

Openings and Retrospectives

UNTIDY TIMES: Alexis Wright, Extinction, and the Politics of Apprehension

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Their story was unfolding dangerously through the complex design of children growing up in untidy times. Of times inscribed in the warped, dull state of a publicly determined fate. Or Law that stretched back to the beginning of time.

—Alexis Wright

We are, it has been widely observed, haunted by the future.¹ The ghosts that trouble us today seem temporally unfixated, the future regarded with apprehension, its avatars encountered in the uncanny half-light of *déjà vu*. What is the character of the contemporary such that this apprehension animates such a broad swath of filmic, literary, and academic imaginaries, spilling from the pages and screens of sci-fi and fantasy across literary fiction and into a range of other, ostensibly realist narrative genres? How ought we understand the power of these and other critical forms when the future occupies such an unstable, ideologically weighted place in them? In part the answer ready to hand, in popular culture as

well as academic analyses, rests in dispersed anxieties around climate change, in the shrinking of possibility as figures of the Anthropocene become a new common sense, and in the related fascination with extinction and an accompanying eschatology of what comes after. Yet this ready gloss does not address the distinctions among multiple futurisms that mark filmic, literary, and political thought, and it may conflate lengthy histories of apprehension and their politics with contemporary philosophical and anthropological concerns with the ends of life tout court (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017).

This essay concerns the politics of the future as they emerge in the work of the Waanyi author Alexis Wright. Here I explore the temporal experimentalism that animates Wright's (2013b) *The Swan Book*, a literary work that brings together critiques of time and human exceptionalism in a speculative exploration of extinction. While reviews of this work note its arch humor and accurately describe its narrative as a dystopian parable alert to the stakes of climate change, I am interested in some specific and less often noted dimensions of this novel: the temporal disorientation it seems to pursue, and the politics of apprehension it makes legible. In Wright's book, the future and the past spin around one another so rapidly that readers might easily lose track of up and down, backward and forward. For Wright's principal characters, the past's future and the future's past stand in for one another as memory becomes *déjà vu* and apprehension becomes recognition. I suggest that this temporal disorientation provides paraethnographic attunement to tropes of innovation and capitalist realism that differentiate and parcel out social potential in a race toward the future. Wright's work reckons, I argue here, with the politics of apprehension and their stakes for Indigenous Australians, animating these politics by making time newly perceptible and human exceptionalism problematic.

TIME, EXTINCTION, AND THE BLACK SWAN

Wright has spent decades in land rights and legal advocacy across northern Australia. As a writer and cultural activist, she is accomplished in multiple genres, including both academic and historical nonfiction and the realist novel. In 2007, Wright won the Miles Franklin Award, perhaps Australia's highest literary honor, for her long-form epic *Carpentaria* (Wright 2006), a book that also received the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the Queensland Premier's Literature Award, among others. In *Carpentaria* Wright develops a narrative voice that embraces colloquial Aboriginal English, drawing on the speech poetics of the

Northern Territory to tell a story about a fictional conflict between a mining corporation and a small, northern Australian town.

The prose poetics that Wright developed in *Carpentaria* are amplified in the very different narrative of *The Swan Book*, which extends Wright's enduring political concerns with Indigenous sovereignty into questions of time and futurity. Indeed, in many ways *The Swan Book* is a grand play with time itself, drawing together syntactic, narrative, and poetic features in a chronotope of temporal indeterminacy. The difficulty of locating oneself as a reader in the book's time is echoed in the underdetermined status of time itself. In the novel, the future is made at once an instrument in Australia's ongoing colonization and something through which Aboriginal people might yet find respite ("satisfaction," as one character perceives this possibility). The ironic, difficult status of the future here resonates with other Australian artwork and film, but perhaps most strikingly with the photography and filmic works of Tracey Moffatt. Moffatt's work is widely appreciated for the ways it explores the difficulties of her characters' efforts to move beyond forms of racialized and gendered subjugation. Wright also asks us to reckon with the complications and ironic inversions that attend Aboriginal



Figure 1. *Something More*, by Tracey Moffatt, 1989. Series of nine photographs. From the collection of MONA, Museum of Old and New Art, Hobart, Australia. Image courtesy of Tracey Moffatt, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, and MONA. Photo by Rémi Chauvin.

efforts to attain, as Moffatt might have it, “something more,” and both Moffatt and Wright draw on a global set of interlocutors and intertexts in the pursuit of their respective projects.

