely the construction of meaning facilitated by their framework. Rather, irony draws attention to their existence as a framework and my application of that framework. By recognising and challenging the Western literary modes that have

[15] Three Gothic images run throughout the text, creating the web of violence outlined above: the swan with a bone in its beak, the bones of women in the desert and the flight to the hollow of the tree. The swan is first mentioned by Bella Donna on page 44 and the desert graves originate on page 87, also through Bella Donna.

contributed to my reading, Wright's irony questions "how shared, common and stable

our conventions and assumptions are" (Colebrook 18). I am made to feel that my

reading is an active process, a process simultaneously facilitated and limited by my own

reading position.

Reading Spectrality

Though founded on the framework of the Female Gothic, the presence of ghosts in *The

Swan Book* contributes to my understanding of the text's relationship to the Gothic form.

Ghosts, and the concept of haunting, are often at the centre of postcolonial readings of

the Gothic. In *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Ken

Gelder and Jane M. Jacobs locate the postcolonial uncanny in the ability of "the

Aboriginal sacred . . . to turn what seems like 'home' into something else, something less

familiar and less settled" (xiv). For Gelder and Jacobs, Australian ghost stories are an

expression of this un-settling and can be thought of "in terms of an entangled kind of

haunting, which gives expression to a sense of (dis)possession for both Aboriginal

people and non-Aboriginal people alike" (42). Meanwhile, in *Unsettled Remains:

Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic*, Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte

describe the postcolonial Gothic as a mode that expresses the haunted nature of colonial

nations, arguing that supressed histories and stories work to create uncanny and

haunted conceptions of national identity (viii). In *The Swan Book* there are many

examples of spectrality that contribute to this tradition of a postcolonial uncanny by

acting as a reminder of the cruelty of the colonial encounter or bringing to the fore

forgotten or repressed realities of colonial violence. The swamp, for example, is haunted

by "foreign ghosts" that can "steal a whole country, kill your people, and still not pay all those centuries' worth of rent" (Wright 57). As with my reading of the Female Gothic, I will firstly examine how the familiar and practiced mode of postcolonial Gothic critique interacts with examples of spectrality in *The Swan Book*. I will then question the limits and problems of applying a critical framework that is, in the case of common postcolonial readings of haunting, predominantly informed by psychoanalysis and, as with the two key texts cited above, often grounded in a settler experience of colonialism.

Both Françoise Kral and Katrin Althans have discussed Wright's use of spectrality in her first novel *Plains of Promise* (1997). Kral argues that "postcolonial Gothic texts invite us to revisit the subversive potential of this genre and that by doing so they displace and debunk colonial discourse" (111) and that "[t]he Gothic quality of these texts is not just ornamental but serves a political purpose" (111). When discussing *Plains of Promise* she reads this political purpose as articulating trauma:

> ghosts are not only a projection of the fears and longings of the characters—as is often said of ghosts in Western Gothic fiction—but are invested with a different meaning. They flesh out the trauma associated with loss and are a constant reminder of the cruelties of colonial encounter. The Gothic thus seems to originate in the postcolonial experience from which it emanates. (117)

Althans forms a similar reading of spectrality in *Plains of Promise* stating that "ghostly remnants of a long-lost past return to the world of the living in an attempt to uncover the forgotten truths about colonialism" (116). Similarly, in *The Swan Book*, Wright uses the trope of haunting to revitalise colonial histories of invasion, occupation and violence. Furthermore, ghosts serve as a link between historical and contemporary realities, denying any relegation of colonisation to the status of past wrong.

Jennifer Lawn argues that "[i]n gothic temporality the past does not dissolve itself smoothly as the present takes its place. Instead, traces of the past remain active, rebounding upon, clawing back, interrupting, exposing, and even mocking the actions of today" (125). This shifting temporality is evident in Wright's depictions of the wreckages of boats that are moved by the Army into Swan Lake early in the text. The introduction of these "collected ruins" and the "Army's high-powered searchlights swivelling on the tugboats—eyeballing along the shoreline for witnesses" causes "the entire population to slink away from its homes and slip into the bush" (9). When they return to the lake, the traditional owners are informed that when they left the land their Native Title "had been lost irredeemably" (10) and the area around the lake becomes an Army-run detention camp and "secret locality for Defence Force scheduled training manoeuvres" (12). During the Army's initial dumping of the boats in the lake, Wright's use of the concept of haunting acts to link the contemporary act of colonisation (military occupation of land owned under Native Title) with Australia's history of colonial invasion. The presence of the Army is first introduced by a reference to "the arrival of the strangers from the sea" (8). The ambiguity of this phrasing makes this arrival a mirror of the first colonial invasion. This temporal ambiguity is maintained by the lack of any era-specific language; for example the children around the lake reside in "little dwellings" and the voices that are heard are just routinely announcing the time, a convention more reminiscent of colonial seafaring than a contemporary military manoeuvre. As the passage continues, the existence of the Army is felt only through the movement of their voices: "their shouting ended up on ribbons of salt mist that went idling from the sea along an ancient breezeway—travelling with sand flies and tumbling bats along kilometres of inlet" (8). The disembodied voices and lack of physical presence of the soldiers contribute to an impression that this arrival is a form of ghostly

invasion, perhaps even an echo of the original arrival of white settlers. After three paragraphs, this impression is broken by the statement that "[t]hose voices which originated far out at sea were coming from the Armed Forces men involved in a large-scale sweep-up of the ocean's salty junk" (8-9). However, immediately after the invasion is attributed to present and embodied "Armed Forces men" the ghosts of the colonial invasion are once again alluded to:

> The men from the Army were taunting these haunts of ghosts and outlaws to surrender themselves by dawn because they shouted: *Grab your liberation! Freedom! Called ghosts, you what?* It was a tragic demand to abandon steel, planks of timber, brass lanterns and fittings, whose ghost sailors were unable to respond to military voices. (9)

Like much in the text, the allusion is ambiguous. However, the "brass lanterns and fittings" speak of another era of vessels, and the sailors and outlaws who haunt the ships recall the role that convicts played in the initial colonisation of Australia.[16] After these ghosts are reintroduced, Wright complicates the temporality of the scene once again: "Whatever the men from the Army had been saying to each other on that night of bringing the junk to the lake was quickly forgotten" (9). The shift from the earlier "were taunting" to "had been saying" removes the events from the present and converts them into an historical occurrence. In this passage the present soldiers become ghosts and forgotten histories, while historical figures return to haunt and mirror the present. As Erin Mercer argues, "[t]he liminal nature of the Gothic mode means that depictions of a haunting past are intimately, often uncannily, connected with a recognisable depiction of modern social reality" (113). As we see in a close reading of the invasion, Wright uses

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[16] The allusion to colonial violence is strengthened by a later reference to the military nature of the ghosts that haunt the vessels: "It gave you the shivers. If you looked closely at the flotilla for long enough you saw people at war. Saw military parades. Dead men marching up and down on the decks" (58).

the trope of ghosts to vitalise colonial history, keeping it present and relevant while also fusing and confusing contemporary and historical instances of invasion.

The ghosts that haunt the vessels on the swamp, while interrupting the present and exposing the past, remain relatively passive. They exist, haunt and remind but do not inflict violence. However, through a monstrous activation of the vessels themselves, Wright reveals the present and active violence caused by colonial history. After they return to the lake, the traditional owners try to pretend that nothing has changed and that the lake "was still the same tranquil place that it had always been" (10). However, this self-deception is revealed to be impossible:

> [I]t was strange what a view can do to how people think. The rotting junk clung to its secrets and in turn, the local people who did not really know what they were staring at or why the junk was staring at them back, also became secretive.
>
> They wished and dreamed for this emotional eyesore to be removed and gone from their lands forever. It was foreign history sinking there that could not be allowed to rot into the sacredness of the ground. (11)

The uncanny animation of the junk in this passage makes it an active presence. Furthermore, it is an active presence that has the power to change the thoughts and actions of the people who view it. The metonymic replacement of "foreign history" for the junk that represents it, reminds the reader that it is not the view that is changing the swamp people, but the history of colonial invasion that created it. The continuing violence of the vessels is reinforced later in the text when they are described as "either falling apart at the seams from decades of bobbing themselves into oblivion, or had become dilapidating wrecks" (55). The replacement of dilapidat*ed* with the active form dilapidat*ing* makes the wrecks a destructive force in the swamp. Later, as the swamp people watch the pollution from the boats spreading into the water they wonder: "*Was*

this the final killer then, the Army's final weapon of mass destruction?" (59). Wright's Gothic representation of these haunting and haunted vessels not only reminds the reader of the history of colonisation, but constructs that history as an actively destructive force.

In *Post-Colonial Transformation* Bill Ashcroft argues:

Rather than being swallowed up by the hegemony of the empire, the apparently dominated culture, and the 'interpellated' subjects within it, are quite able to interpolate the various modes of imperial discourse to use it for different purposes, to counter its effects by transforming them. (14)

Wright too is interested in exploring and questioning the relationship between existing text and the creation of difference. The examples of a postcolonial Gothic and Female Gothic already discussed here are instances of positive and productive adaptation. However, I argue that while this kind of familiar postcolonial reading is relevant, in the context of *The Swan Book*, it can only get you so far. I am not suggesting that to draw on the Western Gothic, or present ideas of productive adaptation, is to create an automatically flawed reading. However, to allow one language or system of meaning to consume or obscure the difference presented by this text would be a denial of its complexity and power. What is the effect of using a European Gothic as my starting point? Are there elements of this text that the language of the Gothic excludes or cannot express? What are they? And if they are not Gothic, how then do I interpret them? I turn now to a discussion of the examples of spectrality in *The Swan Book* that deny the classification of transformative adaptation and are instead divorced from the European Gothic tradition.

Re-Reading Spectrality

There are moments in *The Swan Book* in which the ghosts and spectres that haunt the text become something other than the conventional European ghosts that represent a return of repressed histories or anxieties. These moments invite me to question, as Erin Mercer does, whether "Gothic readings of Indigenous literature are not only fruitless but guilty of cultural colonisation" (112). In her chapter "Is There an Indigenous Gothic?" in *A Companion to American Gothic* Michelle Burnham states that "indigenous cultures and histories of storytelling were *already* populated by Gothic elements, representing a literary and cultural history that not only predates the importation of the European Gothic into the Americas, but predates the arrival of Europeans in the Americas altogether" (226). With this statement, she questions the definition of the Gothic as a product of eighteenth-century Europe, instead arguing that it may be commonly defined as such because "we have always looked only to European and to eighteenth-century sources to define it" (226). I am interested in whether strictly applying a Eurocentric generic frame ignores the difference and limits the power of the text. While the futuristic Australia of *The Swan Book* is haunted by colonial violence, Wright disrupts and defamiliarises the way ghosts work and uses spectrality to draw attention to and separate Western and Aboriginal epistemologies. In this way, not only is my mode of reading disrupted and once again proved to be limited, but I am also presented with other systems of meaning, systems that are incompatible with my own, systems that are, for me, untranslatable.

In *The Gothic, Postcolonialism and Otherness: Ghosts from Elsewhere*, Tabish Khair explores the relationship between postcolonial authors and the Western Gothic. In the second half of his text he seeks to make what he terms a "rather controversial point:

that the postcolonial defence or explication of Otherness has, at times (but by no means always), narrowed down the scope for narrating difference" (18). He describes this narrowing potential as "a problem of language" (108), arguing

> the Other in its irreducible alterity always exists outside the language of the Self.
> It is this that Gothic fiction has sometimes been able to suggest and that
> postcolonial fiction sometimes erases, especially in its justifiable desire to
> explain, narrate, correct the errors and oversights of colonial narratives. (109)

While Khair investigates this erasure of difference in the context of an author constructing a narrative, I am interested in exploring this possibility as not only a problem of writing, but also a problem of reading. The activity of reading will always involve the introduction of the reader's knowledge and experience. My impulse to draw on my knowledge and familiarity with the Western Gothic canon is understandable and as unproblematic as Wright's ability to draw on her own knowledge of the form. However, as Khair argues, when "Otherness is inscribed within a relationship of power . . . the irreducibility of the Other is dismissed. In this sense, when the Other is reduced to the language of the Self, it becomes the subaltern" (108). In a similar vein, Shelley Kulperger criticizes the potential for academic work to abide by a "colonizing logic" (110). Drawing on Simon Critchley's statement that "to think philosophically is to comprehend—*comprendre, comprehendre, begreifen*, to include, to seize, to grasp—and master the other, thereby reducing its alterity" (Critchley 29), Kulperger argues that examples of Indigenous Gothic literature have the potential to "jam" this process of mastery. By leaving space for that which cannot be explained within the discourse of the coloniser, an Indigenous Gothic can shift "the emphasis on haunting and ghostliness as a preoccupation with enunciative modalities . . . to a critique of colonizing epistemologies and practices" (110). In *The Swan Book* the Western Gothic tradition is an example of

what Khair terms "the language of the Self" and Wright defamiliarises the tropes of ghosts and haunting to maintain alterity and gesture to what is outside that language, thus "[critiquing] colonising epistemologies and practices." While I am invited to draw on my existing knowledge in the process of making meaning from this text, I am also encouraged to recognise the limits of that knowledge.

