

Alexis Wright's Literary Testimony to Intersecting Traumas

Meera Atkinson

University of Sydney

Abstract: *This article proffers a reading of Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), hailed as 'the first truly planetary novel' (Gleeson-White), arguing that Wright's poetics of transgenerational trauma witnesses to intersected trans-species injustices and traumas. Exploring the way Wright testifies to entanglements of human-nonhuman trauma, I challenge entrenched humanist and speciesist preoccupations in trauma theory to address trauma transmissions with particular focus on trauma as a social and political force generated by patriarchal imperialism. In doing so, I show how Wright's fiction serves as a form of advocacy for nonhuman sentient beings.*

Keywords: *trauma, affect, transgenerational trauma, trauma transmission, literary testimony, poetics, intersectionality, speciesism, Alexis Wright*

Introduction

'*My sweet Lord, they only see what they want to see. They are blind, not stupid. They see, but they are blind ...*' [italics in original] (Wright 21).

Activists use the term 'tipping-point' to describe those moments at which the ascent of awareness around a particular injustice peaks, translating to a groundswell of support for radical change, or at least its beginnings. Anti-colonial nationalist independence movements, unionism, anti-slavery and the civil rights movement, Indigenous rights, disability rights, child rights, animal rights/protection and multiple feminisms all sought, and continue to seek, to address and redress systemic traumas and injustices rooted in patriarchy, imperialism and capitalism.

Each of the aforementioned movements represents innumerable lives and indignities. The experiences these movements embody need to be, communicated and addressed specifically, in accordance with their specificities of suffering. 'Intersectionality' (Crenshaw), both as a conceptual framework and a grass-roots political activism, seeks to identify shared underlying structures between socially interrelated injustices and traumas. At its best, intersectionality does not attempt to replace the specific focus necessary to each struggle, or to dilute it, but rather it builds upon it with a view to more effectively challenging the stranglehold of the patriarchal, imperialist, and capitalist social organisations that underpin structural trauma and disadvantage.

In this spirit, I employ an intersectional framework in considering the ways in which Alexis Wright, Australian writer from the Waanyi nation of the Gulf of Carpentaria, testifies to intersected traumata in her groundbreaking works of experimental fiction, *Carpentaria* (2006) and *The Swan Book* (2013), with particular focus on the latter. *The Swan Book* is unique in its depiction of trauma transmissions that exceed human society and in its revelation of traumatic intersections of injustice in society in relation to gender, race and age, but it is its engagement with nonhuman animals that I want to draw attention to in this article, though I do tend to those other aspects in my recently published monograph, *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (2017). Despite receiving a number of nuanced and glowing reviews (Webb, Gleeson-White,

Mulcrone), this aspect of Wright's work has not to my knowledge been addressed in a sustained way.

Nonhuman animals are threatened and becoming extinct at an unprecedented rate, and there are claims from the scientific community that the consequences of climate change are poised to increase to levels that endanger human life and community (Barnett and Adger; Berry, Bowen and Kjellstrom). This suggests that human-induced greenhouse gas emissions operate as a form of trauma transmission in as much as they appear to be having devastating consequences for the environment and nonhuman beings, which can be considered fundamentally traumatic. Psychic trauma describes an experience that occurs too quickly or suddenly to be processed, that alters brain function and other aspects of subjectivity, returning in delayed symptomology, which often appears pathological. The literary trauma theory of the 1990s 'trauma turn' was a purely humanistic concern, which is to say it involved an emphasis on human experience and language (and the perceived difficulty of representing trauma linguistically in conventional terms). While that is understandable to some degree given the precedent set for trauma theory by Holocaust Studies and cultural trauma theory's focus on literary testimony, the continuing overlooking of the many among us not human is not ethically justifiable.

