

## Strange Weather: Indigenous Materialisms, New Materialism, and Colonialism\*

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*The essay looks at the challenges Australian Indigenous materialisms make to the Western concept of human and its relation to the inhuman, and it does this through reading the novels of Waanyi writer, critic, and activist Alexis Wright. In the Australian context, a highly productive knot is being tied between post-humanism and postcolonialism, such that the binary of “culture” and “nature” is understood in relation to another binary couple that sits snugly within “culture” and “nature,” and that is “colonizer” and “native.” The place of Indigenous-signed literary texts in critiques of Western materialisms cannot be underestimated. It is through the arts that most encounters between Indigenous and settler Australians take place. How non-Indigenous readers might approach these literary texts is a key ethical question with implications for new materialist and post-humanist projects.*

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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”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Watson, “Settled and Unsettled Spaces: Are We Free to Roam?” *Sovereign Subject: Indigenous Sovereignty Matters*, ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2007), 16–17.

## Introduction

The weather is always strange now. As the Australian poet Ellen van Neerven observes, even her Indigenous elders “well-versed in the sea” can sometimes look at the waters and feel they don’t know them.<sup>2</sup> It is not only the weather itself that has become unknown and strange, however, but the very horizon of ideas through which the weather is understood. The “weather”—as an idea—is not what it used to be. Within Eurocentric discourses those theories that go under the signs of new materialism and post-humanism have contributed to a reimagining of weather through their discoursing on nature, ground, the inhuman. However, while new materialism has renewed pressure on the binary coupling between a masterful and autonomous “human” and a dumb “nature” taken to be an object of human measurement, experiment, exploitation, and control, its claims to newness have been critiqued. As Sara Ahmed among others has argued, new materialism’s founding gestures are possible only by excluding earlier feminist materialisms.<sup>3</sup> But at least as urgent is the exclusion of Indigenous materialisms and through this the recentring of the Western-centered discourses that these theories aim to depose. Post-humanism and new materialism (and some feminist critiques of both) risk leaving the Western liberal human intact, making the “human” in “post-human” stand in for all of “us.” To put this another way, in an age when “human” catastrophic interventions are leaving their permanent marks in the geological strata, how not to risk once again the universal and indeed masculine “human” that is implied in the name given to this age—the Anthropocene?<sup>4</sup>

It is the urgency in some calls for specificity and difference when discoursing on the contours of “human” and “inhuman” to which this paper responds, and it is through the unique literary art of Waanyi Australian writer, activist, and critic Alexis Wright that the paper seeks to make its argument. The argument turns on the differences between worlds as figured in Wright’s fiction. It also turns on the significance of literary practices themselves—writing *and* reading—for unsettling the Western sovereign subject—*that* very particular human, *that* agent, *that* subject of the Age of the Anthropocene. How to read Indigenous-signed literary fiction for their capacities to unsettle Western sovereignty? More, how to see Indigenous materialisms as part of the field through which new materialism has itself been materialized—“thingified” in Karen Barad’s playful lexicon? A refusal to

2 Ellen van Neerven, “The Country Is Like a Body,” *Right Now: Human Rights in Australia*. [rightnow.org.au](http://rightnow.org.au).

3 Sarah Ahmed, “Open Forum Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism,’” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 15.1 (2008): 23–39. For an analysis of feminist engagements with new materialism see Angela Willey, “A World of Materialisms: Postcolonial Feminist Science Studies and the New Natural,” *Science, Technology, and Human Values* 41.6 (2016): 991–1014. Also see Sari Irni, “The Politics of Materiality: Affective Encounters in a Transdisciplinary Debate,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 20.4 (2013): 357. Irni points out that “one of the crucial challenges within material feminisms is whether this strand of feminism can effectively answer to the call to question the whiteness of feminism.”

4 For a discussion on masculinity and the anthropocene, see Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1 (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, with Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2014).

acknowledge the prior presence of and the debt to Indigenous materialisms reiterates the fabricated grounds of colonization: *terra nullius*—a land on which there are no others with prior claim.

Wright's fiction is poetic, and it therefore requires poetic reading practices. This paper writes toward this idea, where poetics means the practice that, after Barthes, can be thought of as producing its effects most powerfully not through the possible, the familiar—the *already* known, the *already* believed—but through the improbable or impossible. Recalling the imperative in the title of one of Alexis Wright's first books *Croire en l'incroyable* (published only in French translation), what might be the signifying and therefore material effects of believing the unbelievable?<sup>5</sup> This paper aims to approach another's horizon of ideas as a stranger might, traveling toward another's Country that has not—or *not yet*—come into view.