I now return to the four pages of *The Swan Book* (8–11) that enabled me to investigate Wright's use of spectrality to articulate the ongoing violence of colonisation. I return to this section of the text in order to clarify what I mean when I refer to the limits of my reading of spectrality. Previously, I focused on the connection between the spectrality of the invading Army and the haunting presence of the historical occupants of the vessels. However, within the four pages discussed, there are several uses of the word "ghost" and references to spectrality that were not referenced in my argument. The passage begins:

> Her fingers traced the movements of the ghost language to write about the dead trees scattered through the swamp, where *dikili* ghost gums old as the hills once grew next to a deepwater lake fed by an old spring-spirit relative, until they all slowly died. (8)

After the disembodied voices of the Army are introduced, Wright describes "the roar of those harsh-sounding voices" startling "the ghosts which rose from beneath the lake's water" (8) and after the return of the traditional owners there is an eye witness to "the lake bubbling from the tug boats mix-mastering the water with their propellers, whisking it like a spritzer and putrefying all the dead ancient things rising to the surface, spraying it around like the smell of eternity" (10). In the Western Gothic tradition, ghosts are commonly theorised as manifestations of repressed guilt and fears

or unconsciously inherited secrets, returning to haunt a younger generation (Berthin 1, 5). Commenting on Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, Fredric Jameson argues:

> Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that that living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us. ("Marx's" 86)

For Jodey Castricano, ghosts are a signifier "of psychological unease, perceptual disturbance, or atavistic, and, therefore, pathological tendencies to be explained . . . in terms of hysteria, neuroses, or 'uncanny' primitivism" (806). By reading the ghosts that haunt the vessels as symptoms of ongoing colonial trauma and a reminder of our relationship to history, I place them in this narrative of pathology, allowing them to fit within an "interpretive model . . . [that does not] have to consider the issues of spirits and visions beyond allegory, symbol, or symptom" (805). However, in order to do so, it is necessary for me to limit my reading, temporarily excluding "the ghosts which rose from beneath the lake's water" (Wright 8). If this "ghost language", these "dead and ancient things" will not (and I argue should not) be consumed by a Western European Gothic explanatory model, I am left with the question: how do I read them? As Castricano argues in the context of Eden Robinson's *Monkey Beach*, if our understanding of Gothic texts places them in a "dialectic or perhaps dialogic relationship with Enlightenment value and thought" (807), the question then becomes "how to read *Monkey Beach* without slipping into the 'received ideas' about the Gothic and without doing the work of the empire by framing the novel and its concern with the spirit world in terms of what might be called 'psychological colonialism'" (807–08). Similarly,

allowing for the limits of my "received ideas" of haunting, how do ghosts work, and what is the work of ghosts in *The Swan Book*? Rather than simply employing ghosts to represent repressed or unconscious anxieties (that is, using ghosts to create meaning) Wright uses Gothic tropes to question modes of creation of meaning in general.

I will now return once more to the haunted flotillas, particularly the section of the text that describes the swamp people's reaction to the "[*w*]*hitefella ghosts*" (57) that inhabit the decaying boats. Within the reality of the novel, these ghosts exist. In the context of Kral's argument about the subversive potential of articulating trauma, perhaps the extent of their political purpose would be the fact that they exist, that the reality of colonial occupation is not forgotten. This is an important aspect of their presence. However, what is equally important is the ways in which ghosts are read in *The Swan Book*—not just by me, but also by those within the text:

> The swamp people were really frightened of the flotilla. Some would not even look at the decaying boats. Some claimed that they could not see any dumped boats out there on their pristine swamp. . . . So, floating junk, if seen in the light of having too many foreigners circulating in one's own spiritual world could always be ignored for what it was—other people's business. (57)

Ghosts in *The Swan Book* are complicated entities. Because, for the swamp people, the boats and the ghosts that inhabit them exist in another world, that is they are a part of a different mode of viewing the world, and through devout disavowal, they can be made to disappear. While deleting the flotillas, the swamp people also transform Bella Donna into a ghost, as it did not "take much from a separatist-thinking swamp person to believe that Bella Donna was a real ghost" (57). These ghosts, then, are not spectral and fantastic projections of the unconscious as they are in Gothic texts founded on Western dualism. Nor, I argue, are they limited to uncanny articulations of trauma. Instead, the

textual reality of the ghost becomes a way to articulate the tensions between distinct epistemological modes. For, as Castricano argues, it is not just historical colonial violence that haunts, but an interpretive model that continues the work of colonisation through framing Indigenous Gothic in terms of European psychological Gothic (809). The combination of the ghosts' haunting presence and the swamp people's determined refusal to engage with that presence allows Wright to both productively transform a Gothic trope to make meaning and also to defamiliarise the Gothic genre as a whole. The familiar trope of haunting is denied the usual connotations of repressed and returning memories and is instead used to articulate the existence of multiple ways of looking at, and knowing, the world.

Another example of the use of ghosts to describe distinct modes of knowing is Oblivia's reaction to her own wedding:

> The man who officiated the marriage wore a tight black snake suit that could have been a boa constrictor strangling him. His face was sickly grey. He looked like he had seen a ghost, Oblivia thought—she even thought it was funny, wondering whether she was really in some other reality, and if this is what the ghosts of white people did all the time, getting married, saying I do, promising the world and whatnot. (223)

Ghosts here operate once again to represent a division, rather than to specifically haunt. For Oblivia, what she sees as the white concept of marriage is foreign and meaningless and this epistemological divide is expressed by a phenomenological shift. The otherness of whiteness becomes the total otherness of spectrality. In this example ghosts, rather than making forgotten knowledge known, create space between different types of knowledge. Frow states that "a central implication of the concept of genre is . . . that the realities in and amongst which we live are not transparently conveyed to us but are

mediated by systems of representation" (20). By defamiliarising a recognisable system of representation, and furthermore, by using it to express incommensurable modes of knowing, Wright interrupts my reading of the text. With this interruption comes the awareness that not only is my reality mediated by a system of representation, but also, that other systems of representation exist that are incommensurably different from my own. This awareness brings with it what Hoy describes as a "decentring power" (35): I am no longer in control of my reading, meaning is created and maintained in a system separate from my own. The text "forces me to confront my . . . cultural arrogance, teaches me to see and hear something other than what I've been taught to see and hear" (36).

Perhaps the most pervasive example of ghosts in *The Swan Book* comes from the spectral presence of Bella Donna and the Harbour Master after Oblivia's departure from Swan Lake. The narrative of *The Swan Book* is constantly shifting and unstable. This instability often results in seamless transitions between, and effective melding of, European Gothic tropes and more singular Gothic elements. After Warren Finch has taken her from the swamp, Oblivia travels across the country accompanied by him and the three genies. This journey begins with all five characters travelling together in a car. The classification of Hart, Mail and Doom as the "three genies" comes from an extrapolation and solidification of the brief image of cigarette smoke filling the car, and the three men sitting "in this smoke like genies squashed in a lantern" (162). Soon after this supernatural image is introduced it is overlaid with elements of the Gothic. Oblivia imagines the genies as "devils monotonously speaking in the talk of body guards" (162). The uncanny description continues: "In the lightning strikes their faces looked freaky. Nobody looked real with their skin replaced by a watery substance trapped in opaque layers of silicon" (162). As the car fills with smoke, Oblivia drifts into a dream of a swan

following the passage of the car. The swan flies higher and struggles to breathe and Oblivia's breath slows to match the swan's.

> She slips into unconsciousness while following the broken swan flying off through the darkness. Then the swan is pushed aside by the Harbour Master walking towards the car from a long way off and suddenly he is in the back seat of the car. . . . Oblivia wakes up in fright, opening her mouth wide as the Harbour Master punches her hard in the chest. He is pushing air through her lungs, while squeezing the wrist of each of Warren Finch's men in turn, until they are in so much pain, they are forced to wind down the windows to let in some fresh air.
>
> (163–64)

The Harbour Master's appearance in the car begins as an element of Oblivia's dream, but he is still present after she wakes. He is substantial enough to exert force in the world as he performs CPR on Oblivia (seemingly saving her from the effects of second-hand smoke). He is, however, invisible to the other members of the car; the genies feel his physical grasp and a more abstract "foreboding" but only Oblivia knows of his existence and identity. So I am again left with the question: how do I read this spectral presence that does not frighten, and sometimes helps?

Kulperger states that "[i]n the postcolonial Gothic, the exhaustions of the ghostly/supernatural as a source of fear, spectacle, awe, mystery, and abnormality significantly reorders the traditional Gothic" (109). In their casual mode of apparition, their almost irritating back-biting and commentary, both Bella Donna and the Harbour Master are examples of an exhaustion of the fear and abnormality associated with the idea of haunting. Kulperger also argues that "[b]eing haunted signals the trace of atrocity and the unresolved still-lingering effects of colonial bureaucracy and speaks of a consciousness that leaves its 'host' bodies with little peace" (105). It is neither Bella

Donna nor the Harbour Master who best fits this description of haunting, but rather the virus in its lolly pink bed, the "nostalgie de la boue" (3) that has taken a parasitic hold on the host body of Oblivia. The Harbour Master is not an articulation of Oblivia's madness; as previously stated, he exists outside her dreams and imagination, and, as is evident in his description of his search for the monkey Rigoletto, is able to function in the world separate from Oblivia's consciousness and perception. He cannot be read as an articulation of colonial trauma; neither would I place him or Bella Donna in the same class of spectrality as the "spring-spirit relative" (8) or "dead ancient things" (10) of the lake. Instead, as he and Bella Donna enter and exit the text, serving many purposes, espousing and sometimes contradicting ideas, possibly dead, possibly real, possibly ghosts, but certainly there, Wright continually destabilises my understanding of the text. As my reading of ghosts is challenged and re-formed, Wright forces me to abandon previous definitions of haunting and even previously formed understandings of the text so far, creating moments of untranslatability. It is this lack of interpretive closure, these moments of irreducible difference, that allow Wright to make and sustain a space in language "for other ways of thinking" (Scott 123).

Chapter 2

"when the truth itself was mad": Challenging Knowledges and Maintaining Difference

> I make an offering of the truths as known to myself. It is an individual
> attempt to provide some of the pieces and to also untangle some of the
> knots, in the hope of providing some further openings or ways of looking
> beyond the limited horizon many believe is all there is. Other horizons
> exist.
>
> Irene Watson, "Settled and Unsettled Spaces" (16–17)

The Swan Book undermines the concept of a single, stable and knowable truth, replacing it with narrative and linguistic ambiguity that encourages the acknowledgement of multiple, non-hierarchical modes of knowing. In the previous chapter I presented Wright's use of the Gothic as a system of representation to construct meaning and foreground the limitations of any single reading position. However, the Gothic represents only one of many systems of representation that frame the text and the limits of my reading position are made clear not only through breaks with familiar rules of genre, but also consistently by disruptions of narrative, and even of language itself. The multiplicity of systems of representation gestures to other modes of looking at and knowing the world, reminding me that other horizons exist. Furthermore, the uncertainty—or what Ravenscroft, after Derrida, terms "undecidability"—created in

narrative and language confirm that those horizons are not my own, and often, that I do not have the ability to master the modes of knowledge to which they gesture.

On a broad level, Wright undermines the concept of a singular and stable narrative by amalgamating multiple registers of storytelling. These include, but are not limited to, contemporary political critique, postapocalyptic narrative, Aboriginal culture and knowledge, folk and fairy tales, a global mythology of swans, and the Gothic mode. In her use of these discourses and modes, Wright acknowledges the legitimacy of all, without arguing for the primacy of any. [17] In the first section of this chapter, "Multiple Narratives," I outline how the layering of these concurrent systems of meaning expands the reader's conception of what constitutes legitimate knowledge, focussing particularly on the capacity of Aboriginal knowledge systems to undermine Western assumptions such as linear time or limited non-human agency. As in the previous chapter, I will return later to question my ability as a white reader to locate and identify elements of Aboriginal knowledge systems in the text. However, I maintain that by presenting these modes of knowledge as legitimate and vital, Wright questions the assumption that empirical knowledge is the only system of meaning that warrants the status of truth. Furthermore, Wright's use of multiple registers, or languages, of storytelling enables an investigation of relationships between modes of knowing. By presenting interactions between systems, particularly Oblivia's language of black swans and Bella Donna's white swan mythology, Wright communicates the silencing power of colonial discourse while still maintaining the possibility for productive communication.

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[17] The combination of these modes is not without conflict; for example the image of the virus and the amnesiac quality of Bella Donna's history of white swans can both be read as the harmful effect of colonial thought on an Indigenous subjectivity. However, in the course of this chapter I will maintain that in this conflict, Wright is describing the power of stories (both beneficial and dangerous), without necessarily denying the reality or legitimacy of either mode of knowing.

Any understanding of truth as stable and universal is also consistently undermined in *The Swan Book* by means of Wright's poetic style. In the second section, "Ambiguity and Undecidability," I read closely examples of Wright's complex and opaque prose style, arguing that, while repetition and allusion encourage me to make connections, and tempt me into believing I have, even if momentarily, reached understanding, ultimately, the language of *The Swan Book* is not one that I can master effortlessly. My reading is disrupted by seemingly incongruous events or startlingly indecipherable language and these moments of undecidability act as constant reminders of the gaps and limitations inherent in my own singular viewing position.