Trauma is not simply the upsetting memory of an event located in the past; it involves a complex psychic operation that challenges the notion of a distinct psychic past and present. As Cathy Caruth puts it:

For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. (18)

This has obvious implications regarding human society and testimony, but though the implications are somewhat less obvious for nonhuman animals, it has been convincingly argued that nonhuman animals do experience trauma and that focus on this is warranted (Bradshaw; Bradshaw et al.). As Wright shows us in *The Swan Book*, the mass traumatisation of nonhuman animals is one of junctures of injustice wrought by contemporary settler-colonial society in Australia.

If intersectionality is a useful framework through which to re-think traumatic affect and transmission, it is also a potentially tricky one. Specific struggles warrant their own platforms and primary representations by those affected (and/or their allies and advocates), but it is also compelling and productive to examine the ways in which oppressions and injustices intersect, even if some compromise is inevitable in terms of pointed focus. I am aware too that any consideration of nonhuman animals in the intersectional matrix in relation to trauma will likely attract charges of anthropomorphism. As Teja Brooks Pribac says, the stalwart opposition to so-called anthropomorphism is a convention that 'favours an unwarranted, highly separatist view in regard to different others' (76) that has, through its negative connotations and exposure over time, induced a knee-jerk fear of being associated with it. As she observes, the emergence of Critical Animal Studies and Human-Animal Studies means the dogma of anthropomorphism has come under scrutiny in contemporary Western academic discourse, drawing strong criticism for 'engendering reductionist views' (76). I am allied with David Brooks when he insists that rather than being wary of the capacity for empathetic affect to inform our view of, and relations with, nonhuman animals, we should rather embrace it. We must, he says, 'develop, articulate and amplify' the feelings we experience in engagement with the world. We must sensitise ourselves to it, experience and relate to it the only way we can, 'which is to extend our senses into it, and guard ourselves against – consider most carefully – any voices which would have us turn our backs on it' (52).

If either Wright or myself are culpable of charges of anthropomorphism it is my view that Wright's is – and my contention that mine is also – 'an anthropomorphism that serves to remind us of anthropomorphism's inadequacies' (Finlay 75). When it comes to the 'immense question of pathos' that Jacques Derrida summons ('The Animal That Therefore I Am,' 395), I stand with the 'minority, weak, marginal voices little assured of their discourse, of their right to discourse and of the enactment of their discourse within the law' (395) in advocating on behalf of nonhuman animals. I make no apology for championing nonhuman animals; I only regret the perpetration and 'organized disavowal' of their subjugation (395), for which my own kind is wholly responsible.

Traumatic Intersections and Entanglements in *The Swan Book*

Intersectionality emerged from the work of African American feminists dissatisfied with the ways in which (white) Western feminism failed to reflect their experience. Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix describe it as ‘signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation –economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts’ (76). The framework of intersectionality enables examination of the ways in which patriarchy, imperialism and capitalism have thrived on overlapping oppressions and discriminations around gender, race, class, species and so on. Awareness of intersected injustices and their transgenerational impact also affords more equitable acknowledgement and restitution of oppressions, discriminations, and histories of violence.

Even though there have been welcome developments in terms of public consciousness of abuses and injustices relating to nonhuman animals, many people still minimize or are oblivious to the systematic suffering of animals. Wright was already paying mind to nonhuman trauma in her writing back in *Carpentaria*. When Norm and Bala return to the post-cyclone flattened ghost town of Desperance on the second-last page in that novel, the only living beings they encounter are dogs:

He was met by the bony, hollow-ribbed, abandoned dogs of the town that had run to the hills and back again after the cyclone. Now, having appeared from nowhere, they roamed along streets that no longer existed, searching for their owners. They did not bark or howl. The shock of the cyclone had left them like this: speechless, dumbfounded, unable to crack a bark. Unable to emit a sound out of their wide-opened mouths. (518)

This scene of dogs stripped of voice, abandoned by humans, and traumatised by the effects of possible human-induced climate change is painfully affecting. For the reader, it is the deadening of the naturally expressive nature of dogs, to whom our historically strong bond renders us especially sympathetic, that makes this such an unsettling scene.