### New Materialism and Its Others

In Australian Indigenous materialisms—at least to my stranger's eyes—"human" and "inhuman" are so extensively, elaborately, and constitutively entangled that the very terms *human* and *inhuman*, *culture* and *nature*, *body* and *ground* as conceived within a Western-oriented epistemology start to tremble, if not fall. This paper will offer examples from a range of witnesses, Indigenous and other. To set the scene a little, here is one evocative example. This is from the Yawulyu ceremonies among the Warlpiri of the Central Desert, ceremonies through which, as Jennifer Biddle describes it, the women aim at the "livening-up of country—rejuvenating, re-vitalising, 'feeding' certain places, species and persons."<sup>6</sup>

A certain slow-speed jump forward is made where the feet don't actually leave the ground and yet manage to slowly, measurably, compel the dancer forward. . . . The breast is compelled downward towards a no-longer static or inert ground—country—that simply provides a platform for dancing . . . [t]his is ground—country—which is enlivened by the pounding of the dancers' feet, the slapping of the breasts in rhythm with the singers' voices and the swirling of the dust engendered, which appears as almost an active partner to the dancers, almost as if it too moves, rising up to meet the breast in 'fall,' like the infant, pulling for a feed.<sup>7</sup>

In this description, ground is lively, sensate; human and inhuman are responsive to and responsible for each other in a relation of mutual nourishment. We can go further and say that therefore human and inhuman are differently substantiated; they are not the same *things*. This example also gestures to the wider concept of Country as a

5 Roland Barthes, "The Metaphor of the Eye," trans. J. A. Underwood, in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (London, England: Penguin, 2001), 119–27. Alexis Wright. *Croire en l'incroyable* (Arles, France: Actes Sud, 2000).

6 Jennifer Biddle, "Breasts, Bodies, Art: Central Desert Women's Paintings and the Politics of the Aesthetic Encounter," *Cultural Studies Review* 12 (2006): 24.

7 Biddle, "Breasts, Bodies, Art," 38.

central principle of Indigenous materialisms, where Country is living, it is energy, and it is Law.<sup>8</sup>

Such ideas about a vital materiality have often been relegated to the margins of much new materialism—as footnote or epigraph—or have been overlooked altogether. Jane Bennett in her seminal *Vibrant Matter* seeks to reinvoke a vital materiality by returning to Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, Charles Darwin, Theodor Adorno, Gilles Deleuze, Hans Driesch, and Henri Bergson<sup>9</sup>—to awaken what Bergson described as a “latent belief in the spontaneity of nature.”<sup>10</sup> Nowhere in this work will a reader find the names of the great First Nations intellectuals for whom all matter is indeed vital. Karen Barad in her own influential essay “Posthumanist Performativity” mobilizes Niels Bohr and returns to, revises, sometimes applauds, and sometimes critiques various other Eurocentric thinkers on the characteristics of nature, matter, human and inhuman: Donna Haraway, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Gilles Deleuze appear in her discourse, among others. There is not so much as a footnote to other thinking about “human” outside Barad’s own intellectual traditions and habitual ways of living.

Barad also works with the Australian theorist Vicki Kirby’s important insights into the nature and culture binary, extraordinary work that is indeed unparalleled within recent Western thinking on this question.<sup>11</sup> Kirby in turn speaks with Barad and Jacques Derrida, revisits Ferdinand de Saussure, and critiques Butler. She performs illuminating readings of some extremely articulate human bodies formed outside European discourses—for instance, those embodied subjects who appear in the course of Hindu rituals of Thaipusam as cut, pierced, and pressed to an extent that seems at the edge of endurance. Such readings of non-European or non-Western speaking and writing bodies whose very flesh appears to be made, and which performs, differently from my own—these human bodies that exceed or defy the limits experienced by some others—need not, though, foreclose consideration of the *words* these men and women utter, orally or in script. These kinds of cuts made in language, including Australian Indigenous oral and written literatures, remain tantalizingly absent from many new materialist approaches to “human” and “inhuman.” The oral and written textualities composed by Australian Aboriginal people, who read and write relationship in ways that are among the most complex in the world and who theorize the “human” as deeply con-substantiated in relation to the “inhuman,” risk remaining outside the considerations of key new materialist theories as if Aboriginal people had never spoken.<sup>12</sup> This unwittingly risks re-enlivening the pairs nature : native/culture : colonizer. The Western subject slips in, installs itself, and assumes the sovereign’s mantle even in those new materialist writings that sustain some of the most profound critiques of this very centrism.

8 In Australian Aboriginal discourses, “Country” often appears written with initial capitalization, indicating its significance as a living being. “Country,” then, can be thought of as a proper name.

9 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), viii.

10 *Ibid.*, vii.

11 Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter,” *Signs* 28.3 (2003): 829, fn 38.

12 Kenelm Burridge suggests that Australian Aboriginal life is “perhaps the most complicated representative of human life,” quoted in Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human: Life and Land in an Australian Aboriginal Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 25.