After a prolonged investigation of alienation, invitation appears briefly in the form of the temptation to ascribe this text with the status of "magical realism." In this chapter's final section, "Questioning Magical Realism," I turn immediately to the limits of this invitation, further exploring the importance of undecidablity by using magical realism as an example of how *not* to read this text. While (in the style of Ravenscroft) this negative reading assists me to outline the possibility for unproductive and reductive white reading practices, I also (inspired by the more positive style of Hoy) present a possible framework through which one *can* read this text. Rather than diminishing difference or encouraging assumptions of knowledge, Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic* allows for, and encourages a reading practice founded on, the centrality of undecidability to the poetics and politics of *The Swan Book*.

Multiple Narratives

In *The Swan Book*, contemporary political critique sits beside a global mythology of swans in a Gothic postapocalyptic narrative informed by Aboriginal Law that references everything from Chinese poetry to Dusty Springfield. Each of the myriad systems of representation operating within the text possesses its own set of rules, its own system of meaning, its own way of looking at and knowing the world. In "Where to Point the Spears?" Wright describes the process of constructing the story worlds[18] of her texts as "trying to replicate a helix of divided strands forever moving, entwining all stories together, just like a lyrebird is capable of singing several songs at once" (41). Similarly, in "Politics of Writing," she explains "[t]he world I try to inhabit in my writing is like looking at the ancestral tracks spanning our traditional country which, if I look at the land, combines all stories, all realities from the ancient to the new, and makes it one— like all the strands in a long rope" ("Politics" 20). In both these representations of storytelling, there exists an important, if subtle, dynamic: all stories, all strands, all songs, all realities are valid and eligible for inclusion; however, in the final product, distinctions remain. Wright's story worlds are not liquid pools of undistinguishable hybridity; instead, they are webs of multiplicity, separate songs sung at once. In *The Swan Book*, the multiple modes of knowing introduced by the systems of representation that clutter the text expand the reader's understanding of what might constitute legitimate knowledge and destabilise a conception of truth as single, universal and stable. Furthermore, in the interactions between different systems of meaning, Wright

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[18] This is a term that Wright herself uses ("On Writing" 80; "Where to Point" 41) and I have found it useful for discussing the complex narrative scopes of her texts.

evidences the capacity for communication and exchange while still maintaining a distinction between forms of knowledge.

Though the threads that make up the long narrative rope that is *The Swan Book* are seemingly endless, some are central and pervasive. Aboriginal Law plays a vital role in the construction of the story world of *The Swan Book*, particularly Aboriginal knowledge of a non-Western temporal universe, the importance of non-waking reality and conceptions of non-human and inanimate subjectivities and agency.[19] In "Learning to Read the Signs: Law in an Indigenous Reality" Palyku scholars Ambelin Kwaymullina and Blaze Kwaymullina examine Aboriginal views of knowledge, time and space, and the role these play in Aboriginal legal systems. In the context of conceptions of time they state:

> In an Aboriginal worldview, time—to the extent that it exists at all—is neither linear nor absolute. There are patterns and systems of energy that create and transform, from the ageing process of the human body to the growth and decay of the broader universe. But these processes are not "measured" or even framed in a strictly temporal sense, and certainly not in a linear sense. (199)

Wright incorporates this conception of non-linear time into her work, explaining in "On Writing *Carpentaria*" that "[t]he Indigenous world is both ancient and modern, both colonial experience and contemporary reality, and the problem right now for us, is how to carry all times when approaching the future" (81). In many ways, non-linear time is more apparent in *The Swan Book* than in *Carpentaria*. Though the setting is futuristic, it "might be the same story about some important person carrying a swan centuries ago,

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[19] Though the influence of these ideas are clear, it is challenging for a reader without direct access to these systems of knowledge to identify where (and even if) an Aboriginal worldview ends and Wright's literary re-imagination begins. This is a question that I address in a later section; however, in this section it is my intention to highlight the presence and importance of Aboriginal knowledge systems in the construction of *The Swan Book*.

and it might be the same story in centuries to come" (333). Time stands still for Oblivia while she sleeps "for a very long time among the tree's huge woven roots," although that "very long time" "did not take long" (7). Representations of colonisation also deny the concept of linear time: as discussed in the previous chapter, the colonial rule and interventionist policies experienced by the swamp people of the future are instantly recognisable as today's reality, and simultaneously reflect the first colonial invasion.

In "Learning to Read the Signs" a dream recounted by Blaze Kwaymullina is incorporated into the article as a primary text. Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina include a footnote that designates it as a dream and states that they include it as an "illustration of Palyku knowledge process" (207), as "Aboriginal knowledge systems do not compartmentalise knowledge or ways of knowing into specific disciplines, because intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual understandings of the world cannot be divorced from one another" (196). Such non-compartmentalised knowledge is reflected in the narrative mode of *The Swan Book*. Warren has a dream of a "black angel cloud flying in a starry night" (109), and, a short while after, he sees "in the corner of his eye a flash of black, of last night's dream, now down-stream in the river" (112). There is no discernable barrier between waking and non-waking reality as "last night's dream" becomes a black swan, trapped in a flooded river.[20]

Non-human agency is another way in which Aboriginal knowledge informs Wright's style, creating multiple modes of narration and also troubling the idea of a singular and stable worldview. Non-human agency and subjectivity permeate the text, from the lonely crow that "chuckl[es] its secrets" (177) into Warren Finch's ear and

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[20] An added dimension is exhibited in this dream as, although he has yet to meet Oblivia, the "black angel cloud" that becomes a black swan is melded with his "memory" of "the dark skin of a woman's body" (109). Furthermore, Warren's reality is later transposed back into a dream; specifically, Oblivia's dream "of a river walled up with knotted debris composed of words describing tree trunks, branches and leaves that had been washed away by previous floods" (221).

communicates its feelings of loneliness through an ABBA rendition, to the bullfrog who guards the "closed-gap entrance to the security fence" around the swamp, but is "happy enough to grant [Bella Donna] asylum" (32). Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina state that "[e]ach part of country is not only alive, but has a life of his or her own—and is as capable as human beings of resistance and subversion" (201). This is certainly the case in *The Swan Book* for, as van Rijswijk attests, "[a]nimal life and land are agents who suffer, make law, and attest to a different authority from that of the state" ("Encountering" 247). This agency is clear in the depictions of the black swans who move across the country, motivated by "stories for country that had always been known to them"; after all, as Wright succinctly explains, "[s]wans had Law too" (67).

By providing examples of some of the ways in which Aboriginal knowledge systems influence the narrative and style of *The Swan Book* I have sought to elucidate how Wright inserts multiple knowledge systems into her work and also to highlight how influential these particular types of knowledge are in the text. Furthermore, as van Rijswijk argues, in *The Swan Book* "[t]he reader is forced to re-examine mainstream perceptions of the status of indigenous laws and Dreaming—and to question the assumption that state law, and cultural realism, are the genres of truth" ("Archiving" 128). However, though Aboriginal forms of knowledge are central, the types of narrative that make up the story world of *The Swan Book* are many, and the dynamic established by Wright is neither binary nor directly hierarchical. In the context of *Carpentaria* Wright has remarked that "[i]n contrast to Indigenous spiritual beliefs, [she] also wanted to demonstrate . . . that other people have strange ideas and belief systems about who and what they are" ("On Writing" 92). In *The Swan Book*, this is demonstrated by Bella Donna's narrative of the white swan: "The girl remembered how the old woman was always talking about how she owed her life to a swan. Telling

Oblivia about how much she missed seeing the swans from her world. It was a foreigner's *Dreaming* she had" (16). Bella Donna's "foreigner's *Dreaming*" is grounded in a global literary history of white swans. Bella Donna recalls that when the swan first appeared

> 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, 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 the frozen moss. (29)

After Bella Donna's death, her history of swans lives on in the books of poetry taken by Warren from the hull and left with Oblivia in The People's Palace (240). However, Bella Donna's "strange ideas and belief systems" extend beyond literature just as Aboriginal forms of knowledge create action and narrative. The Harbour Master confirms this when he relates his journey "in search of Bella Donna's homeland" (249):

> What he found was that there were swans in most continents of the world and finally, he believed he had found the old woman's swans. There were not many left. The poor things had flown back to paradise, which was an oasis in the desert. (249)

Wright establishes histories, stories and events and then entwines them with the Law of the black swans, or complicates them by introducing the voices of contemporary political discourse and climate change science. By creating this multi-stranded rope of narratives, Wright encourages the acknowledgement that more than one way of seeing and knowing can be valid.

As well as foregrounding the multiplicity of systems of knowledge and representation, Wright also examines the ways in which they interact. In *The Swan Book*, "[s]tories had value. Could buy trust. Could buy lots of things. Even silence" (27). Language and narrative inform our perception of the world and the reality in which we live. But our language (and reality) is not concrete or quarantined; it can be informed, affirmed, challenged, and also silenced and threatened. In "On Writing *Carpentaria*" Wright explains:

> I wanted the novel to question the idea of boundaries through exploring how ancient beliefs sit in the modern world, while at the same time exposing the fragility of the boundaries of Indigenous home places of the mind, by examining how these places are constantly under stress and burdened with threat, and often forced into becoming schizoid illusions of our originality. (82)

Both the virus that inhabits Oblivia's mind and the power of Bella Donna's stories embody the threat of colonising discourses. In the Prelude, Oblivia's first-person narration describes the "cut snake virus" that lives in "its doll's house . . . [u]pstairs in [her] brain" and "vomit[s] bad history over the beautiful sunburnt plains" (1). This virus's link to the colonising power of foreign modes of knowing is loosely established by the diagnosis of doctors who "said this kind of virus wasn't any miracle; it was just one of those poor lost assimilated spirits that thought about things that had originated somewhere else on the planet and got bogged in my brain. . . . The virus was nostalgia for foreign things, they said, or what the French say, *nostalgie de la boue*" (3).[21] Similar to the virus, the narratives and language of Bella Donna also have colonising power.

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[21] The negative connotation of this nostalgia is reinforced by the translation from French of "nostalgie de la boue" as a desire for degradation, depravity or regression; or, literally, a yearning for mud. The phrase is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "[a] longing for sexual degradation; a desire to regress to more primitive social conditions or behaviour than those to which a person is accustomed."

After Bella Donna's death, the people of the swamp begin to talk "like the old woman,"

meaning that "[e]veryone spoke a few words of Latin in every conversation" (80):

> It appeared that the old ghost had colonised the minds of the swamp people so
>
> completely with the laws of Latin, it terminated their ability to speak good
>
> English anymore, and to teach their children to speak English properly so that
>
> the gap could finally be closed between Aboriginal people and Australia. (80)

In her review of *The Swan Book* Michelle Cahill argues that this event "intentionally

fetishize[s] the naming and discursive power of language so that the reader experiences

language as invasion, as appropriation, as indoctrination, just as Bella Donna herself

invades the swamp country of the Northern Territory." The power of the language of

Bella Donna is reiterated by Takolander who argues that while Bella Donna's "foreign

stories might be beautiful to behold, their effect is deadly. Oblivia's cultural identity—

and her autonomy—is softly destroyed" ("Theorizing" 116).

However, while Oblivia's identity is threatened and undermined, it is not

destroyed. Certainly, she is "full of the old woman's stories about swans" (Wright 17)

and evidence can be found of these stories impeding Oblivia's access to "the ghost

language" (8) of the tree: "Fancy words, scrolling back and forth in the girl's mind, float

like the feathers that stop her escaping back to the tree" (51). However, Oblivia is not

consumed by these stories. Though she "thought she would find [the answers to

universal questions] by tossing herself in the old woman's madness of singing to

swans," and despite her efforts to "become Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions,"

Oblivia remains "out of kilter with the old lady's shadow, never quite fitting the cast of

the sun" (72). Furthermore, though Bella Donna's language of swans can be seen to

disrupt Oblivia's own narrative, there are examples of Oblivia employing that language

to facilitate or gain access to her connection to "her own black swans" (240):

The girl in turn thought she might read their fortunes in the language nature had

written in the blackish-grey-tipped curled tail feathers scalloped across their

backs. . . . She was determined to solve the mystery of why they had left the most

beautiful lakes in the country—a vision created in her head by the old woman's

stories of other places. Her existence revolved around learning the route they

took. (71)

The language of the black swans is framed and digested through the images provided to

Oblivia through the stories passed on by Bella Donna. In this instance, Bella Donna's

narrative rather than silencing Oblivia's own, prompts further investigation of the black

swans and allows for an articulation of her connection to them.[22] Later, after they are

delivered to The People's Palace, Bella Donna's "books [of poetry] became good

company. Pages were flicked over, lines recited, and reflected upon: *The wild swan's*

death-hymn took the soul of that waste place with joy" (240). This recited line from

Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Dying Swan" is followed by: "Was this wasteland the

swamp? . . . She sang over and over, a chant, her lonely incantation to the swans flying

over country" (240). After references to letters of an Australian poet, Bengali Baul song,

and English seventeenth-century elegy, Oblivia's "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" (240). While it is these thoughts of black swans that instruct

Oblivia "in endurance and perserverance" (240), initially, it is Bella Donna's poetry that

raises memories of the swamp and provides a pathway to thoughts of black swans.[23]

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[22] There are also examples of Oblivia's black swans influencing Bella Donna's narrative: "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 realizing she was deviating from the white swan she had been longing for" (44).