Nonhuman animals figure so significantly in Wright's fiction that when Sophie Cunningham posed a question during an interview beginning with, 'At what point did Oblivia, the main character ...' she stopped and corrected herself with, 'the main *human* character' [my italics] (The Wheeler Center). And when Cunningham pointed out that animals 'have as much authority' as human characters in *The Swan Book*, Wright replied: 'I've always liked animals, since I was a child, but also in the Indigenous world everything is sacred and animals are sacred and have stories'. Wright went on to discuss her perplexing discovery, during the course of researching the book, that Australian black swans have been disappearing from typical habitats and appearing in odd numbers in unusual places.

The Swan Book is not an easy story to summarise, largely because it proceeds less by way of plot and logic and more by way of character- and affect-driven imagination. In stripped back terms, it tells the story of Bella Donna, an old woman and refugee of the climate change wars in the Northern Hemisphere, who rescues a mute Aboriginal girl called Oblivia, severely traumatised following a gang rape. After Bella Donna's death, Warren Finch, a magnetic Indigenous hero of dubious integrity, risen to the rank of Deputy President of Australia on the back of mining deals, kidnaps Oblivia, believing her to be his promised wife, and imprisons her in a southern city, from which she eventually escapes to be reunited with her country and the swans that populate the book from the title to the final page. In these pages, contact with humans and human-influenced environments are nothing less than a traumatising catastrophe for nonhuman animals.

The book matters politically because it speaks poetically and profoundly to many pressing concerns in twenty-first century society. In Wright's hands, violence against women, child abuse, racism and neo-colonialism, climate change and the ravaging of the environment, unethical corporatism, the exploitation and suffering of nonhuman animals, and reprehensible immigration policies and practices are woven together, along with love and the fleshed goodness of beings, human and nonhuman, with their many idiosyncrasies and eccentricities. Wright's extraordinary ability to bring an Indigenous conception of animals alive in stories set in the contemporary world reveals nonhuman animals' involvement in the traumatic cycles of, and

beyond, humanity. Passages like the following recount routine scenes of horror, testifying to the traumatic effect of human civilisation on animals as collateral damage:

A crescendo of dead – the carcasses of splattered or bloated bullocks and native animals lay over the sealed or unsealed corrugated roads, where the eyes of dingoes and curlews gleamed in the headlights ... the girl watched as they collected those still with a trace of life: small rodents, mangled rabbits, various marsupials, broken-back snakes, a bush turkey, a smashed echidna. (165)

This is the work-a-day world divorced from the land it plunders, disconnected from relatedness and conscience. Here, Wright depicts the price nonhuman animals pay for whitefella ways, contrasted throughout with Aboriginal people's understandings of nonhuman others. As Patrick Condliffe has asserted in his reading and defense of the work of B. Wonger (later outed as Serbian immigrant Sreten Božić), the distinction between animals and humankind in First Nations cultures is made very differently and less completely than in non-Indigenous cultures. 'In terms of representation, symbolism, and totems,' Condliffe writes, 'the animal and the human are considered part of the same spiritual and creative order' (186). There are many examples of inter-species affective communications and transmissions in both *Carpentaria* and *The Swan Book*; for example, in the latter, the cuckoos and cockatoos hear 'every single thing and, it might be, their nervous flinching and tapping of beaks on wood were imitating insecurities in the hearts of the children' (51).

Condliffe proclaims that B. Wonger's 'Kafkaesque narratives' challenge the 'colonial language of racism by making corporeal and spiritual identity a liminal thing that shares, at least within the human mind, something of the same space as animality' (184). This might also be extended to Wright, although *The Swan Book* not only deals with a history of racism in which 'taxonomies of descent' ascribe 'differentiation between groups', between 'those with voice and rights and those without' (Condliffe 189), it also tackles the history of imperialist 'anthroparchy' (a term coined by Erika Calvo in a 2008 essay to represent the nexus of patriarchy and the anthropocene) as it plays out across a range of intersections. It is the sheer depth, breadth and complexity of Wright's vision that led Jane Gleeson-White to proclaim *The Swan Book* 'the first truly planetary novel'. Gleeson-White's assessment signals an important point about Wright's