It is not only through new materialisms' citational practices that the Western sovereign subject is recentered. This kind of human is also their assumed reader and the subject of their discourse. The "human" assumed under post-humanism remains the Western liberal subject, not put under erasure as the "post" in its name promises. Karen Barad's essay "Posthumanist Performativity" begins with a quote from Steve Shaviri: "Where did we ever get the strange idea that nature—as opposed to culture—is ahistorical and timeless. We are far too impressed by our own cleverness and self-consciousness . . . we need to stop telling ourselves the same old anthropocentric bedtime stories."<sup>13</sup> As Barad is careful throughout her writing to insist on the provisional nature of "human," the quotation marks insisting that the taken-for-grantedness of "human" is now under pressure, still the first person plural "we" remains here and elsewhere in the essay without the provisionality afforded by quotation marks, as if "we" are able to move around the globe and across time unanchored, not contingent on the local cut on which Barad elsewhere insists.<sup>14</sup>

But to whom are these comments addressed? To whom do Shaviri and Barad appeal? It is Western Eurocentric subjects. Not all humans require Barad's or Shaviri's correctives. As Indigenous feminist Zoe Todd, from Amiskwaciwâskahikan, Canada, has pointed out, in order "to communicate with the constituents of complex and contested world(s) . . . [such theory is] spinning itself on the backs of non-European thinkers." It is not Indigenous peoples who are "credited for these incredible insights into the 'more-than-human,' sentience and agency."<sup>15</sup> Here is her account of waiting through a talk by Bruno Latour to hear him: "credit Indigenous thinkers for their millennia of engagement with sentient environments, with cosmologies that enmesh people into complex relationships between themselves and *all* relations, and with climates and atmospheres as important points of organization and action. I waited. I waited. . . . It never came. He did not mention Inuit. Or Anishinaabeg. Or Nehiyawak. Or any Indigenous thinkers at all."<sup>16</sup>

Todd's point goes to the very heart of colonialism's elision of Indigenous intellectual labors and brings new materialism itself into an unwitting alliance with the very imperialism of the Western sovereign subject that it avowedly strives to undo. So deep is the Western subject's sense of itself as original and self-made that other knowledges, including ones that arose prior to the Western ones, can disappear from view.

Barad insists that meaning "is not ideational but rather specific material (re) configurings of the world, and semantic indeterminacy, like ontological indeterminacy, is only locally resolvable through specific intra-actions."<sup>17</sup> The "differential boundary" between new materialisms and Indigenous materialisms is stabilized and can be destabilized in "intra-action." If we think of new materialism, then, not as ideational but as a specific material configuring of the stuff of the world, then we can

13 Steve Shaviri, *Doom Patrols: A Theoretical Fiction about Postmodernism*. (New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997). Quoted in Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 801.

14 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 819.

15 Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' Is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29.1 (2016): 4–22.

16 Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn," 6–7.

17 Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity," 819.

propose that one of its boundary-making practices—its *thingification*—is colonialism and the Indigenous practices that colonialism says are not there but which it takes up (or takes) anyway.<sup>18</sup> The act of refusing this indebtedness performs—makes—the very same Enlightenment discourses that new materialism insists must be transformed if the devastation wreaked on the West's Others—“human” and “inhuman,” the “*zoe*” and the “*geo*”—is ever to cease.

Not only have cultures outside the prevailing Western ones theorized “human” and “inhuman” in radical entanglement prior to these new materialist efforts to do so, but new materialism's very possibilities of emergence include Indigenous materialisms that are, however, unrecognized. To break from the reiteration of *terra nullius*, non-Indigenous peoples will need to recognize the existence of Ab(original) materialities and materialisms.

### Reading and Other Acts of Translation

It might be productive at this point in colonialism's history to emphasize travel toward other ideas of materialities and materialisms rather than arrival, to move from the lexicon of “hold” and “grasp” and “apprehend” toward something more liminal, provisional, tentative, experimental. Might Euro- and Western-centric thinkers “attend” to Indigenous materialisms in the sense so delightfully provided by the Latin root—“to stretch”—coupled with the Middle English usage, “to apply one's mind to”? The body can be introduced here, too, and the register of affect permitted entry—anxiety caused by uncertainty and doubt before another's materialities; and pleasure aroused by curiosity, anticipation, of our desires *not* met—so long, that is, as we recall that affect and body are nevertheless materialized locally. Can we remember to remember that affects and bodies are not universal? The shapes of “mine” and “yours,” “ours” and “theirs,” are still to be discovered, not assumed in advance.

The method this paper follows is a literary one, not anthropological or ethnographic. Among the several spheres of intellectual labors that it brings together, however, are observations and interpretations of Indigenous materialities and materialisms made by non-Indigenous anthropologists and ethnographers, as well as Alexis Wright's literary texts and other accounts of materialities given by some of her countrymen and -women. The reports that anthropologists and ethnographers bring of Indigenous materialisms are acts of cultural and linguistic translation. They are partial, invested, imperfect—as all translations must be. As Penny van Toorn comments so eloquently on writing and cultural exchange, “[w]riting never arrives naked.”<sup>19</sup> In putting these ethnographic texts together with Alexis Wright's fiction, I don't intend to imply that Wright's fiction should be read as ethnography. What I do intend is to use ethnography where it can contribute to making a place where the *presence* of Indigenous materialisms can insist itself to be attended to by its Others.