[23] Oblivia's description of her "quest to regain sovereignty over [her] own brain" also begins with images that seem to be drawn from Bella Donna's narrative: "mountainous foreign countries that dwarf the plains and flatlands in their shadows, and between the mountains,

Wright remarks in "On Writing *Carpentaria*" that she has "often thought about how the spirits of other countries have followed their people to Australia and how these spirits might be reconciled with the ancestral spirits that belong here" (92). In the relationship between the stories of white swans and Oblivia's connection to the black swans, Wright communicates the silencing power of colonial discourses while still maintaining the positive potential contained in the concept of multiple, simultaneously active and valid, systems of knowledge. In a similar way to Wright's use of the Gothic form, Oblivia is able to make space in the language of the coloniser. Though Bella Donna's Eurocentric system of representation (the white swans) holds an indoctrinating and silencing power, there are moments in which these other histories activate and facilitate Oblivia's own language and narrative (the black swans). Translation and exchange between systems is shown to be possible; however, there is no complete melding or assimilation, a distinction, a difference, always remains.

Ambiguity and Undecidability

In *The Swan Book*, the concept of a stable and singular truth is undermined both by multiple, valid systems of knowledge, and, on a smaller scale, by the ambiguity of single moments. When attempting to establish a singular definition of what is realistic or true, it is necessary to exclude that which is not realistic and not true. This list generally includes concepts like story, dream, lie, poem, madness, magic, imagination, prophecy and myth. In *The Swan Book*, Wright makes it impossible for a reader to construct and

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there are deserts where a million thirsty people have travelled" (4). These "illusionary ancient homelands" become a tool to try "to lure the virus . . . to the open door" (4).

maintain this distinction, as the items on this list are integral to the creation of action and meaning within the text. These elements and more combine to create narrative and, by denying a consistent distinction between the realms of thought and action, Wright creates a sustained state of undecidability. Ravenscroft argues that in *Carpentaria*, the "conventional European arrangements of objects into reality and fantasy, interiority and exteriority, country and culture, earth and body . . . can no longer hold, and the text moves and morphs, it shimmers" (*Postcolonial* 71). *The Swan Book* is a similarly shimmering text. Its undecidability refuses an unconscious and easy reading practice; it makes me work for meaning and, often, reminds me that some forms of meaning cannot be translated into my own familiar system.

After the owl has led Oblivia to the genie's shop, the street kids begin to follow her on her journeys through the maze-like city streets:

> They wondered whether she was just mad, you know, having gone crazy in the city, and crept in closer to see over her shoulder. None had the girl's ability to visualise how the genie's shop had once been, of seeing tiny birds buzzing inside an antique Chinese aviary constructed of wire that had once been forged into decorative swirls. She ignored their voices whispering in her ear, *What you looken at, sis?*
>
> Inside the aviary flew the smallest hummingbirds in the world—but only if you thought of them flying, flying from cone-like nests in which they slept. The more she stared at the stillness of the nests, the more the hummingbirds would become animated, and would begin darting around the fresh flowers inside the cage. (262-63)

I have reproduced this passage at length as it provides a cogent example of the fluidity, or shimmer, in Wright's style. The reality of the genie's shop wavers in the minds of

readers. At first it is an act of Oblivia's imagination, she "visualises" a past reality of the shop, an image of how it "had once been." This image is both internal and temporally distant. However, the opening statement of the next paragraph briefly converts this image into a reality, interior becomes exterior as "[i]nside the aviary flew the smallest hummingbirds in the world." Then, again, reality is converted back into imaginary, but it is no longer Oblivia's single imaginary that can summon the birds, but the second-person "you." This change suddenly places the reader within the shimmer of the text. Through shifts between external and internal, singular and plural realities, Wright makes it impossible to maintain conventional Western distinctions between real and imaginary.

Even Wright's use of words such as "fact" and "truth" challenge the concept of stable and singular knowledge. Take for example Oblivia reacting to the first swan to arrive at the swamp:

> It was through this narrow prism of viewing something strange and unfamiliar that the girl decided the swan wasn't an ordinary swan and had not been waylaid from its determined path. She knew as a fact that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her. (15)

Within the space of a sentence, Oblivia's self-formed belief, marked by the word "decided," is transformed into something that is known "as a fact."[24] With this transition from "decided" to "fact," Wright gestures to a different understanding of knowledge that is outside of, or alternate to, Western requirements of objectivity and impartiality.[25] By

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[24] Examples of the term "truth" as either plural or unstable span the text—see for example pages 1, 11, 233, 248 or 333.

[25] Kwaymullina and Kwaymullina critique this requirement of objectivity, stating that Western modes of knowing result "in a belief that the only way to understand the world is to stand apart from it; that it is both possible and desirable to disconnect from surrounding relationships so as

undermining this definition Wright also challenges the assumption that there is only one way in which something can be known.

Though these examples are based around differences between Oblivia's and others' perceptions of the world, the undecidability of real and imagined in *The Swan Book* does not exist only within the bounds of Oblivia's individual worldview. Ravenscroft argues that in *Carpentaria* Wright renders "the very division into magical and rational, living and dead, body and country undecidable—at least for this white reader" (*Postcolonial* 70). She continues that "[t]his is not an undecidability that resides (only) in the Aboriginal protagonists. . . . This undecidability is produced in me too" (70–71). In *The Swan Book* undecidability often exists outside Oblivia's consciousness, preventing a reading that locates the text's challenging difference in her, and her alone. After they leave the swamp, Oblivia and Warren Finch journey into the desert accompanied by Hart, Mail and Doom (the three genies). While attempting to run away, Oblivia almost treads on a snake:

> The girl felt the serpent eyes staring into her mind. She felt the sensation of its glare and the immediacy of her fear travelling back through its nervous system, pushing its strength down though [sic] the muscles of its body, and from there her fear sat like a spring in readiness, as the snake prepared to strike. . . . Perspiration ran from her forehead onto the snake's shiny head and over the black beads of its eyes. (183)

Though the first two statements of connection are softened by the word "felt," by halfway through the second sentence this distance is forgotten. The gaze of the serpent travels through Oblivia's mind and its own body, shaping and affecting its physical

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to become an 'impartial' observer," whereas "[i]n Aboriginal systems, the world can only be known by acknowledging and respecting relationships, not by ignoring or denying them" (197).

reality and her own. Rather than a combative interaction between two separate beings, it is the relationship and the connection that is most present for the reader. By the conclusion of the passage Oblivia and the snake are almost indistinguishable as Oblivia's sweat enters the eyes of the snake. With work, this passage can be forced into a reading that denies this connectivity: it is all Oblivia's feelings and she just happens to be standing in such a way that her sweat drips off her forehead and falls directly into the eyes of the snake. However, to read it as such requires effort, and this effort, and the pause it necessitates, is an important element of Wright's text. Her style and poetics create a problem—a moment of undecidability—within my own reading, leaving me with a question that will not, and I argue should not, be easily answered.

While critics have labelled Wright's first novel, *Plains of Promise*, incomplete or flawed (Ravenscroft, *Postcolonial* 55), Ravenscroft argues that there is in fact a power in these perceived flaws: "[i]n the eyes of such critics the strangeness of the writing is the text's failing rather than evidence of its accomplishment" (56). The "flaws" can instead, she argues, be read as "evidence of the failure of certain critical practices that are preoccupied with the task of *making sense*" (56). *Plains of Promise* concludes with an italicised story about waterbirds, narrated by the character Elliot. This story seems to sit outside the flow of the narrative and has challenged readers and reviewers. Ravenscroft suggests this section of the text is one that is potentially inaccessible to her as a white reader:

> Elliot's story is in excess of the story I can read: it is there, it exists, it has effects, but for me as a white reader these effects might be best understood as ones that disturb my certainty in my own capacities to see. It is illegible and excessive in the sense that it exceeds the scene I can see, the story that is mine. (56)

She argues that "reading practices that aim at orienting readers" (56) will not necessarily result in the illegible becoming legible. Instead, this persistent disorientation could be incorporated into a positive and productive reading process. To strenuously read Oblivia and the snake as separate in the passage outlined earlier is an example of a reading practice that aims to orient the white reader. To recognise my disorientation and allow the disruption to my reading that accompanies it, is to acknowledge the limits of my own reading position.

In *The Swan Book*, poetic ambiguity, stylistic choices like free indirect discourse paired with a lack of quotation marks, and the unapologetic disruption of conventional temporal and spatial narratives combine to create instances where my reading cannot go on. Once I have established that my reading has been disrupted, I find myself wondering why. What is it that I cannot read? Why is it that I cannot read it? I have encountered a gap in my vision, but is it my role as a critic to attempt to fill this gap? To translate the unknown into the known? Wright, along with Ravenscroft, suggests that often it is not. Take for example a description of Bella Donna and Oblivia's life on the swamp before the arrival of Warren Finch:

> The swamp's murky water was littered with floating feathers, and it looked as though black angels had flown around in dreams of feeling something good about one another. *Well! Not around here when you were nobody, you don't feel like an angel*, Bella Donna said as though she read thoughts, but she was just passing traffic—generalising about what was going on in the girl's brain. She had no idea of how the girl saw those wasted grey-black feathers.
>
> Ah! All these feathers were just sweet decoration. Feathers floating on fading dreams, obscuring the address that was difficult enough to remember for transporting the girl back to the tree, where in her mind the route she chased

> while sinking away into slithers of thoughts slipped silently in and out of the old
>
> threads woven through the forest of mangled tree roots. (51)

As Oblivia gazes at the feathers that fill the swamp after the Army arrives, Bella Donna, like so many other characters throughout the novel, attempts to vocalise Oblivia's thoughts, responding to what she believes is the focus of the girl's imagination. However, it is made expressly clear that this is a presumption and an impossibility: she has "no idea of how the girl saw those wasted grey-black feathers." Despite her claims, Bella Donna can see through no eyes but her own. And then comes the "Ah!": a vocalised and so, in a way, personalising interjection from a third-person narrative voice. As a reader, this exclamation gives me a sudden feeling of conspiracy, a feeling that perhaps I have more insight, an "in" as it were, that Bella Donna is lacking. I have access to the voice of a potentially omniscient narrator that I as a reader and a knower can engage with. But the promised insight swiftly disintegrates. The sentence that follows is long, winding, poetic and ambiguous. Added to this purposeful inaccessibility of language is a return, or really a frustrating lack of return, to the place that is a locus of irreducible difference: the eucalyptus tree with its ancient, wordless language. How do I read a wordless text? How am I to find my way to meaning through the "forest of mangled tree roots" that is the spatial reality of Oblivia's self? I argue that the power of this passage is that I can't. My position as reader gives me no special powers of objectivity, I am given no special treatment. I am rebuffed in my attempt to claim the omniscient knowing eyes of the narrator and in doing so, claim an understanding of Oblivia's singular self. Like Bella Donna, no matter how I pretend or presume, I am forced to acknowledge that I can see through no eyes but my own and my eyes offer a vision that is necessarily partial and incomplete.

The undecidability that forces recognition of my limited reading position is also created by repetitions and allusions that thread their way through the text. These moments create tenuous connections that hint at stability while simultaneously increasing uncertainty. One example is the Machine's transformation into the owl that guides Oblivia through the city.[26] This transformation is first suggested by Oblivia: yet even then it is unstable. While "[i]nstinctively the girl knew that the owl wanted to be followed," the understanding that the owl is Machine is assigned the less-certain status of "thought": "she thought that Machine had become the owl" (258). The reading of Machine and the owl as one is also undermined two pages later when, on Oblivia's return after her first trip to the shop, Machine asks: "*Where you been?* Odd Machine was waiting at the door, angry but relieved that she had come back. He complained about how lonely he was" (261). However, in the opening lines of the next paragraph, we learn "Oblivia had faith in the owl with a Dean Martin *Houston* song stuck in its head" (261). This song has been mentioned twice: it is playing in the foyer of The People's Palace on Oblivia's arrival, and again as Oblivia asks Machine if she can relocate the swans in the city. It seems likely, then, that the owl with "Houston" stuck in its head is Machine. But such webs of meaning are delicate, diaphanous—shimmering. In many ways, rather than increasing understanding, these tantalising hints make the reader more aware of the gaps in their knowledge.

In *The Singularity of Literature*, Derek Attridge writes:

The otherness that is brought into being by an act of inventive writing—an argument, a particular sequence of words, an imagined series of events embodied in a work—is not just a matter of perceptible difference. It implies a

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[26] Another example is the connections that are created between the stories of Warren and Oblivia such as the dream/reality of the dam of sticks already mentioned (114, 221) or the repeated image of butterflies (98, 131).

wholly new existent that cannot be apprehended by the old modes of

understanding, and could not have been predicted by means of them; its

singularity, even if it is produced by nothing more than a slight recasting of the

familiar and thus of the general, is irreducible. (29)

The ambiguous poetic style of *The Swan Book* consistently produces this irreducible

difference. Wright's multiple and unstable narratives create space within and between

ideas of truth. As Ravenscroft comments, art practice has the capacity to make "the gap

in all knowledge *appear*, but as a gap" (79). On every page, in almost every line,

language and narrative combine to subvert any easy sublimation of this text into the

realm of what is known and thus reducible to the same. I have traced this subversion

through large narrative trends and the ambiguity of single moments, but it is also

consistently present in small shimmers of linguistic strangeness. "Over and over, Oblivia

sings in her head: *Nah! Sporadically all the time. Be full of useful facilities.* And, this: Treat

people decent" (21). "Sporadically all the time" is comically paradoxical and is followed

by the concentric word puzzle of "full of useful facilities" where the outer words

combine and are reshaped to make the inner, and then the disarmingly straight: "Treat

people decent." With poetry and wordplay Wright draws attention to language and

recasts my familiar system of making meaning into something unfamiliar and opaque,

creating a language that is perhaps beyond my ability to translate.