In many other ways, however, Wright’s work proves singular. *The Swan Book* is loosely set in Waanyi Country, along the southwest coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria, straddling the Northern Territory and western Queensland. The novel tells the story of two children, each differently bound to a shared fate. Warren Finch, placed on a path to greatness by his elders, is sheltered from the policy mandates of the state and slated to become an Aboriginal president of an Australian republic. Oblivia Ethylene Oblivion, a girl born into a community less able to achieve the recognition that would afford such shelter, is instead raised by a white auntie, a refugee from climate wars on another continent. Raped as a child by a group of petrol-sniffing boys, Oblivia remains deeply wounded, living with her auntie in a detention center for Aboriginal people in northern Australia. The center marks a site where different Aboriginal peoples are detained together, an avatar of the actual towns of the Gulf region and many other communities across the north, but it also resonates with contemporary (as yet unimplemented) proposals for northern Australian “growth towns,” where Aboriginal people might be more readily policed, educated, and governed.²

For Wright, the future arrives in the form of black swans. In the novel, these birds arrive in the hundreds to the swamp that Oblivia calls home, sharing in her story and shadowing her (and her fate) throughout the book. These birds are indigenous to southern and southeastern Australia, but they are now seen, as she has written elsewhere, flying and settling ever farther north (Wright and Zable 2013). This is an avian climate-change casualty, now without a dreaming for the country in which it finds itself. Northern Australia abounds with animals and other nonhuman agents from elsewhere: *invasive species*, as they are sometimes called. In addition to the black swans that now wing their way northward, there are the better-known cane toads, a poisonous imported species that has moved along water routes north and west from Queensland, and gamba grass, a species of African origin, which threatens to transform the fire ecology of the far north by upending a longstanding détente between burning grasses, thriving trees, and towns and cities (see Bowman et al. 2011). In discussing the book after its release, Wright underscored the uncertainty such creatures can entail for her friends and interlocutors in the Northern Territory. They ask: Can I kill such a thing? What is this swan doing here? “So what do you do?” Wright responds. “What happens

to a bird—or to anyone—who has no story for that country? . . . How do you make stories for them in a new place?” (Wright and Zable 2013)

The black swan also marks a contemporary trope of impossibility, a thing that one will never see. The figure can be traced to the Roman poet Juvenal and, later, to Dutch encounters with Australian black swans in the seventeenth century. More recently, the figure of the black swan has been refashioned, taken from the analysis of financial markets to explain historical change itself as sharply punctuated by transformative events that are wholly unexpected and unpredictable based on past experience (Taleb 2010). While Wright’s work is replete with intertextual references to swans, white and black alike, she downplays these tropes of unknowability and historical rupture. Her swans are not oddities, and they come in the hundreds. As climate refugees themselves, Wright suggests, these black swans are to be welcomed and given a story: they do not simply constitute exotic alters or signs of historical rupture; they are also kindred beings. As figures for relations between humans and nonhumans, for human refugees from far-flung places, and for the migration and dislocation within Australia of different black communities, swans draw the book’s concerns temporally close to our present—reckoning not an unlikely future, but rather a contemporary moment for those knocked about by shifts in Australian policy.

Given the ways in which this future ultimately seems so much like our present, the words Oblivia offers when confronted by the particular black swan who singles her out for attention in the book seem apropos: “What kind of premonition is this?” (Wright 2013b, 15). Ostensibly set one hundred years in the future, the book might as well describe a time just a year or two ahead: the world *The Swan Book* discloses appears as merely a slight variant to the one described in the grim pronouncements of contemporary journalism and policy prescription. The children at the center of the book suggest the resonance of its concerns for the present. When her foster mother passes away, Oblivia overhears the gossip of others and finds her own memories contested by these stories. She recalls dreaming inside of an old gum tree, protected by its ancient stump as she recovered from a violent attack, but these overheard stories figure her as a problem, a victim of fetal alcohol syndrome and traumatic rape and now an unhappy reminder to her community of its purported dysfunction. Oblivia’s story is thus not always her own: it is told and retold by others. It is she who has to bear this community’s traumatic past and, as it turns out, its promised future. As a child who cannot grow up, who is not allowed to become a person, she offers a

gendered figure for the broader confinement of Aboriginal people in Australia's settler colonial present.

Finch, on the other hand, is a boy held apart for an educational experiment, an icon of Indigenous promise. In one key passage, the author describes Finch's community as a model for a broader human future:

Warren had been taught, from the day he entered his people's Aboriginal Government School of Brolga Nation as the *sweetest* boy of six years of age, that he would fulfill a vision primed for their own survival, that above all else, he would connect Brolga values with the future of the world. (Wright 2013b, 107)

We might read this paragraph with trepidation. Readers learn that the Brolga nation has been singled out, "chosen by an international, fact-finding delegation to be their showpiece of what a future humane world was all about" (Wright 2013b, 106). Children like Warren are thus not simply avatars of a reproductive futurity (see Ginsburg and Rapp 1995; Edelman 2004) but captive to the investment in Aboriginal futures of both Aboriginal and settler agencies.