18 Ibid.

19 Penny Van Toorn, *Writing Never Arrives Naked: Early Aboriginal Cultures of Writing in Australia* (Canberra, Australia: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2006).



At the heart of any critical practice is a theory of reading, whether or not this is explicitly stated. This essay proposes a reading practice where the non-Waanyi reader takes up Alexis Wright's invitation to be "welcomed strangers." She has said that she wants her readers to "believe in the energy of the Gulf Country . . . to stay with a story as a welcomed stranger, as if the land was telling a story about itself as much as the narrator is telling stories to the land."<sup>20</sup>

This practice approaches Wright's work for its poetics and, recalling the "ecological procedures" of Joan Retallack, for its poethics.<sup>21</sup> However, *reading* Wright could also be a poet(h)ical practice. In such a reading practice, strangeness and estrangement are not covered over or newly familiarized, instead there is a making strange what was once reassuringly familiar. As Bennett herself put it so eloquently, her own method is precisely "to turn the figures of 'life' and 'matter' around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something like the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound. In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape."<sup>22</sup> I am interested in the possibilities of a reading practice based in estrangement for the possibilities it might hold for decentering the Western-centric knowing reader-subject. It may be that for the non-Indigenous reader to attempt to take up the position of a stranger before Indigenous textuality is such a precarious, decentered, and destabilized position that the Western sovereign subject might fall into doubt and uncertainty—exactly what new materialism has aimed at, suggesting the significance of literary practices for understanding the possibilities of changing Western ideas about human, inhuman, life and nonlife, energy and matter.

I am taking Wright's work, then, to be about energy and matter, about human and inhuman, about land that writes and is written to, and I am interested in the idea of a non-Waanyi reader who is a stranger both to the story and to the land that "stories" and is "storied."

### "The Bureau of Meteorology Had Called and Translated the Message from the Ancestral Spirits"<sup>23</sup>

Alexis Wright's three novels to date can be read as a loose trilogy, all set in the Gulf of Carpentaria, where the traditional land of the Waanyi is located. The first novel, published in 1997, *Plains of Promise*, starts out in the 1950s; the second novel *Carpentaria*, published in 2006, is set in a time that is recognizably contemporary. *The Swan Book*, published in 2013, is set in the future, toward the end of the twenty-first century.<sup>24</sup> Extreme weather figures in each of the novels: cyclone and torrential rain, the desperate years when it seems that rains will never come again, and then the years of ceaseless rains. How this weather has been read, however, has changed over the past

20 Alexis Wright: "On Writing Carpentaria," *Heat* 13 (2007): 87.

21 Wright's work is among those poetical texts that refuse the lyrical in their depiction of nature and climate, instead reaching for aesthetic modes that perform the unsettlement that they describe. This recalls Joan Retallack's work in *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

22 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vi.

23 Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (Sydney, Australia: Giramondo, 2006), 466.

24 Alexis Wright, *Plains of Promise* (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: University of Queensland Press, 1997); Wright, *Carpentaria*; Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (Sydney, Australia: Giramondo, 2013).

two decades partly because of new materialist and ecological critical practices and partly because the weather itself is so insistent: the weather now is always strange. But there are also the powerful effects of Wright's own writings.

The weather emerges in readings of *Plains of Promise* retrospectively, I suggest, as an effect of reading *Carpentaria*, which figures great bodies of water, rivers that change their course, cyclones that destroy the coast. The effect is redoubled after reading *The Swan Book* where the devastation of climate change is now explicit: "Towns closed, cities were boarded up, communities abandoned, their governments collapsed . . . In every neck of the woods people walked in the imagination of doomsayers and talked the language of extinction."<sup>25</sup>

When *Plains of Promise* was first published, it was characterized in critical essays and reviews generally in broadly historical and political terms as a story of the "Stolen Generations," the devastating removal of Aboriginal men, women, and children from their communities, traditional cultures, and from their lands.<sup>26</sup> A young woman, whose name a reader never learns, is forcibly removed to an Aboriginal mission in Queensland, accompanied by her young daughter, Ivy Koopundi. The location of the mission is on lands that are not Ivy's or her mother's, and they are not welcomed by many of the other Aboriginal people among whom they now are forced to live. In keeping with an Australian regime of apartheid and assimilation known as the dormitory system, the young Ivy is separated from her mother into a dormitory with other children called half-castes, and in the years that follow there is imprisonment, widespread and devastating illnesses, and death; Ivy herself is raped by the missionary, and the child whom she carries is taken from her.<sup>27</sup> Whereas Ivy was placed in the dormitory, her daughter is taken away from the mission and brought up by a white family in the city, becoming a member of the Stolen Generations.<sup>28</sup> Ivy's child, Mary, returns years later with her own daughter, looking for her lost family, and meets her mother, but the chance of reconciliation has long passed. Ivy is broken in body, mind, and memory. Mary and her child return to the city.