Questioning Magical Realism

In *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004),

Wendy B. Faris defines magical realism as a mode that "combines realism and the

fantastic so that the marvellous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring

the distinction between them" (1). Though the term originated in the early twentieth

century in the context of post-expressionist German art, in literary criticism magical

realism has become a term generally linked to postcolonial literature. The hybridity and

destabilising elements of the form make magical realist texts particularly welcoming to

postcolonial literary criticism; as Stephen Slemon argues in "Magical Realism as Post-

Colonial Discourse" (1988), the literary practice of magical realism encodes within it "a

concept of resistance to the massive imperial centre and its totalizing systems" (10).

This close link is reiterated by Faris when she argues that "[m]agical realism radically

modifies and replenishes the dominant mode of realism in the West, challenging its

basis of representation" (1). Certainly, *The Swan Book* "resists the force of totalizing

systems," and a discussion of magical realism can create valid readings. However,

similar to the Gothic, I argue that when reading this text there are limits to the

usefulness of magical realism as a critical lens. Furthermore, applying the binary

framework of magical realism can deny the unknowability of the text and obscure the

limits of my reading position. Similar to the construction of my arguments in Chapter 1,

my critique of magical realism does not dismiss its usefulness entirely. Both Ben Holgate

and Takolander have produced relevant work on *The Swan Book* with magical realism

as their central theoretical focus. However, *The Swan Book* demands more than familiar

modes of translation and interpretation can provide and I challenge the ultimate worth

of an easy application of the term magical realism. Below I outline two possible

constructions of the relationship between "magic" and "realism" with both leading to a

denial of the difference represented by the "magic" elements of a text, or subsumption

of that difference into existing systems of representation. I will argue Todorov's theory

of the fantastic is a more useful framework through which to understand the central role that uncertainty and irreducible difference play in the text.

In the emerging criticism of *The Swan Book*, two articles focus particularly on its status as a magical realist text: Takolander's "Theorizing Irony and Trauma in Magical Realism: Juno Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*" and Holgate's "Unsettling Narratives: Re-evaluating Magical Realism as Postcolonial Discourse through Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*." Takolander approaches magical realism from what she herself describes as a "minority theoretical position" (96). She distances herself from readings of magical realism as "authentic expression of cultural identity or of historical trauma" (118) and instead draws out the more playful and self-conscious elements of the text, labelling it an "ironic magical realist novel" (112). However, the focus of her reading remains postcolonial criticism as she argues that the "supernatural" elements of the text are "narrated in ironic ways designed to call attention to a compromised neo-colonial history and contribute to the construction of an uncompromised postcolonial future" (97). Holgate's approach is perhaps more familiar. He begins with Slemon's theory of magical realism as "a battle between two oppositional systems" (10-11), the "magical" and the "realistic," the colonised and the coloniser. Wright's magical realist fiction, he argues, "presents the supernatural as an ordinary, everyday occurrence" (3) that advocates "a localized mode of knowledge production as an alternative to western epistemology" (7). *The Swan Book* is a magical realist text that "portrays ongoing colonization in a supposedly postcolonial nation" (1). Building on Slemon's two discursive systems, Holgate argues that the text "incorporates three oppositional systems: the Indigenous colonised; the white settler colonizer; and global economic forces that help perpetuate the ongoing colonization" (1).

The importance of magical realism for postcolonial literary criticism can be broadly located in the genre's capacity to express difference, to articulate that which is outside established, imperial systems of representation. However, some critics have argued that theorising these texts as magical realism *denies* difference. Khair broadly separates the capacity of magical realism to deny difference into two potential outcomes. The first is that it encourages the separation of the two modes ("magic" and "realism") into an unhelpful and hierarchical colonial paradigm. The second outcome is that the binary structure is denied, and the hybridity of the genre is emphasised. With the emphasis on hybridity comes a lack of opposition, and the field of the same consumes difference. I will return to this second path later, but first I will focus on the construction of a hierarchical binary relationship.

The representational codes that battle within the magical realist text represent a binary opposition between two distinct worlds. As Ravenscroft argues, these worlds "are now keenly associated with the world of the coloniser on the one hand and the colonised on the other. Unsurprisingly, the so-called magic falls on the side of the Indigenous colonised subjects and so-called reality remains on the side of the colonisers" (*Postcolonial* 62). The "magic" of the other's world is ultimately positioned as the less realistic, less relevant, less rational alternative to the more familiar realism. In this way, postcolonial theorisation of magical realism often implicitly adheres to the hierarchical binary structure of representation that the form itself purports to destabilise. Ravenscroft locates the source of this seeming paradox in a shift that has occurred between historian and art critic Franz Roh's original use of the term, and the way in which it is commonly mobilised in postcolonial literary criticism. As Ravenscroft explains, for Roh the term refers to the possibility of strangeness, or magic, within one's own experience of reality. However, as previously stated, the term is now often used to

describe the difference between two separate experiences of reality. "The doubleness of a psychic reality which for Roh, after Freud, always has its own 'magic' within it is now arranged across two fields, with magic and its correlates—dream, delusion, irrationality—appearing in the field of the other" (62). If I conceive of both my own field of experience as a divided but knowable whole and my own experience *and* the other's as *the same* divided but knowable whole, then I am necessarily able to consider the experience of the other to be a knowable field. Furthermore, not only is it knowable, it is also a correlate to dream and delusion, as my own experience occupies realism and the experience of the other occupies magic. In this way, the binary structure inherent in magical realism denies an engagement with difference as difference. Instead, it is immediately *known*, as an externalised but recognisable version of the unreal elements of my own experience.

Holgate argues that "Wright's work reminds us that seemingly straightforward classifications, like white-settler society or postcolonial, often do not adequately reflect the complex reality of a particular territory" and that as magical realism is a narrative mode that "transgresses boundaries of all kinds" it is an "apt fictional mode to explore these quandaries" (12). His arguments that Wright's work destabilises Western epistemology and portrays multiple realities (7, 8) are productive and relevant to my own work earlier in this chapter. However, they are ultimately more limiting than enlightening. As Ravenscroft asks, "When a white reader determines the text's placement in her own genre of magical realism, what is this but a determination to read her own bewilderment as the other's magic?" (69). Why classify as magic what Wright describes as "things that were happening in the everyday life of the people of the Gulf" ("On Writing" 89)? Furthermore, magical realism encourages labelling and therefore obscures the limits of a reader's ability to know. For Holgate, "the magical aspects of

magical realism" (10) can be identified, separated, named and therefore known: "the

magical (Warren's spiritual training) and the real (corporate brutality)" (11). By neatly

parcelling elements of the text into the magic and the real, Holgate undermines his own

argument that "straightforward classifications . . . do not adequately reflect the complex

reality" (12) and limits the acknowledgment of the strain that Wright places on "white

readers' assurance that they can decide what is real and what is magical, . . . whether it

is a reality represented naturalistically and when it is figured in code" (Ravenscroft,

Postcolonial 67).

If I am then incapable of separating the magical elements from the realistic

elements of a text, how should I approach a text like *The Swan Book*? An alternative is to

deny the separation altogether. However, this approach is the basis of the second of

Khair's critiques of magical realism: that instead of a binary separation, "magic" is

folded seamlessly into "reality" and therefore Cartesian certainties are left uncontested.

As Khair asks: "does magical realism leave any space for Otherness at all? By collapsing

all possible oppositions, does it also reduce alterity to a kind of 'hybridity' that is always

there, integral to itself and reality, and hence finally devoid of contestation?" (138). In

other words, if in magical realism "the marvellous seems to grow organically within the

ordinary, blurring the distinction between them" (Faris 1) then difference has been

accommodated into the field of the same. Khair argues that there is a

> tendency in magical realism to collapse difference, unite them within a fluid
>
> whole. This is best illustrated in its self-definition as fiction that combines the
>
> magical with the "real" in such a way that both are essentially the same or at
>
> least interchangeable. This has its advantages. But it also has the disadvantage of
>
> removing both as containing possible contradictions, and definitely aspects that
>
> are not possible to combine without doing violence to the one or the other. (140)

Absorbing the magical into realism becomes another path to the assumption of knowledge. In this way, the theorisation of the positive potential of the liquidity of magical realism can be read as one of the "universalizing gestures" described by Hoy "that ignore difference and absorb disparate historical and material realities into dominant paradigms" (7).

Furthermore, to attempt to eliminate the hierarchical binary structure of magical realism by arguing that the "magical" elements of *The Swan Book*, that is those that are read as relating to Indigenous epistemologies, are interchangeable with the "realistic" elements fundamentally depends on yet another assumption of knowledge of that "magic." As Takolander argues, "supernatural events in magical realist novels cannot be consistently attributed to any mythological system" (98). An "ethnographic theory of magical realism," she continues, is unhelpful as "[m]agical realist literature typically turns against its own fantastical elements rather than authenticating them" ("Theorizing" 99). For example, in *The Swan Book* time is disrupted by Oblivia's extended sleep in the roots of the eucalyptus tree and her experience of the ghost language is real and plays an important role in the construction of meaning and narrative. However, this story is sometimes denied, sometimes labelled as dream or madness:

> Everything in her mind became mucked up. This is the kind of harm the accumulated experience of an exile will do to you, anyone who believes that they slept away half their life in the bowel of a eucalyptus tree. (14)

With shifts and instabilities such as this in mind, I echo Ravenscroft who asks: "in what sense a white reader could be said to know Indigenous Law, and how would she ever distinguish it from the text's huge, generous, imaginative playfulness?" (63). I am unable to distinguish precisely Indigenous Law from madness, poetry, humour and play. Rather

than "offering a reader an opportunity to acquire new knowledge about Indigenous Law" (63) and allowing me to feel confident in denying a hierarchical binary structure by labelling elements of Indigenous epistemology as "real," my confusion is a source of power for *The Swan Book*. Hoy argues that "[p]articularly with cultures romanticized and appropriated, defamiliarization and a recognition of silences and impasses rather than quick cultural keys may be a more useful critical stance" (78). This recommendation of impasses of knowledge over an appropriative interpretation based on "quick cultural keys" is reiterated by Ravenscroft when she suggests that rather than reading Wright's work 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 unknowablility and undecidability" (77).

I turn now to a discussion of Todorov's concept of the fantastic as a possible alternative to the limiting framework of magical realism. The contrast of the fantastic to magical realism is not new; Khair discusses the distinction. However, after so thoroughly outlining how *not* to read the text, I would now gesture to an alternative, positive framework. For Todorov, the fantastic is neither realism, nor the uncanny, nor the marvellous; it is instead a genre defined by a prolonged state of indecision:

> In a world which is indeed our world . . . there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is a victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of imagination—and the laws of the world remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality. . . . The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. (25)

This description of two possible reactions to the unknown mirrors the two understandings of magical realism described and critiqued by Khair: either the magic is

not real, is a delusion, is less than the real; or, it is a part of the real. Rather than allowing its reader to choose, to label, to feel certain, *The Swan Book*, like the fantastic, exists in the "duration of this uncertainty." Ravenscroft categorises the style of *Carpentaria* as "an aesthetics of uncertainty," stating that through "a lack of unitary resolution"—an "irresolvable equivocality in language and form"—it "accomplishes its political work" (*Postcolonial* 70). Similarly, *The Swan Book* is built on moments that shimmer, events that force the reader to hesitate between possible readings, and in doing so, prevent a sense of interpretive closure.

When discussing Gérard de Nerval's *Aurélia*, Todorov gives specific examples of linguistic ambiguity created by the use of the imperfect tense and modalization. Examples include phrases such as "it seemed to me that" or "I had the sense that"—additions to text which, "without changing the meaning of the sentence, modify the relation between speaker and his utterance" (38). Todorov gives as an example how the statement "these currents were constituted of living souls" is rendered ambiguous by a sentential antecedent phrase: "*I had the sense that* these currents were constituted of living souls" (38). Todorov argues that "[w]ithout these locutions, we should be plunged into the world of the marvellous, with no reference to everyday reality. By means of them, we are kept in both worlds at once" (38). In *The Swan Book*, the multiplicities and linguistic ambiguity I outlined earlier in this chapter work to maintain uncertainty in a similar way, forestalling interpretive closure and preventing the reader from claiming the text as knowable. Instead of the binary structure of magical realism, the fantastic allows for the centrality of uncertainty in the poetics and politics of *The Swan Book*. For a white reader, the distinction between what is magic and what is real is engulfed by the realisation and acceptance of undecidability. As Ravenscroft argues "the endless movement that for Slemon is the dialectic never results in full knowledge. . . . [I]nstead

we might think not of a continual movement between knowledges, not using one to fill in a gap in the other, but the gap in all knowledge" (74). In *The Swan Book* Wright destabilises knowledge and creates a space in which a reader, rather than denying difference or claiming a universal knowledge, engages with difference as difference, recognising that which is unknowable, untranslatable and irreducible.