reach in *The Swan Book*. One of its great achievements is the way it addresses both local and global concerns showing how the injustices of settler-colonialism relate to the multinational corporatised capitalist project. That the two are intimately entwined has been evident since Europeans developed the seafaring means to venture forth to exploit the wealth of riches, resources, and inhabitants of the 'New World'. So it is that Wright is also writing against what David Brooks has called 'saturation capitalism', which he defines as consumerism driven by the 'deep wound' and 'ontological distress' (47) at the divide between head and heart and human and nonhuman animals.

Nonhuman Animal Inclusive Intersectional Trauma Testimony

The controversial 'ethical philosopher' Peter Singer popularised the term 'Speciesism' in his seminal 1975 book *Animal Liberation*. It refers to the assumption of human superiority and the relegation of nonhuman animals to the status of things and property, leading to systematic dominance and exploitation. Speciesism is widely considered among many scholars working in Critical Animal Studies, and activists at large, to be a central feature of Western culture, along with sexism and racism (and other structurally established bigotries). With roots in patriarchal history, attitudes and customs, speciesism is now being interrogated across a diverse range of academic fields. The Institute for Critical Animal Studies' website states that the intention in creating the term Critical Animal Studies was to denote an interdisciplinary field 'dedicated to establishing a holistic total liberation movement for humans, nonhuman animals, and the Earth.' This was deemed necessary in order to address speciesist tendencies within the higher education sector by bringing diversely disciplined scholars together 'under one common field of study, similar to that of other marginalised fields of study (such as Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, Latina/o Studies, Native American Studies)' (ICAS).

An exciting and eclectic array of (often interdisciplinary and intersectional) scholarly approaches to critiquing interspecies relations between humans and nonhuman individuals has emerged via a wide range and diversity of avenues. It is within this multi- and inter-disciplinary development that I seek to make a critical contribution toward the end of speciesism within

trauma and literary theories. It stands to reason that language and representation are, as the means by which shared meaning and culture is made (Hall), at the very heart of speciesism.

For Derrida, as well as for Brooks, disregard for nonhuman animals has its foundation in language, in the manner in which we conceive and then speak about 'us' and 'them'. In a video interview, Derrida ('Jacques Derrida and the Question of "The Animal"') made clear his dislike of talking of 'animals in general' because 'when one says "animals" one has already started not to understand anything and has started to enclose the animal into a cage'. Pointing to the irreducible specificity of 'radically different organisms of life', he adds, 'To say "animal"', thereby putting all living things that aren't human into one category, is 'a very violent gesture' and a 'stupid gesture', as well as 'theoretically ridiculous'. Derrida sees this oversimplification as the origin of the 'very real violence that humans exercise toward animals that leads to slaughterhouses, their industrial treatment, their consumption'. Wright presents us with this divide and its demands for ethical response in part by dealing with nonhuman animals in their specificity. Swans are everywhere in the narrative of *The Swan Book*. There are also owls, parrots, cats, rats, cows, sundry road kill, snakes, a monkey called Rigoletto, brolgas, and many more. But this attention to the specificity of being is contrasted with a grand scale confrontation with the 'anthropocene' – the proposed geological era marked by the dominion of human activity.

Wright was already working this micro-macro territory back in *Carpentaria*. In a chapter titled 'Norm's Responsibility' she recounts a scene in which a groper has been winched out of the water onto the beach by a four-wheel drive. The groper dies a slow, agonising death as 'white fishermen from the mine' hack the flesh off its live body blow by blow (249). This representation of what the neo-liberal, corporatorised anthropocene and its henchmen do to animals turns out to have been something of a precursor for the near future Wright leads us into in *The Swan Book*.