Underneath this story is another one about the weather. This is not, however, an idea of the weather as something ordered according to the discourses of Western meteorology that attributes the patterns of rain and drought to the long cycles that take years to fully turn on a vast and mostly dry continent between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Weather is not an object to be measured and mastered, but a part of a vital living world that is in consubstantiating interdependence with "human." The weather is bound to humans and both are subject to the Law of Country. Weather, it seems, is Country enunciating itself.

25 Wright, *The Swan Book*, 6.

26 A recent essay by Linda Davey marks a shift in some of the main trends in critical approaches to this novel by placing it in relation to debates around materialism and the relationship between language and non-linguistic forces. See Linda Daley, "Alexis Wright's Fiction as World Making," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 10.1 (2016): 8–23.

27 I have discussed white Australian sexual desire, violence, and colonialism in the literary texts of Alexis Wright and Kim Scott in *The Postcolonial Eye: White Australian Desire and the Visual Field of Race*, especially chapters 3, 9, and 10.

28 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families*. (Sydney, Australia: Australian Human Rights Commission, 1997).



### But What Is Country?

Country cannot be confused with the connotations of that word in English: this is not merely land or ground or nature if by these things we mean something inanimate. To the extent it can be translated, it seems to be something like a living and life-giving nexus of energy-matter in which entities, including Ancestors, emerge; it is a sensate intelligence; it includes what in English might be thought of as geological and life forms, except that rock and mountain range are among the living. It includes “human” and “animal,” but these now would be approached as consubstantiating—wonderfully evoked by Deborah Bird Rose in her reports of Yarralin theories of materiality that refer to “dingo makes us human.”<sup>29</sup> Country is also inextricably linked with what in Kriol is called “Dreaming,” described by Rose as “sets of moral relationships—country to country, country to plant and animal species, people to country, people to species, people to people.” Dreaming, Rose continues, is “quite literally ‘grounded.’”<sup>30</sup> And it is energy, power. As W. E. H. Stanner quotes his friend speaking of the Dreaming: “Like engine, like power, plenty of power, it does hard work; it *pushes*.”<sup>31</sup>

And, Country is Law. As Deborah Bird Rose reports from her time spent with the Yarralin, also from the Gulf Country, Yarralin see ground, or land, or Country as carrying Law. Quoting Doug Campbell: “You see that hill over there? Blackfellow law like that hill . . . Blackfellow Law hard—like a stone, like that hill. The Law is in the ground.”<sup>32</sup> Quoting another source, a man called Hobbles: “Everything comes up out of ground—language, people, emu, kangaroo, grass. That’s Law.”<sup>33</sup>

Country is also living, sensate. As John Bradley describes Country for Yanyuwa in the Gulf of Carpentaria: “People visit country and listen to country; they sing for country and cry for country. They worry greatly about country and speak longingly of places they are unable to visit because it is now a part of a pastoral property, a mining lease, or just too hard to get to without transport. They feel their country, in return, hears, thinks, and feels about its human relatives.”<sup>34</sup>

The status of Country and that which inhabits it is rendered with piercing clarity by Elizabeth A. Povinelli in her account of Two Women Sitting Down and the legal case that was prosecuted against a mining company that damaged this—well, this what? Are Two Women Sitting Down a geological formation, or living entities, or both? Indigenous groups “testified that they believe that specific features of the landscape such as Old Man Rock and Two Women Sitting Down are sentient, and equally important, that, as the human descendants of these still sentient sites, they are obligated to act on this belief.”<sup>35</sup> These entities, also spoken of as Dreaming sites,

29 Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*.

30 *Ibid.*, 57.

31 W. E. H. Stanner, “Religion, Totemism and Symbolism,” in *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology*, eds. Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Diane Bell, and Kenneth Maddock (St. Lucia, Queensland, Australia: Queensland University Press, 1984), 166.

32 Doug Campbell, senior Yarralin man, quoted by Rose in *Dingo Makes Us Human*, 56.

33 Hobbles, “boss” for the *Pantimi* ritual, quoted by Rose in *Dingo Makes Us Human*, 57.

34 John Bradley with Yanyuwa Families, *Singing Saltwater Country: Journey to the Songlines of Carpentaria* (Sydney, Australia: Allen and Unwin, 2010), 228.

35 Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem for Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC; London, England: Duke University Press, 2016), 35.

“listened to and smelled the sweat of Aboriginal people as they passed by.”<sup>36</sup> And yet, as Povinelli points out, “[i]t goes without saying that the mining company’s action within the lawsuit was not prosecuted as manslaughter, attempted murder, or murder but as ‘desecration’ under criminal liability law.”<sup>37</sup> Do we refer to Two Women Sitting Down, she asks as “that,” “it,” or “they”? The point is that there is no answer—at least not yet—to this question within Western embodied knowledges and the legal and cultural practices in relation to which they arise.