In *Fables of Responsibility: Aberrations and Predicaments in Ethics and Politics*, Thomas Keenan defines reading as

> our exposure to the singularity of a text, something that cannot be organized in advance, whose complexities cannot be settled or decided by "theories" or the more or less mechanical application of programs. Reading, in this sense, is what happens when we cannot apply the rules. This means that reading is an experience of responsibility, but that responsibility is not a moment of security or cognitive certainty. (1)

Similarly, Attridge argues that "the literary work demands a reading . . . that involves both active engagement and a letting-go, a hospitable embrace of the other" (130). The cognitive uncertainty of *The Swan Book*, the moments when the rules do not apply, encourages in a white reader an acknowledgment of the limits of their own field of knowledge and a hospitable recognition of the other's difference. In "Politics of Writing," Wright states that "[r]acism is strong in this country, make no mistake about it. And it will remain that way as long as it promotes the notion that there can be only one Australia" (15). Wright creates undecidability through narrative and linguistic ambiguity, and in doing so, disrupts the violent fiction of one Australia, encouraging readers to acknowledge that (both inside and outside this text) other horizons exist.

Chapter 3

"a sensation of straining to hear": Whiteness and Untranslatability

> Finding ways to put a politics of difference into practice will require more
>
> than including voice or making space for Indigenous women in Australian
>
> feminism. . . . Perhaps the way forward is to make trouble by
>
> reconfiguring theory to deal with how to give up power.
>
> Aileen Moreton-Robinson, "Troubling Business" (351)

The Swan Book's ambiguity and strangeness disrupt and disorient my reading

experience. But what precisely does this mean in terms of my interaction with this text?

In this chapter I am interested in creating a reading of reading, as it were, by analysing

examples of white reading practices within the text but also by scrutinizing my own

position and power, and discussing the possibility of working productively with the

literary and linguistic difference established in Chapters 1 and 2 in order to begin to

relinquish a little of the power that my privileged reading position affords. In *The Swan*

Book Wright continually critiques the universalising or silencing effect of the white gaze

and creates an irreducible difference that urges me to confront the realities and

limitations of my own position as a white reader. However, within the concept of

irreducible difference, or untranslatability, is contained a threat of an impossibility of

communication. I offer the concept of translation as a venue for the exploration of how

The Swan Book navigates this seeming paradox, simultaneously managing to be a

medium for irreducible difference and a facilitator of communication and exchange.

In the section "Visible Whiteness" I argue that Wright draws attention to and critiques whiteness as a racial location and identity within the text, establishing whiteness as distinct and recognisable. During Oblivia's stay at the Christmas house the histories and world of whiteness with which she is confronted are foreign to and separate from her established reality. Wright's description of the guests who attend the wedding presents a critique of the privileged racial blindness of the white gaze and its paradoxical reliance on the racialised other. Furthermore, I argue that the representations of Warren reflect bell hooks's critique of the imperialist use of the other to provide "life-sustaining alternatives" (25) for the West.

Turning away from the whiteness represented in the text, I return in "Theorising Whiteness and Questioning Difference" to the concept of incommensurable difference with the intention of more fully exploring my position as a white reader of *The Swan Book*. I draw on the work of both Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Hoy to highlight the importance of recognising my reading position. Furthermore, by working through the importance of viewing position, or standpoint, in establishing an ethical reading practice, I combat some of the critiques of Ravenscroft's privileging of irreducible difference.

Finally, I turn to the question of whether a too-aggressive adherence to the principle of radical difference in fact results in an unhelpful and self-indulgent silence on the part of a white critic. I use the framework of translation theory to establish a path that simultaneously allows for communication and discussion while maintaining the importance of the recognition of radical difference.

Visible Whiteness

In *The Swan Book*, Wright makes whiteness visible as a racial category and interrogates its status as the universal (non-racialised) norm. The most straightforward examples of Wright's critique come from Oblivia's stay in the home of a woman known only as Big Red. It is here Oblivia is married to Warren and her stay, for all its brevity, is the longest interaction with collective whiteness she faces. Wright purposely constructs this whiteness as a world outside Oblivia's experience. When exploring the house, Oblivia follows the family cat into a room devoted entirely to extensive and seemingly impossibly detailed "white Christmas" dioramas. On entering the room, the cat warns her: "Don't get sucked into other people's worlds. And don't knock anything over and spoil the dream" (217), immediately presenting these performed narratives as alien and false.

> They passed each elaborate world of dreams, where miniature winter people went about their business walking, stopping to talk to others, living among reindeers, tending baby deer, riding colourful sleighs, and looking at a cheerful Santa with elves, and grinning snowmen. There were carol singers that looked into rooms of brightly wrapped presents, decorated Christmas trees, dinner tables laden with feasts, bowls of delicious apples and pears, and behind them, a country side full of red robins singing in bare-branch trees, and miniaturised forests of pine trees laden with fake snow. (217)

Though these miniature scenes are clichéd and ridiculous, oblique references link them to the life of Big Red and her family. The "dinner table laden with feasts" foreshadows the wedding banquet that later overwhelms Oblivia with its opulence, while the "miniaturised forest of pine trees laden with fake snow" is reminiscent of the red-

headed family's backyard that is filled with abandoned potted Christmas trees, and their reminiscences of "*the good old days when we could even cover the whole yard, trees and all, with the snowflake machine*" (213). To Oblivia, however, these scenes are unfamiliar. She "examine[s] each of the created worlds closely with a dark, morbid fascination, consciously searching for failure, proof of fault, in the perfect images of nostalgia" (217).[27] After another extended description of the miniaturised scenery, Wright reiterates Oblivia's desire to find a crack in their perfect façades of whiteness: "The girl had spent hours searching for deception in these countless miniature scenes, perhaps because she hoped that some tiny voice would reach up to her ear" (219). Later it is revealed that the tiny voice Oblivia fails to find is that which speaks against exclusionary whiteness: "After exploring all of these little scenes that had been created by months of labour, she found no eucalyptus tree trunk with its strange writing in the dust. . . . She could not understand why this history did not exist in this world of creation" (219). With this passage Wright explicitly points to the universalising and silencing power of whiteness. Moreton-Robinson argues that

> within whiteness's regime of power, all representations are not of equal value: some are deemed truthful while others are classified fictitious, some are contested while others form part of our commonsense taken-for-granted knowledge of the world. Imbued with a power that normalises their existence, these latter representations are invisible, unnamed and unmarked. ("Whiteness" 76–77)

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[27] These wintertime dioramas can also be read as a reference to Irving Berlin's highly nostalgic song "White Christmas," which, written in sunny California, longs for the snow-laden scenes of colder climates. As a result, the nostalgia felt by Big Red and her family for a Christmas in a world before global warming is doubled in the existing role that snowy Christmases play in the nostalgia of settler colonists longing for the established images of European traditions.

The hegemonic whiteness of the world of the dioramas is the unquestioned and

invisible norm until Oblivia finds and articulates the flaw she has been searching for:

"There was no miniature black girl such as herself in any of these depictions of

humanity, no swamp of people quarrelling over food, not even Warren Finch among the

black shepherds, or a black Wise King" (219). With this statement I am reminded that

these little scenes of happy faces are incomplete. Though they contain aspects that act to

move them away from trivially decorative representations of western mythology into

representations of historical fact,[28] these representations are nothing but a dream:

partial and fabricated.

This dream of homogenous whiteness extends to Oblivia's interactions with the

white characters she encounters during her stay. Before the wedding, Big Red bathes

and dresses her, and even this simple action is satirised: "The fiery woman worked her

fingers to the bone to get into the girl's brain, as though this was where one removed

grime, salt, vegetation, blood of dead animals, lice and whatever thoughts about having

different origins she had brought into this house" (221). This compulsion to obliterate

Oblivia's difference is combined with several examples of subtle objectification. In the

statement that Big Red "knew to expect her to be dark, not that dark, but the colour was

fine for the cream silk that had been ordered" (222), the colour of the silk is given

precedence over Oblivia, who becomes an accessory to the dress, a mannequin that only

just completes its purpose. This objectification is reiterated by Big Red's exclamation:

"*Unbelievable! Who would have thought you could put the bush where you come from into*

a frock" (222).

The desire to eliminate difference is echoed in the conversation of the wedding

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[28] For example the vista of "Sir Winston Churchill mourning his war gift (a black swan) from
Australia before World War II" (219).

guests:

> *But she was half mad when he found her.*
>
> *Was that when she was living in a tree or something?*
>
> *They say she didn't even know her own name.*
>
> *Why? I never heard of anyone not knowing their own name.*
>
> *Well! It is true. Not all people are the same.*
>
> *Bullshit! We are one country here. We are all Australians. All equal. No one is any different.*
>
> *Well! If you don't believe it, go and ask her what her name is.* (227–28)

This exchange, while comically presented as a flurry of anonymous repartee, enunciates both the privileged racial blindness of the white colonial gaze and its paradoxical reliance on the racialised other. Moreton-Robinson argues that "[i]n the guise of the invisible human universal, whiteness secures hegemony through discourse by normalising itself as the cultural space of the West" ("Whiteness" 78):

> Australia as a former colony of Britain saw the transplanting of an English form of whiteness to its shores. . . . The White Australia policy made Anglocentric whiteness the definitive marker of citizenship; and a form of property born of social status to which others were denied access including Indigenous people. Through political, economic and cultural means Anglocentric whiteness restricted and determined who could vote, . . . who was entitled to legal representation and who could enter Australia. These devices of exclusion did not articulate who or what is white but rather who or what is not white.
>
> ("Whiteness" 79)

In the exchange between the wedding guests, Australian subjectivity is secured as white, not by an explicit recognition that the privileges accorded to an Australian

citizen, those that make us "equal," are historically defined by Anglocentric whiteness,

but instead by excluding the non-white subject: Oblivia. Furthermore, while this

conversation purports to establish our universal sameness, it is in fact aggressively

racist and brought about solely by a contemplation of Oblivia's perceived inferior

difference. Moreton-Robinson argues that "as an ontological and epistemological *a*

priori, whiteness is defined by what it is not (animal or liminal), thereby staking an

exclusive claim to the truly human. In this way, racial superiority becomes a part of

one's ontology, albeit unconsciously, and informs the white subject's knowledge

production" ("Whiteness" 77–78). During the conversation between the guests, any

potential for positive difference is silenced by the voice of homogenising whiteness

claiming that in order to be equal we must be same: "*We are all Australians. All equal. No*

one is any different." However, as Moreton-Robinson explains, to know what is same,

one must be able to recognize difference. The universal is represented as an opposition

to Oblivia's difference: "*I never heard of anyone not knowing their own name.*" It follows

that if the universal is the "equal," the "Australian," the "truly human," then the

difference must necessarily be constructed as unequal, un-Australian, less than human.

In the course of Oblivia's time in Big Red's house, Wright reinforces and

complicates her satirical critique of Warren's political allies. Their reaction to his

marriage is reminiscent of hooks's discussions of cultural appropriation and melancholy

imperialist nostalgia in her text *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992). After the

wedding, the politicians, journalists and business people who are the guests "spoke in

hushed tones to fill the moment by clinking glasses to honour [Warren's] peculiarly

bizarre but honorable marriage whether they thought it was exploitation or not, the

thing was, it was a novel idea indeed" (Wright 222–25). As hooks argues, in some cases

"the contemporary crises of identity in the west . . . are eased when the 'primitive' is

recouped *via* a focus on diversity and pluralism which suggests the Other can provide life-sustaining alternatives" (25). To a room full of powerful white Australians, Warren seems to offer these alternatives. Earlier in the text Wright has presented the possibility that Warren has the ability to "save the planet" using "secret information" found in "centuries-old documents containing ancient laws" (127). While at the wedding "Warren smiled amicably, briefly, politely to hear snippets of important news among these high-profile advocates of worthy causes, human rights, moral judgement, espousing correct answers for saving the lives of Aborigines, displaced people, freedom of speech, endangered species, the environment" (224). hooks recognises that the introduction of racial difference into dominant culture can be a positive breakthrough, a disruption of hegemonic whiteness (39). However, she argues, "the over-riding fear is that the cultural, ethnic, and racial differences will be continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate—that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten" (39). Furthermore, "[w]hen the dominant culture demands that the Other be offered as a sign that progressive political change is taking place . . . it invites the resurgence of essentialist cultural nationalism. The acknowledged Other must assume recognizable forms" (26). This impulse can be traced in Wright's description of the national outpouring of grief after the death of Warren:

> It certainly seemed as though there was a national deafness to hearing what other Aboriginal people had to say of themselves. Perhaps it was the tone of voice? Or the message that could be heard, or could not be heard? . . . Whatever the case, it seemed that the country was locked up inside a curse of national fever-pitch dimensions in its grief for this one Aboriginal voice now dead, but still heard throughout the world. (291)

The difference that Warren represented as the first Aboriginal President of Australia is

mourned with a self-indulgent excess that Wright also describes as "a form of greed" and a "glut of reverence" (290). However, this excess applies only to the difference presented by Warren as his is the only voice that comes in what hooks would designate an appropriately "recognizable form" (26): other Aboriginal people do not "have enough of the evangelical in their voices for proclaiming themselves sinners of their own race, like Warren Finch did on their behalf" (291).