In tackling both the singularity of being as well as its comprehensive sweep in terms of trauma, Wright challenges what Patricia Hill Collins describes as the tendency to analyse 'one or more hierarchies as being socially constructed while continuing to see others as naturalized' (67). Exposing the inner workings of saturated capitalism for women and girls, Indigenous

peoples, nonhuman animals and the environment, *The Swan Book* poignantly portrays the industrialised corporate dominance of the anthropocene as callously traumatising:

This was the place where the mind of the nation practiced warfare and fought nightly for supremacy, by exercising its power over another people's land – the night-world of the multi-nationals, the money-makers and players of big business, the asserters of sovereignty, who governed the strip called *Desperado*: men with hands glued to the wheel charging through the dust in howling road trains packed with brown cattle with terrified eyes, mobile warehouses, fuel tankers, heavy haulage steel and chrome arsenals named *Bulk Haul*, *Outback*, *Down Under*, *Century*, *The Isa*, *The Curry*, *Tanami Lassie*, metal workhorses for carrying a mountain of mining equipment and the country's ore. (Italics in original, 165)

The 'brown cattle with terrified eyes' enduring crowded road trains are destined to become 'meat', the production of which takes place out of sight and out of mind for the vast majority of people. The naturalisation of human uses and abuses of nonhuman animals facilitates industry secrecy as to the processes that turn them from sentient beings, with their own bodily, psychic, affective, and relational capacities and ties, into a product for human consumption. In addition, the willing collective ignorance of human individuals and communities ensures endemic cruelty and killing of animals on a scale that dwarfs, in terms of sheer numbers, the highest toll human genocides and persecutions on historic record. Yet denial of the glaring ethical concerns around the mass production and consumption of meat remains firmly entrenched despite eyewitness video and audio evidence obtained by activists confirming the pain and suffering of nonhuman animals in factory farms. And as *The Swan Book* implies, there is a pointed connection between the mass production of meat and concerns about sustainability and the environment. The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization has stressed that the 'largest source of GHG emissions within agriculture is enteric fermentation – when methane is produced by livestock' (para 3).

Further, horrendous experiments conducted on animals confirm what common sense dictates: that nonhuman animals are capable of being severely traumatised and the effects of traumatisation are transgenerational (Harlow, Dodsworth and Harlow 96; Clark et al.). Though

such studies do not usually use the term 'trauma' (the more oft-used word is 'stress'), they repeatedly describe traumatic symptomology in nonhuman animals. Wright reveals the systematic trauma transmissions that nonhuman animals are subjected to and she does so in a manner that evokes not only what she shows, but also what she leaves out. For example, her momentary depiction of the 'howling' road trains with their terrified-eyed cargo is ghosted with calves left bereft, with the entire crushing cycle of life that beasts of burden are born into.

Though Wright's writing is most overtly powerful when propelled by the heat of anger as it homes in on the ignorance and damage of contemporary life, it is at its most sorrowful and poignant when it turns to the swans; the sadness and unholy tragedy of their demise seems somehow intimately bound to the struggles of First Nations survivors (though this is not a simple case of metaphor). The last chapters of *The Swan Book* focus on Oblivia's bid for freedom following the death of Bella Donna and Oblivia's abduction. Her escape and the swans' drought-stricken fight for survival are brought together in an interwoven affective relation. In a lyrical depiction of what Brooks Pribac calls the 'neural substrates for conscious and affective states humans share with other species' (83), Wright enacts a requiem for the shared attachments, needs and grief between humans and nonhuman animals. In her own words, Oblivia and the swans are 'caught in the winds of a ghost net dragged forward by the spirits of the country' (326). In the final passage of the novel, ahead of the epilogue, the swans meet their demise as the earth heats to an inhospitable degree:

In hotter skies, their wings beat faster in desperation until finally, they become completely disoriented. They lose faith in their journey. They lose each other. The remaining swans fly in every direction in search of the last drying water holes. They stand on baked earth and hiss at the sky they cannot reach, then the time arrives when no more sound comes from their open beaks. The weak, feather-torn necks drop to the ground, and eventually, with wings spread they wait for the spirit flight. (327-328)