### ***Plains of Promise and the Meaning of Weather***

In *Plains of Promise* there are prolonged absences of rain, disturbing the possibilities of all life. These absences are attributed to the impossibility of looking after Country under conditions of colonialism. In colonial relations, the owners of Country are prevented from living in proper relation to it, which includes taking care of Country and being taken care of by it. Locked out of land completely, or in restricted access to it, the practices of caring for Country—recall the dance—are interrupted or can’t go on. Extreme weather events are attributed to the absence of care, which in turn are produced by colonial relationships of land. This is colonialism *as* climate change. As Ghassan Hage asks: “What if Gaia articulates the human and nonhuman overreaction to the permanent state of savage colonization in which we have been living?”<sup>38</sup>

In *Plains of Promise*, these long years of extreme drought bring death: death is all around. Witness the pelicans that perish by the thousands on the dry lakes, drawn by a mirage to detour from their flight paths, tricked by water turned to vapor by the hot earth, holding out false promises. But, miraculously, the country eventually delivers torrential rains that will bring water flooding back into the lakes. More waterbirds arrive and, having timed their travels well, land on the flooding lakes that are now such vast and still expanding bodies of water that there is no crossing them. The waterlands have: “turned into a brilliant carpet of bright shades of green moments after the rain finally stopped . . . The land rejoiced. The words of the world whistled by in an endless murmur of repeated rhythms.”<sup>39</sup>

What has brought about this transformation is the arrival in Country of a person with special obligations to Country. This part of the story, however, is not made explicitly; it can be read only retrospectively from the final pages where a story is told about a waterbird whose presence (and the presence of her children and her children’s children) is what is needed to bring about the return of the rain. Ivy’s mother and her child, and her child’s child, are the custodians according to that Country’s law and, indeed, Mary’s return brings back the waters for the first time in thirty years.

As described earlier, dance is one of the practices through which humans fulfill their responsibilities for Country. Dance is no merely expressive, ornamental, or

36 Ibid., 34.

37 Ibid., 32.

38 Ghassan Hage, “Etat de siege: A Dying Domesticating Colonialism,” *American Ethnologist* 43.1 (2016): 48.

39 Wright, *The Swan Book*, 80.

aesthetic practice. In *Plains of Promise*, on the great dry lakes before the rains come, there is “a dancing ground where several hundred people, their bodies painted white, were dancing. It was the force of their stamping feet breaking up the ground and sending the red dust flying in the air that caused the storm.”<sup>40</sup>

Returning to Biddle’s witnessing of the dance, can we go further than say that human and country are responsive to each other? For it seems that from Biddle’s account, “body” and “country” are different things in the Warlpiri culture than they are in the colonizers’. This is to say something other than that this thing called the body takes different meanings unto itself depending on its habits and habitus. It is to say something other than that there is a cultural corporeal scheme, in Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s terms, defined by Rosalyn Diprose as a set of habits, gestures, and conducts formed over time in relation to other bodies.<sup>41</sup> It is instead to say that the very substance of bodies is not universal but made differently in different places, and that country, too, is made differently in relation to different bodies. Country and body might be consubstantiating such that one does not “have” the same body if one lives in one country rather than another.<sup>42</sup> We can suggest, too, that Warlpiri live in another country than the one in which I live, even if they and I abide in the same coordinates of longitude and latitude because “country” is constituted differently in these two bodily contexts. We do not stand on the *same ground*. Or, to put this another way, there is no “we”—no “human”—prior to “ground.” This is my understanding of what in Indigenous materialism is called Country.

### ***Carpentaria*, or, Reading as a Stranger Might**

*Carpentaria* has become the subject of critical readings in Australia that mobilize ecocritical and materialist approaches not seen at the time of its first release in 2007, or evident in readings of its predecessor, *Plains of Promise*. These recent critical moves indicate the increasing traction of the theoretical approaches associated with new materialism that insist on the mutuality of human and inhuman, and the agency and animation of the inhuman. This represents a significant shift from some earlier readings of Wright that saw Indigenous perspectives of human and country, energy and matter, as naive creation stories with no explanatory power. In Australia, Indigenous Law is still often perceived as if it were a form of myth or legend, or children’s story, another’s epistemologies reduced to an irrational or primitive naivety, lore rather than Law.<sup>43</sup>

The newer readings of *Carpentaria* emphasize that the place of the novel is an Aboriginal world where, as Linda Daley puts it: “[t]he natural world is characterized as animate and interconnected with the human world and one where human agency

40 Wright, *Plains of Promise*, 84.

41 Rosalyn Diprose, *Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 109.

42 For a fuller account of this argument please see Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*, 31–44.

43 Indigenous philosopher Mary Graham uses lowercase “law” to refer to white man’s law and uppercase “Law” to refer to Aboriginal Law. See Mary Graham, “Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews,” *Australian Humanities Review* 45 (2008): 181–94.