Interestingly, Big Red voices a version of this critique of the appropriation and commodification of Warren's difference during the wedding:

> *Trying to be honourable. Such hypocrites. All of them. Fancy trying to justify oblique practices from another culture they know nothing about and wanting to build it into the normal practice of Australian law. But what can you say? Men from the mountaintops will always come down to the molehill to conquer it. That will always be the vice of the conqueror.* (225)

While Big Red's scorn of her male counterparts and their justification of Warren's manipulation and exploitation of Oblivia may be justified, this critique is another example of Wright's deconstruction of silencing and silent whiteness. Big Red's critique of the blindly appropriative practices of white patriarchy is directed at Oblivia and, after she has spent the night reminding Oblivia of the importance of the men around her, might be an olive branch. However, her use of the word "normal," her equation of whiteness with the lofty heights of mountaintops and the daring deeds of conquerors, combined with her earlier avowed wish to eradicate Oblivia's difference, turn her mockery into a multilayered meditation on the unquestioned complicity of white privilege. In this way, Big Red embodies Moreton-Robinson's argument that though it is unsurprisingly tempting for white feminists to focus on patriarchal oppression, "failing to racialise white women as such means white race privilege remains uninterrogated as

a source of oppression and inequality" ("Troubling" 344-45). Throughout *The Swan Book*, Wright ensures that whiteness is made visible and interrogates the role it plays in gaining and maintaining power.

Theorising Whiteness and Questioning Difference

I turn now from a reading of whiteness in the text, to a more thorough investigation of white reading practices of Indigenous texts. I work through a critique of Ravenscroft's irreducible difference by introducing Moreton-Robinson's arguments for the need for me as a white reader to recognise and theorise my own racialised body. However, while the importance of recognition of my position can be established, the question of the potential paralysis as a result of a too strict adherence to irreducible difference remains.

The importance of articulating and examining my own reading position is established by Moreton-Robinson in "Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation":

> it is academics who represent themselves as "knowers" whose work and training is to "know". They have produced knowledge about Indigenous people but their way of knowing is never thought of by white people as being racialised despite whiteness being exercised epistemologically. Whiteness establishes the limits of what can be known about the other through itself, disappearing beyond or behind the limits of this knowledge it creates in the other's name. (75)

If then, I refuse to allow my own whiteness to disappear in an illusion of objectivity and academic distance, the question remains: how do I interact with, and write about, an Indigenous text?

In her introduction to *How Should I Read These?* Hoy outlines common responses of white, particularly female, readers of Native texts. These responses, she argues, fall loosely into the categories of denial, guilt and retreat. Denial involves white readers' unwillingness to examine the privilege accorded them as a result of their whiteness. For example, "the attempt, by emphasizing one's positions of subordination and not privilege (as a woman, say), to disclaim responsibility for subordinating others. . . . [is] a denial [that] obscures the necessity, as a part of ending one's own marginalization, to end all systems of marginalization" (16). The second response Hoy describes, the static self-recrimination of guilt, results in "the determination to 'get it right'" (17). This becomes an indication of personal virtue and overwhelms the impulse to take action against inequality. Lastly, Hoy describes the retreat response which involves "[d]eciding not to attempt to speak beyond one's own experience" (17). Drawing on feminist philosopher Linda Alcoff, Hoy argues that this decision can be either "a self-indulgent evasion of political effort *or* a principled effort at non-imperialist engagement (although, in the latter case, with a seriously restricted scope)" (17). Aware of these possible reactions, Hoy argues they do not represent the only alternatives. Instead, using terms proposed by postcolonial feminist scholar Uma Narayan, Hoy suggests

> "methodological humility" and "methodological caution" as strategies for the outsider. Methodological—or epistemological—humility and caution recognise presumed limitations to the outsider's understanding and the importance of not undermining the insider's perspective in the process of communicating and learning across difference. (18)

In *The Postcolonial Eye*, Ravenscroft advocates a similar, though more limiting, methodological and epistemological caution, calling for "a different ethics of looking, in particular, for aesthetic practices that allow Indigenous cultural products, especially in

the literary arts, to retain their strangeness in the eyes of a white subject" (i). By deconstructing the experience of "the settler-reader faced with an Indigenous-signed text" and investigating not only "how to read differently, but . . . the places where reading cannot go on" (2), she argues for the positive potential of not just recognising our limitations as readers, but embracing them.

Discussions of the body and embodied experience can be found at the centre of Ravenscroft's theory. In her second chapter, "Coming to Matter," Ravenscroft (quoting personal correspondence with Wright) states that "[w]ithin Australian Indigenous conceptions of country, country is bound with story itself: 'Stories are told to and by this ancestral land'" (31). "Country writes," Ravenscroft argues, and "bodies read" (31). She then turns to the question of why it is "that some bodies can read this country when for others it remains illegible" (31). After a discussion of Jennifer L. Biddle's description of the women-only *Yawulya* Dreaming ceremonies among the Warlpiri of the Central Desert, Ravenscroft concludes

> It is not enough to speak of the differences as being in the register of belief or
> epistemology if by that we mean that belief or knowledge are separable from the
> embodied subject. . . . To live in a cultural context, a place, is to be a particular
> body/subject. It is to enter/be entered into a particular arrangement of matter.
> (40)

It is arguments like this, arguments that present a conflation of subjectivity and matter, that have prompted critiques of Ravenscroft's work as essentialist. In "Falling From View: Whiteness, Appropriation and the Complicities of Desire in *The Postcolonial Eye*" Anne Maxwell and Odette Kelada question the foundation of Ravenscroft's claims of an essential difference between white and Indigenous viewpoints: "Ravenscroft does not explain how she arrives at her claim, resonant in articulation with essentialist ideas,

that White Australians are so profoundly 'different' from Indigenous Australians" (7).

Though the absoluteness of Ravenscroft's conception of difference can be superficially

concerning, I would argue her strict adherence to the importance of acknowledging

standpoint in the construction of knowledge is fundamentally positive and productive

as it encourages in a white reader a consistent awareness of their own racialised body

and reading position.

Moreton-Robinson argues that, courtesy of their whiteness, white feminists

possess the capability to "deploy a Cartesian shift to forget their racialised bodies when

they theorise" ("Troubling" 350). It is this strategic separation of mind and body

Ravenscroft seeks to eliminate with what might be viewed as her essentialist focus on

matter and the difference of a white standpoint. As Moreton-Robinson explains, if a

theorist or academic claims the status of transcendent subject, then physical and

material realities are ignored and

> their standpoint becomes that of a virtual deracialised subject/knower. . . . There
>
> is no imperative for white women to acknowledge, own, and change their
>
> complicity in racial domination, because the mind/body split works to position
>
> "race" as extrinsic to the subject ("Troubling" 350).

Furthermore, in "Towards an Australian Indigenous Women's Standpoint Theory"

Moreton-Robinson explicitly works through the critique of the "strategic essentialism"

that some might claim is created by her "imputing an essence to being Indigenous"

(343). She argues:

> from an Indigenous epistemology, what is essentialist is the premise upon which
>
> such criticism is situated: the western definition of the self as multiple, becoming
>
> and unfixed. This conception of self, whose humanness is disconnected from the
>
> earth, values itself above every other living thing, is a form of strategic

essentialism that can silence and dismiss non-Western constructions, which do not define the self in the same way. (343)

Rather than presenting a reductive essentialism, theories like Ravenscroft's that take as their foundation the viewing position or standpoint of the subject bring into question "the ability of patriarchal white knowledge production to make truth claims through an episteme that does not accept there are limits to knowing and the metaphysical traces that underpin its logic" (Moreton-Robinson, "Towards" 344). Furthermore, anti-essentialist critiques such as that presented by Maxwell and Kelada, rather than advocating less restrictive conceptions of subjectivity, can instead be read as stemming from a falsely universal definition of self that is grounded in western patriarchal constructions of truth (Moreton-Robinson, "Towards" 343–44).

In "Troubling Business" Moreton-Robinson argues "white race privilege remains un-interrogated as a site of domination because whiteness is not positioned as racial location and identity" (347). She concludes that "[f]inding ways to put a politics of difference into practice will require more than including voices or making space for Indigenous women in Australian feminism. It will require white race privilege to be owned and challenged by white feminists engaged in anti-racist pedagogy and politics. . . . Perhaps the way forward" she suggests "is to make trouble by reconfiguring theory to deal with how to give up power" (351). Wright's singular poetics, when combined with the focus on standpoint and reading evidenced by Moreton-Robinson, Ravenscroft and Hoy, offers me an opportunity to acknowledge my own racialised body and mode of reading. As a result, I can experience moments of confusion and alienation not as a failure of either the text or my ability as a reader, but as a positive and productive opportunity for me to give up power.

Though I have made a case for the positive potential of irreducible difference, there are aspects of Maxwell and Kelada's critique that are yet to be addressed. In the final section of their review, they formulate a question that, in my opinion, is not explicitly or at least sufficiently answered by Ravenscroft, in either *The Postcolonial Eye* or "Another Way of Reading *The Postcolonial Eye*," her direct response to Maxwell and Kelada's review. They ask:

> [I]f "othering" Indigeneity is taken to the extent of "radical difference" how can this open possibilities beyond a paralysis in a problematic discourse founded on a colonial paradigm? If two cultures (as presented in this text) are incommensurate, are readers likely to take the view that there is no point in reading given the inherent imposition of wrong . . . interpretations? This is especially the case if reading is viewed only as a linear act culminating with a recognition or affirmation of a text's unintelligibility or opaqueness. (7)

Similar criticisms are raised when the concept of irreducible difference is introduced into discussions of translation theory in the form of untranslatability. As Apter states in her discussion of analytic philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine's insistence on "non-identity between even the most scientifically compatible languages": "each language carries a world peculiarly its own." Therefore "[i]mmured in a fortress of untranslatability, the Quinean language user is caught in the vise of linguistic essentialism" (*Translation* 111). Furthermore, Hoy argues that if an assumption of cultural difference goes unquestioned it will often lead to "[d]econtextualised, commodifiable tokens of difference tak[ing] the place of shared involvement in processes of social and political change . . . and the more pertinent, political cross-cultural communication that this might entail" (4). Citing Stuart Hall, she goes on to argue that "[a]lthough potentially part of a radical politics, respect for social specificity

and challenges to ethnocentrism can produce, ironically, 'a kind of difference that doesn't make a difference of any kind' (Hall 23)" (5).

I have to this point been building an argument that values my inability to read certain aspects of *The Swan Book*. Irreducible difference encourages recognition of the limits of my reading position and prevents the assimilation or appropriation of difference. However, it is possible to allow this recognition of difference in its strictest form to solidify into a silence that resembles the retreat response listed by Hoy as one of the inadequate responses to Native texts by non-Native readers. It should be considered whether a too-aggressive adherence to radical difference results in the "self-indulgent evasion of political effort" (17) described by Hoy. As Chandra Mohanty suggests, the decision of white academics and theorists not to contribute to discussions that fall beyond their own experience can produce "a comfortable set of oppositions: people of color as the central voices and bearers of all knowledge . . . and white people as 'observers,' with no responsibility to contribute and/or with nothing of value to contribute" ("On Race" 194). However, the methodological caution Hoy suggests not only encourages the recognition of my own limitations and the importance of the other's perspective, but is also fundamentally a process of communication and learning (18). In summary, after establishing radical difference with the intention of preventing cultural appropriation, the question that seems consistently to remain is where do we go from here? Is it possible to build productive, political and ethical communication on a foundation of irreducible difference? I argue that the two are not mutually exclusive and turn to a discussion of translation theory as a means by which to progress.

In the epilogue of *The Swan Book*, we return to the swamp in which we began, though it is a changed landscape, drought ridden and dry. Spectral swans dance through the dust and myna birds—seemingly the only survivors in the harsh environment—forage through the waste:

> From a safe distance, you could hear these birds swearing at the grass in throwback words of the traditional language for the country that was no longer spoken by any living human being on the Earth. While crowding the stillness the little linguists with yellow beaks sang songs about salvaging and saving things, rearranging sound in a jibber-jabbering loudness. All the sounds were like machinery that rattled and shook while continuously being reworked into a junket of new pickings. In this mood—Well! You had to hear these soothsaying creatures 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)

Like so much of the text, this passage is poetically intricate and linguistically complex. Also like so much of the text, it seems important to me not so much for the answers it gives, but for the questions it raises. In this case, questions of language, translation and communication. What is it that these "little linguists" are making with the machinery of language that remains? How is it that the traditional language in which they speak is at once "no longer spoken by any living human being on the planet" (therefore seemingly untranslatable) and yet "internationally dimensional" (therefore inherently translatable and understood)?

This tension between what is untranslatable and incommensurably different while still seemingly communicable is not only intentional on Wright's part, but can, and possibly should, be at the heart of my own reading practice. In this combination of translation theory and comparative reading I am following Apter's example, who argues in *The Translation Zone* for a "new comparative literature based on translation pedagogies [that] renews the psychic life of diplomacy, even as it forces an encounter with intractable alterity, with that which will not be subject to translation" (11).[29] Firstly, drawing on Ravenscroft's work on the positive potential of irreducible difference for altering white reading practices, I work through the specific moments of untranslatability created by Wright's use of Waanyi language. I then engage with Berman's theory of ethical translation and Diagne's concept of a lateral universal in order to outline the possibility that communication does not necessarily deny, and in fact can be built on, difference. The process of translation makes it possible to envision exchange without hierarchy or the denial of irreducible difference.