The problem of locating oneself in time, the ways in which we are in the future and the ways in which the future animates the present and its politics, marks a range of other speculative fiction and futurist work including novels, films, and music. These works unbind time to explore the future's ghost in our midst, and to reckon the costs of bearing the future and the differential distribution of possibility and responsibility that it may entail. This is also, I think, how we must apprehend the paradox faced by *The Swan Book's* characters: as a glimpse of what falls on their shoulders while the analepsis of flashback and the prolepsis of premonition trade places in its narrative, amplifying our temporal disorientation and showing us the promise and problems of our present's future. Indeed, the book ends with a sudden leap in tense. We learn of the extinction of the swans, of how Oblivia herself became an old woman and then a myth, an ancestral presence. She thus becomes placed at once in the future and in the past and, like the swans, written into the foundation of what is to come.

SPECULATIVE FICTION AS PARAETHNOGRAPHY

My own ethnographic work in northern Australia has addressed different forms of activism, particularly Indigenous media production and forms of urban housing and land rights advocacy. These are spaces of institutionalized advocacy in which the future takes shape in the capacities and voices of young people who

have been trained to represent their communities and to reanimate a series of relations fractured by colonial settlement and settler government (D. Fisher 2016). These young media-makers, whom I first met during my doctoral research, are now young adults familiar with the efflorescent character of what Tess Lea (2014) terms “wild policy,” as well as with the bureaucratic entanglements, delays, and frustrations it brings. Some of the more enabled and financially solvent among them buy houses and talk about retirement and mortgages while riding the cresting wave of Australia’s urban and periurban property boom. But most of them have far fewer fiscal resources, and those closer to the epicenter of Indigenous political struggle are fatigued by the sense of suspended animation that can accompany such uncertainty.

Wright’s speculative fiction offers a paraethnographic road map to the political geography of this situation. Her futurism is attuned to the ways in which Aboriginal Australians find different means to cultivate spaces of autonomy—of a “sovereignty of the mind,” to use Wright’s (2013a) own figure for her efforts—while remaining open to relationships with outsiders and unexpected friends. These could be boat people or black swans—or the internal voices of foreign languages that jostle for room in the free indirect discourse that offers Warren’s perspective on his experience. This futurism is also drenched in the present as seen from a point just on the other side of emerging regional growth towns, threats of urban proletarianization as states move to defund remote communities, and another decade of interventions in Aboriginal government made in the name of children’s well-being. Wright’s futurism is also relational in its attention to the entanglement of human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, and to the political and ethical imperatives of such entanglements.

Unsurprisingly, these aspects of Wright’s work have drawn the interest of Australian literary scholars. Attending to the pragmatics of the book’s narrative interventions and the specific cultural conflicts that its narrative addresses, Philip Mead (2016, 1, 2) analyzes Wright’s “dystopian generics” as part of a “storytelling war” (Wright’s own term). As Mead’s reading suggests, *The Swan Book*’s narrative overtly disputes an Indigenous embrace of capitalist common sense by exploring the different futures of those young people who would be its standard-bearers, those communities it may leave behind, and those nonhumans whose extinction it seems to promise. The effort to embrace a form of “capitalist realism” (cf. M. Fisher 2014), Wright’s narrative implies, entails its own troubles, troubles that might be made apparent by meditating on the phenomenon of the unexpected as

a nonhuman relation, and on time as itself unmoored from the serialized unfolding of linear progress. In these ways, Wright's novel offers a critical window on the costs to her Indigenous characters of being made to bear the hopes of others and on what it might take to tell their stories otherwise.

If Wright provides ironizing distance on the ways in which Aboriginal people might now be asked to preserve the future, to become custodians of its possibility, *The Swan Book* also speaks to the impossibility of anyone actually giving up on such a project. Rather, it explores some of the tools—narrative, conceptual, and political—that one might deploy in its pursuit. Engaged scholarship must, [Janet Roitman \(2014\)](#) has written, rethink crisis and its relation to critique to see how crisis narratives entail understandings of history and time that, in disclosing aporias or failures, also close down other possibilities and emerging worlds. I suggest that Wright's work narrativizes time in ways that perform an analogous reformulation, extending crisis over the *longue durée* to reimagine its coordinates and the kinds of persons and relations it implicates. In so doing, Wright allows readers to apprehend both the need for critique and the danger of its capture. Critique here emerges from more speculative questions: What kinds of differences might the future in fact bring, and for whom? What might endure, and in what fashion? And what continuities with our present might make this future difficult to apprehend once it arrives? However we figure the achievements of Wright's speculative fiction, this proleptic novel assembles a series of insights, built from the prose poetics of narrative form, that unbind time to decolonize our apprehension, estranging us from the end of the world itself.

NOTES

1. See, for instance, [Derrida 1994](#), [Žižek 2010](#), [M. Fisher 2014](#), and [Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017](#).
2. The figure of detention could also describe attempts to govern Aboriginal people, from the concentration of different Aboriginal peoples in early twentieth-century Darwin to the forced settlement of different kin and language groups in places like Port Keats (now Wadeye) and Papunya.

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