occurs in an environment that is equally shaped by nonhuman agency.<sup>44</sup> Jane Gleeson-White reads the novel as endowing agency to the inhuman world,<sup>45</sup> “attempting to embody in novel form a complex multivalent mesh of Indigenous realities related to place and their active interconnection with the human world that I would call . . . ‘ecological.’”<sup>46</sup> Kate Rigby’s extended ecofeminist reading of *Carpentaria* brings together postcolonialism and ecocriticism in the course of arguing that the novel’s subversive narrative points to the necessity of a “dismantling of the ‘alien law’ of eurowestern patriarchal and ‘anthroparchal’ thought and social relations.”<sup>47</sup>

While these recent critical approaches to *Carpentaria* are positioned more firmly within the intellectual framework of ecologically led criticism, new materialist approaches hover close by nonetheless, affecting a change in atmosphere. Rigby for instance notes the similarities between the critical terms with which she and others are reading now and some new materialist approaches: Barad’s “intra-action,” Bennett’s view of “vibrant matter,” Alaimo’s “trans-corporeality.”<sup>48</sup> That is, there is a distinct shift in Australian literary critics’ readings of Indigenous literary textuality, and partly propelling these shifts are ecocritical and new materialist debates taking place both locally and internationally.

If, however, these newer critical moves are indebted to ecological, postcolonial, and post-humanist theorizations of human and inhuman, then they are also indebted to Wright herself and to other Aboriginal cultural workers—poets, songwriters, dancers, among others—who convey different ways of being human, theories developed within the specificities of their own relations to Country. That is, Wright’s novels themselves contribute to the materializing of the newer critical responses. In the same way as I suggested that *Plains of Promise* became available to me as a text about the weather (now reconceived), retrospectively through the impact of Wright’s later novels, so too is Wright part of the formation in which new materialist and ecological readings are emerging.

That is, let’s not make the mistake of submitting Wright’s textuality to a new materialist or ecological reading, but recognize that the influence is the other way around. Indigenous figurings of human and inhuman are among the conditions of possibility for those ideas called new materialist.

Wright’s novels produce their effects not only through their narratives, however. Their formal and structural qualities work toward this, too, and they do so by producing the Western sovereign subject’s estrangement from itself. The novels present challenges to a non-Waanyi reader that might topple such a reader from the position of knowing, Western, human subject. Western-centric readers’ responses to this

44 Daley, “Alexis Wright’s Fiction as World Making,” 8–23. Daley draws on Graham, “Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews.”

45 Jane Gleeson-White, “Capitalism versus the Agency of Place”: An Ecocritical Reading of *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*,” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 13.2 (2013):1–12.

46 Gleeson-White, “Capitalism versus the Agency of Place,” 8–9.

47 Rigby, “The Poetics of Decolonization,” 123. Rigby acknowledges her debts to the Australian ecologist and poet Judith Wright and another Australian ecological theorist Val Plumwood, especially Plumwood’s critique of anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology’s privileging of identity over alterity.

48 *Ibid.*, 130.

pressure, their willingness to relinquish their own certainty, is the point at which reading itself can become a political and poetical (and therefore creative) act.

Before approaching Wright's novels for their formal poetic and poethical practices, I'll briefly introduce *Carpentaria's* narrative, which, like all of Wright's other novels, is overtly political. I am not intending to divert attention from the significance of the narratives that Wright and other Indigenous novelists are producing. *Carpentaria* is explicitly dealing with some of the most pressing issues of our times—these include the degradation of country through mining, the urgency of Indigenous sovereignty, and also, surprisingly at first, the question of the refugee, the stranger, an outsider who makes no claim to the land.

*Carpentaria* is set in a fictional coastal town called Desperance, up in the Gulf of Carpentaria, which had been built on the mouth of a river and so become a port. But the river decided to change course, leaving Desperance stranded and with no purpose until the mine was established, offering employment to the township. On the edges of the town is another world, the world of the Pricklebush mobs, two different groups of Aboriginal people each making claims to the country on which they and the white folk of Desperance live. And then, one day, out of the sea walks a stranger, a man who has been caught in a storm and arrives in disarray, with no memory and no name. He is given not so much a new name as an alias—Elias Smith.

Profound conflict dominates the two groups of Aboriginal people. Some of this conflict predates the arrival of the Europeans—the novel is quite insistent about this. Indigenous cultures continue into the present, their conflicts included. But some of the conflict turns on different attitudes to the mining company. Eventually, each group takes up residence on different sides of the town and they become known as the Eastsiders and the Westsiders, respectively. The Phantom family remain on the Eastside: Angel Day, her husband Norm Phantom, and their children, including Will Phantom, who eventually succeeds in destroying the mine. The woman he loves is Hope, the daughter of Joseph Midnight, the patriarch of the Westsiders. The mine's destructive forces unleash counterforces that seem to arise out of the country itself—the mine is destroyed by fire, and the town by a cyclone. Will is adrift on the ocean, on an island of rubbish, and Hope sets out in search of him. If one had to reduce the narrative to a play on the allegorical names it gives its protagonists, it might be this: that the novel is about the urgency of hope conjoining with political will in a world torn up by the double logic of capitalism and colonialism.