Working with the Lacanian notion of anamorphosis—an image for which a change in perspective or mode of viewing changes what is perceived—Ravenscroft founds her argument on the understanding that "there is no one viewing position from which one can see all; and there are limits to the viewing position that any one subject can occupy" ("Another" 2). In this way, there are necessarily things that I cannot see. Ravenscroft calls for an acknowledgment of these limits of understanding and a development of a reading practice that is no longer designed to alter me as a subject through an advancement of knowledge, but to situate me as a willingly partial reader (*Postcolonial* 20). Through open but aware engagement with difference I might begin to

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[29] In referring to comparative literary theory it is not my intention to exclude Wright from a national literary identity; rather it is to facilitate questions about *The Swan Book*'s relationship to texts of other cultures and nations from Western and non-Western traditions and to allow a framework for my own engagement with Aboriginal worldviews.

see differently, rather than more. "This reader," Ravenscroft argues "rather than simply acquiring more knowledge, relinquishes some of the objects of knowledge she had previously held onto so dearly" (*Postcolonial* 27). I will now work through the relationship between this theory and moments of translation in *The Swan Book* in the context of one of the first prolonged instances of Waanyi language in the text: "Then an elder, a healer for the country arrived to examine the devastation. . . . He turned up like a bogeyman. A *kadawala. Dadarrba-barri nyulu jalwa-kudulu.* He claimed that he was feeling pain in his heavy heart. Turns up from nowhere like an aeroplane. *Bala-kanyi nyulu*" (12).

In her chapter "Australia's Indigenous languages" in *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, linguist Jeanie Bell outlines the deliberate denial of access to language experienced in Australia's colonial past and present and argues persuasively for the cultural and political importance of maintaining languages that have survived, and recording, building and healing those that have been violently pushed out of use (164). On this level alone, Wright's introduction of Waanyi language is an important political statement. In an interview with Arnold Zable, Wright states: "I think it is necessary to use the language in our books so that our children can see it today and tomorrow as something of which we are proud. Our language stands for something—it stands for who we are and describes who we are" ("Future" 27). In response to a comment about how effortless the incorporation seems, Wright goes on to explain that though she does not speak the language as well as she would like, there are moments that she feels "should be in Waanyi" (28). Setting aside the open political gesture of the incorporation of language, it is this idea of the necessity of a language shift for the complete communication of a concept that I want to push further.

"He turned up like a bogeyman. A *kadawala*" (12). Available to me online is "The Waanyi Dictionary," a resource compiled by the Waanyi Aboriginal Corporation, established in 2001 and wholly owned and operated by Waanyi people. In this dictionary, there is one entry under "kadawala"—English translation: "gidgea tree," which, further research tells me is a native Acacia. This would make my translation: "He turned up like a bogeyman. A *native Acacia tree.*" What is it that I have achieved through this persistent and analytic task of translation? In this case, I have only increased my own confusion and alienation; either I have mistranslated, there is more than one meaning for the word, or there is some other form of gap in my knowledge that prevents understanding. In other cases, the translation of the Waanyi seems more straightforward. Take for example an earlier phrase: "like assimilation of the grog or flagon, or just any *kamukamu*" (3). "The Waanyi Dictionary" gives the English translation of "kamukamu" as "grog." With this knowledge, the repetition of the word in both languages becomes an interesting poetic moment, creating emphasis and rhythm. But even with this possible poetic enhancement, my gesture of translation feels empty and, more importantly, emptying. What I have enacted is the kind of reading Ravenscroft refers to as an accumulation of knowledge (*Postcolonial* 27). I sought to achieve coherence and singular meaning, but that singular meaning was of course, necessarily, mine. This mode of reading disavows the necessity for Waanyi earlier referred to by Wright: there is something in "*kamukamu"* that is not conveyed by "grog or flagon" that prompted Wright to introduce the word, something that my hierarchical and literal act of translation cannot access. In this way, Wright's introduction of untranslated Waanyi text is the active political gesture of maintenance of language called for by Bell and Wright. It is also an enactment of the singularity of languages and an affirmation of my embodied and partial reading position. Even when the translation

appears to be provided in the text, it is a "semblance [that] affirms difference . . .

reveal[ing] the gulfs of untranslatability at the heart of every language" (Apter

Translation 126). I argue that what these untranslatable moments seem to call for is a

lighter touch. As Ravenscroft argues, I must relinquish some of my objects of knowledge

(*Postcolonial* 27)—in this case, knowledge itself perhaps. Instead of attempting to tie

down and secure meaning, my experience of these moments could instead be one of a

rolling and expansive poetic; in Apter's words, "a language 'blessed' by the fullness of

aporia" (*Translation* 245). With this lighter mode of reading in mind, I am reminded of

the question with which Hoy concludes her chapter on silence, "'Listen to the Silence':

Ruby Slipperjack's *Honour the Sun*": "What happens," Hoy asks, "when a text asks one

implicitly to talk about it less and internalize it more?" (80).

　　In "The Manifestation of Translation" Berman states that, although on one hand

translation is often a tool of appropriation and assimilation, "on the other hand, the

ethical aim of translating is by its very nature opposed to this injunction: The essence of

translation is to be an opening, a dialogue, a crossbreeding, a decentering. Translation is

'a putting in touch with,' or it is *nothing*" (4). A "bad translation" is one that "generally

under the guise of transmissibility, carries out a systematic negation of the strangeness

of the foreign work" (5). For Berman, the customary choices in translation between

fidelity and freedom—whether a translator should be striving to maintain the integrity

of the original or to convey meaning more clearly in translation—are not mutually

exclusive. Instead, for what Berman terms "the pure aim of translation," it is essential

the translator make the movement of translation felt. Though the form and space of

translation theorised by Berman is far from the form and space within and in which *The*

Swan Book works, I argue that this conception of translation, a process that maintains

the strangeness of the original in any communication of an existing text, is a valuable

framework for reading Wright's work. Take for example, a passage early in the novel that is one of several in which Bella Donna tries to communicate her stories to Oblivia. Early in the passage, incomprehensibility and difference are made clear: "It was just music. . . . The score of a long concerto in gibberish and old principles cemented in language that ears had never heard before in that swamp" (34). But despite the lack of a comprehending audience, Bella Donna continues with her stories: "[s]he liked talking about surviving, intervention, closing the gap, moving forward as the way to become re-empowered" (34). This ironic list is of course familiar to me and also to the swamp people ("They thought she was really a local-bred red-neck after all" [34]); however, this familiarity is not maintained. Bella Donna continues with another, far more disorienting list:

> Feasts and famine. Flutes of bewilderment. Drowning cellos. . . . War. Puzzlement.
>
> Starvation. Staring at death. Organs from all over the world were playing in the
>
> swamp now. Thieving Pirates. Robbers. Bandits. Murderers. And, somehow,
>
> more survival until: Glory of migrating swan birds filling the skies. (34)

The fragmented poetics of this list renews the acknowledgement of untranslatability with which this passage began. In this way, while communication of stories and ideas is possible, there always remains something that cannot be conveyed, a gap in translation.

Moments of untranslatability play an important role in *The Swan Book*. However, there are also elements of the novel in which translation comes to the fore as a mode of constructing meaning. One particular example is Wright's choice of the name Bella Donna. As Takolander states, Bella Donna is "[n]amed after a poisonous plant" ("Theorizing" 114): *Atropa belladonna* or deadly nightshade, a toxic plant known to cause delirium and hallucinations. However, bella donna also has a long history of medicinal applications. Furthermore, Bella Donna could also be translated from the

Italian as "beautiful woman." This combination of meanings—poison, remedy and

beauty—evokes for me the *pharmakon*, particularly Derrida's reading of Plato's

Phaedrus in *Dissemination*. As Derrida describes, in the *Phaedrus*

> Socrates compares the written texts Phaedrus has brought along to a drug
>
> (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this "medicine," this philtre, which acts as both
>
> remedy and poison, already introduces itself into the body of the discourse with
>
> all its ambivalence. This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of
>
> fascination, can be—alternately or simultaneously—beneficent or maleficent.
>
> (70)

Similarly, Bella Donna can be read as beneficent or maleficent, saviour or persecutor,

medicine or poison. Like Derrida's understanding of *pharmakon*, the meaning of the

term "Bella Donna" is located in the undecidability of the translation. An insight can be

gained by employing each translation separately or all at once; but, it is more truly felt

through the overlapping of translations, the connections in the web, the glimpses of the

communal meaning that can only be seen when transitioning from one translation to

the next.

To further explore the possibility of translation, I will return to the perceived

conflict between the universality of communication and the particularity of radical

difference. Anthropologist Jean-Loup Amselle in *L'Occident Décroché* (*The West

Unhooked*) presents a dramatic critique of what he perceives as the socio-political

consequences of the dangerous fragmentation inherent in the concept of radical

otherness:

> In the present context of "clash of civilizations," or rather in what looks more and
>
> more like a crusades conflict, strategic essentialism has become a problematic
>
> notion as the affirmation of a radical otherness can be perceived as the ferment

of all fundamentalisms. In the world in which we are now living, apparently open but in reality perfectly compartmentalized, we must abandon any definition of assertion of identity that restrains the circulation of enunciations through cultural boundaries. (146–47)[30]

I have reproduced this section at length as it presents a broader and more dramatic version of Maxwell and Kelada's critique of Ravenscroft's theorisation of irreducible difference. In the eyes of Amselle and Maxwell and Kelada, this difference can paralyse communication and prevent cultural exchange. Amselle takes this critique further by arguing that this "strategic essentialism" will "give ground to all sorts of fundamentalism" (147). In "On the Postcolonial and the Universal?" Diagne argues against this oppositional divide of difference and communication. Like Amselle, he believes "that enunciations should cross cultural boundaries and circulate" (13). However, rather than relying on a belief in an already constituted universality to facilitate this communication, Diagne argues that to believe in cross-cultural enunciations "is simply to believe in *translation*" (13). He states categorically "there is no universal language of enunciation" (15). However, reworking Umberto Eco's statement that the language of Europe is translation, Diagne argues "the language of the universal is translation" (15). In order to facilitate non-hierarchical communication, a type of dialogue that does not place one participant's language on a higher plane of more true or more universal, Diagne proposes the concept of a lateral universal: "The universal is not any more the prerogative of a language, it is to be experimented and maybe 'acquired' through the lateral process of *translation*. The postcolonial universal, the non imperial universal is precisely that: lateral" (16). The lateral universal presents

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[30] This quotation is Diagne's English translation of Amselle's original French as quoted in Diagne's "On the Postcolonial and the Universal?".

a space where an understanding that meaning can be transferred and shared can exist alongside the reality of many individual and particular truths. No one language, or system of meaning, is elevated over another. Instead, communication takes place horizontally.[31] Similar to Berman, Diagne argues that the act of translation is not a negation of strangeness and does not eliminate difference:

> if lateral universal is to be considered as translation, that does not mean transparency and identification. On the contrary this is incessant testing, says Merleau-Ponty and the co-presence of many different views, in addition to the "mistaken views about each other" are clear indication that the task cannot be to aim at a universal grammar or to an operation of reduction to the same. The open ended process of translation that lateral universal requires, because my point of departure is the language that I speak which is one among many, demands that we avoid both fragmentation and reduction to the One. (16–17)

To place *The Swan Book* in a space of lateral universal allows for attempts at communication and learning without the aim of reduction to the same. Hoy argues that in non-Native interactions with Native texts we should acknowledge the limitations of our own reading while still striving for communication and learning. Reading *The Swan Book*, I enter into a relationship with the text, a relationship that allows me to make meaning and comprehend without the delusion of complete transparency. I argue, in line with Diagne, that it is this *process* of reading, the *work* of reading, that can create a space for ethical communication.

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[31] This concept of lateral communication is also introduced by Apter in her description of Édouard Glissant's *Poétique de la Relation*, in which he argues for a "move toward linguistic inter-nationalism . . . replacing the old center-periphery model with a world system comprised of multiple linguistic singularities or interlocking small worlds, each a locus of poetic opacity" (*Translation* 245). She describes this paradigm as "a model of aporetic community in which small worlds (modelled perhaps after a deterritorialized Caribbean) connect laterally" (*Translation* 245).

In "On Writing *Carpentaria*" Wright states: "[w]hen I look at the novel it is like seeing a myriad of ideas that have created the same thing: islands. . . . If you could fly above the pages and perhaps see the whole sea of words as one inclusive idea as I often do when I dream words, you would see the direction where the book was always headed" (94). What I read in this simile of islands and ocean is the enduring conflict of singularity and connection. Each idea, each character, each system of representation in Wright's text is like an "island of self-sufficiency that act[s] alone" (95). However, it is possible, in dreams and from a great height, for these islands to become a whole—not as a single, homogenised land mass, but as a network, connected by shifting water. In *The Swan Book* Wright's poetics and style draw out my reading, or translation, of a passage, encouraging me to draw connections to moments and texts interior and exterior to the novel. However, it does not allow me the illusion of a perfect translation, always simultaneously maintaining strangeness while also "putting in touch with."

With this dynamic in mind, I return to the passage that opened this section. The "little linguist" myna birds rework and rework the machinery of language and, though it is still an incoherent "jibber-jabbering loudness," this act of continual translation allows a glimpse of some kind of larger, more communal truth. A truth that is perhaps louder, and certainly more eloquent, than the homogenizing and reductive language that Wright imagines in *The Swan Book* to be the only remnants of English: "the most commonly used words you would have heard to try to defeat lies in this part of the world. Just short words like *Not true*" (330).

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