Maneesha Deckha argues for the urgency of a posthumanism that addresses institutionalised discourses like speciesism, racism and sexism as 'the residue of imperial discourses; particularly social Darwinist views about the value of different cultures, races, and human beings' (250). This is no small matter, encompassing as it does a vast swathe of

entrenched and historical operations. It is also important to note that this is not a claim that injustice and oppression began as late as the nineteenth century, but an attempt to explain how the stage was set for the saturation capitalism that prevails today. 'As racial, cultural, and gendered others proved themselves more or less civilised under an imperial gaze', says Deckha, 'they were seen as correspondingly more or less human' (252). 'Animals', cast as not only nonhuman, but as the measure against which the human is defined, are, therefore, the most vulnerable sentient beings in virtually every country and culture. Largely unrepresented or inadequately represented in law, human mistreatment of nonhuman individuals is endemic.

Meanwhile, politics and advocacy regarding gender, race, species, and the environment often remain divided and sometimes even at odds. Even those human subjects most negatively affected by patriarchy, imperialism, and capitalism are not necessarily sufficiently sympathetic or empathetic toward the plight of nonhuman animals to make life changes or advocate on their behalf. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent critical race theorist and founding intersectionality scholar, points out that subordinated groups often face problematic contradictions in responding to violence and oppressive conditions (Crenshaw). Oblivia's brutal rape and the response of her family and community in its aftermath stand as prime examples of this point.

Ingrained speciesism has precluded serious societal consideration of nonhuman animals in relation to injustice and trauma. This is likely due to a combination of the naturalisation of speciesism and an uneasy sense that giving focus to nonhuman animals in this way would somehow negate or devalue human trauma and distress. Deckha suspects that the main objection to including nonhuman animals within a broader framework of social concerns is the 'threat "animal rights" and posthumanist pleas for deconstructing the animal/human boundary are seen to pose to still fragile human subjectivities' (259), like, say, the Aboriginal subjectivities Wright characterises. I sympathise with such concerns, but I view them as mistaken and bound in precisely the tiered thought and practice that produce those 'fragile human subjectivities'. As Deckha says so concisely: 'A species hierarchy is always already racist and colonial' (259-260). Wright understands and demonstrates this in her fictional performance of a comeuppance doomsday, and it is this, even more than her passionately innovative use of language, that makes this text a pioneering testament.

If Deckha's plea for posthumanist potential at first appears to be built on the shaky foundation of utopianism, it, in fact, rests on a surprisingly pragmatic supposition. As she concedes, an evaluation that renounces the animal/human boundary might seem impossibly radical, implying as it does legal and economic revolution. But, as she maintains, a thorough revision of the way we do culture may be indicated, 'irrespective of animal concerns such that what is required to realise justice for animals may not seem so extreme or starkly different in comparison' (263). *The Swan Book* illustrates the need for such a revision. Speaking in human language on behalf of human and nonhuman individuals, Wright's work attempts to break the racist/speciesist imperial trance. Pushing past our ingrained human-centric view leads to some tough questions, such as: how and to what extent do human usage and harm traumatise nonhuman animals? How significantly do our abusive relations with nonhuman animals become a source of human trauma? And how might the traumatic affect of humans and nonhumans feed back and forth in transmissive loops? As Brooks Pribac points out, speciesism involves a number of questionable assumptions, not the least of which is the privileging of the 'arguably exclusively human' neocortex over affect and emotion conceived of in Western discourse as 'something inferior to logic', a bias which has 'to date kept the Cartesian divide alive' (69). This rift has governed psychiatry and psychology to the obvious disadvantage of nonhuman animals and the less obvious disadvantage of human life and community, consolidating a 'conceptual divide between humans and other animals, a divide which is progressively losing theoretical and empirical ground' (69).

This divide is also progressively losing ground in literature. The potential for witness and testimony regarding nonhuman animals and the environment in the poetics of transgenerational trauma is intriguing. While I am unsure of Wright's intention regarding speciesism and its surrounding activism, *The Swan Book* is a welcome example of what I have elsewhere referred to as 'animal poetics' (Atkinson 114) – texts that testify to nonhuman animal experience via affective, creative and political means. Wright's novels reveal an exigent inter-species ethical crisis in which connections between disparate beings are rendered in a pointedly literary way that highlights intersections of injustice and traumatic transmissions in such a way as to challenge them.

In Wright's fiction, nonhuman animals are, much like her Aboriginal characters, resilient, traumatised, broken, beautiful, funny, lost and found. And again, much like her Aboriginal characters, they live in the long shadow of the privileged, prevailing white human, be it government, the owners of the means of production, or the 'average Australian'. In the pages of her novels, animals are remarkably drawn, unique yet bound to one another in their plight. They are central to *Bella Donna*'s stories. As the old woman declares, 'I have become an expert on music made from old bones, and I saw it could be from swan bones, or bones of drowned people, or of drought-stricken cattle, imitating the scores of Mozart's fingers racing across the ivory' (46). This poetic description demonstrates a writer encountering transgenerational transmissions beyond the human. Evoking the 'bad weather' (21) of global warming and climate change, Wright depicts the havoc anthroparchy has wreaked, is wreaking, and will almost certainly continue to wreak, on nonhuman animals.

Conclusion

The intersections of suffering and survival between human and nonhuman animals in Wright's fiction are too numerous to cover exhaustively, though some connections between women and nonhuman animals and Indigenous peoples and nonhuman animals can be readily identified. Nonhuman animals are beloved, mistreated and slaughtered, knowing, spiritual and prophetic by turns. *Carpentaria* features a white seer cockatoo called Pirate who lives with Norm Phantom and is considered 'more than holy' (103) by the Phantom clan. Nonhuman animals appear as predictably damning social commentators as evidenced in a description of a 'large flock of resident cockatoos, thousands of them, flying over the town, screaming in a spectacular, uncoordinated chanting, *What are you doing youse bastards?*' (italics in original, 104). They can also become humorously human in surprising yet meaningful ways, such as when Pirate

screamed repeatedly at the sleeping white dog Dallas, who unlike the Jimmy Dale Gilmore country and western song he was named after, had never been to Dallas on a DC9 at night. The dog was such a big fan of country and western music, it had no time

to listen to Norm's stories, as it lay with its back on the dirt floor, piebald belly belly-up, showing its fleas. (104)

That the dog has a penchant for country and western music is not insignificant; it is perhaps the genre of popular music most favored by First Nations peoples in Australia (Walker).

Nonhuman animals are even more ubiquitous in *The Swan Book* and they are represented in inimitable ways. *The Swan Book* suggests that the stories we tell ourselves, and each other, are implicated in the injustices we participate in, allow, and wilfully ignore. It also suggests that the stories we tell ourselves and each other are central to rectifying and redeeming those injustices. As Gleeson-White says, we 'need new stories for our new age, the Anthropocene'; *The Swan Book* stands as a harbinger for what is left of the ages.

* This article was excerpted and adapted from a chapter in the monograph *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma*, published by Bloomsbury Academic in July 2017.

Works Cited

- Atkinson, Meera. 'Animal Poetics: Singing the Scorched Tongue.' *Southerly: Lyre/Liar* 73, vol. 2, 2013, pp. 114-121.
- Barnett, Jon and Neil Adger. 'Climate Change, Human Security and Violent Conflict.' *Political Geography*, vol. 26, no. 6, 2007, pp. 639-655.
- Berry, Helen, Kathryn Bowen and Tord Kjellstrom. 'Climate Change and Mental Health: A Causal Pathways Framework.' *International Journal of Public Health*, vol. 55, no. 2, 2010, pp. 123-132.
- Bradshaw, Gay A. 'Animal Ways.' *Speaking Up for Animals: An Anthology of Women's Voices*. Edited by Lisa Kemmerer, Paradigm Publishers, 2012, pp. 177-184.
- Bradshaw, Gay A. et al. 'Building an Inner Sanctuary: Complex PTSD in Chimpanzees.' *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2008, pp. 9-34.
- Brah, Avtar and Ann Phoenix. 'Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality.' *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2004, pp. 75-86.
- Brooks, David. 'The Fallacies: Theory, Saturation Capitalism and the Animal.' *Southerly: Lyre/Liar*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2013, pp. 47-60.
- Brooks Pribac, Teja. 'Animal Grief.' *Animal Studies Journal*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2013, pp. 67-90.
- Calvo, Erika. 'Most Farmers Prefer Blondes: The Dynamic of Anthroparchy in Animals Becoming Meat.' *Journal for Critical Animal Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2008, pp. 32-45.
- Caruth, C. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.
- Clark, Corinna, et al. 'Long-term and Trans-generational Effects of Neonatal Experience on Sheep Behaviour.' *Biology Letters*, 10, 2 July. 2014,
<http://rsbl.royalsocietypublishing.org/search/Long-term%252Band%252BTrans-generational%252BEffects%252Bof%252BNeonatal%252BExperience%252Bon%252BSheep%252BBehaviour%20jcode%3Aroybiolett>. Accessed 20 February 2016.

- Condliffe, Patrick. 'Woman, Echidna, Man, Dingo: Bio-political Subjectivity and Ethics in the Animals of B. Wongar's Fiction.' *Southerly: Lyre/Liar*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2013, pp. 183-194.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color.' *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241-1299.
- Deckha, Maneesha. 'Intersectionality and Posthumanist Visions of Equality.' *Wisconsin Journal of Law, Gender & Society*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2008, pp. 249-267.
- Derrida, Jacques. 'The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow).' Translated by David Wills. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2002, pp. 369-418.
- Finlay, Emily. 'On the Value of Anthropomorphism.' *Southerly: Lyre/Liar*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2013, pp. 74-93.
- Gleeson-White, Jane. 'Going Viral.' *Sydney Review of Books*, 23 August 2013, <http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/going-viral/>. Accessed 5 September 2013.
- Hall, Stuart, editor. 'Introduction.' *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. Sage, 1997, pp. 1-6.
- Harlow, Harry, and Stephen J. Suomi. 'Social Recovery by Isolation-Reared Monkeys.' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 68, no. 7, 1971, pp. 1534-1538.
- Harlow, Harry, R. O. Dodsworth, and M. K. Harlow. 'Total Social Isolation in Monkeys.' *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1965, pp. 90-97.
- Harlow, Harry, E. Hansen, and B. Sealy. 'Mother-Infant Separation in Monkeys.' *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 3, no. 3-4, 1962, pp. 123-132.
- Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence — from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books, 1997.
- Hills Collins, Patricia. 'It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation.' *Hypatia*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1998, pp. 62-82.

Hiperf289. 'Jacques Derrida and the Question of "The Animal"'.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ry49Jr0TFjk>. Accessed 13 August 2017.

Institute of for Critical Animal Studies (ICAS). <http://www.criticalanimalstudies.org/>.
 Accessed 13 August 2017.

Mulcrone, Katherine. 'The Swan Book.' *Antipodes*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2014, p. 518.

Singer, Peter. *Animal Liberation*. Harper Collins, 1975.

United Nations Environmental Programme. 'Agriculture's Greenhouse Gas Emissions on the Rise,' 2014, <http://www.fao.org/news/story/en/item/216137/icode/>.
 Accessed 13 August 2017.

Walker, Clinton. *Buried Country: The Story of Aboriginal Country Music*. Verse Chorus Press, 2015.

Webb, Jen. 'Living Wound.' *Australian Book Review*.
<https://www.australianbookreview.com.au/component/k2/105-abr-previews/1597-living-wound-the-swan-book>. Accessed 20 December 2013.

Wheeler Center, The. 'Alexis Wright: *The Swan Book*' [video recording], 10 October. 2013,
<http://wheelercenter.com/videos/video/alexis-wright-the-swan-book/>. Accessed 30 December 2013.

Wright, Alexis. *Carpentaria*. Giramondo, 2006.

Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013.