Critics generally agree that the challenges of the novel are aesthetic ones as well as overtly political. Kate Rigby for instance acknowledges the hermeneutic difficulties of *Carpentaria's* style and structure: "the open-endedness of many of its tangled story-lines, are compounded by Wright's 'decision to write a novel as though some old Aboriginal person was telling the story,' adopting a vernacular tone that 'belongs to the diction of the tribal nations of the Gulf.'"<sup>49</sup> Rigby's narrative-led reading is conducted through this "tangle," "[r]econstructing the tale from the telling."<sup>50</sup> She is keenly aware that this tale might be more available to Waanyi readers than to someone like herself: "[T]here is no doubt that Waanyi readers are bound to feel considerably

49 Alexis Wright, quoted in *ibid.*, 123.

50 *Ibid.*

more at home in the fictional world of this novel than non-Waanyi readers, who are made powerfully aware that they are entering foreign territory in reading *Carpen-taria*.<sup>51</sup> However, Rigby is assured by Wright's wish that a non-Waanyi reader take up the position of "welcomed stranger" to this world, an invitation that she feels enables her to move beyond the resistance of the text and "to make (white Western) sense of it."

A question mark, though, can be raised over the claims a stranger can make. What is this place into which Alexis Wright invites a reader? However welcoming, it is not benign. If we bring ethnography again into proximity with the literary (not to determine meanings but to unsettle), then Deborah Bird Rose's reports on the position of the stranger among the Yarralin in the Gulf Country has implications, I think, for how Wright's invitation might be taken. "Country," Rose reports, "takes notice of who is there. Country expects its people to maintain its integrity and one of the rules of the owners is to introduce strangers to country"—as Wright has done in her double role as author and traditional owner of Country belonging to the Waanyi. The ritual of introduction, Rose goes on, might "include the following steps: first, the owner brings the stranger to water, calling out to the country as he approaches; secondly, he or she wets the stranger's head or arm and gives them water to drink."

A number of people explained that once a person has been introduced to the country through this means the country knows the person's smell. Without this introduction, strangers are at risk—the water may drown them, or they may become sick and die. In discussing this ritual of introduction, people used the English word 'water' as a verb. Jimmy Manngayarri said that it is the Dreamings in country who actually smell and identify people's sweat: "Dream can smell other people. After you water him, that Dream knows him."<sup>52</sup>

This marks strangers as dependent, as potentially at risk from the energy of Country that is not theirs, and with keen limits to knowledge. "In acknowledging their status as strangers, they assent to these facts: that others are the owners, that their own knowledge is limited, and that the country has no real responsibility for them."<sup>53</sup>

In each of Wright's three novels, considerable attention is given to the position of the stranger. In *Plains of Promise*, there are some strangers who are not welcomed into others' Country. Ivy and her mother are held responsible for widespread illness and death among the people with whom they are forced to live, and whose Country it is. Elliot, an owner of the land on which the mission has been built, travels to Ivy's Country as a messenger with proper purpose and is respectful of the Country, but he is terrified. He knows that Ivy's Country is engaging in different discourses than his own, that it reads and writes in ways that are often illegible to him. He takes up a place of uncertainty and doubt before this text. He is cast into the role of interpreting, and then revisiting his interpretations in the light of new evidence in what seems a ceaseless movement of interrogation, intervention, and provisionality. He is full of doubt and at

51 Alexis Wright, quoted in *ibid.*

52 Rose, *Dingo Makes Us Human*, 109.

53 *Ibid.*



times overcome by the energy of the Gulf. There is nothing simple or easy in it; it recalls what has been said of the Dreaming: it is “powerful, it pushes.”<sup>54</sup>

In *Carpentaria* the stranger is Elias Smith, whose position remains ambiguous: Is he a white man with amnesia who is somehow able to bridge white and Aboriginal worlds, or is he an Aboriginal man, dislocated from his own Country, a stranger in this one, but a stranger who knows how to conduct himself—who knows to wait to be “watered” and to be recognized by Country?<sup>55</sup>

### Reading *The Swan Book* as a Poet Might

In *The Swan Book*, however, set in the future, it seems as if all humans risk being strangers to one another and to Country; all are diasporic. Who can any longer take up the position of Indigenous sovereign subject in Country, welcoming the stranger? Is *The Swan Book*'s apocalyptic vision this: that the ravages wrought by colonialism will be so great that the vital, sensate Country might have no remaining custodians, compromising its capacity to sustain other forms of life? In this apocalyptic vision, what are the possibilities of being “human” as an Indigenous sovereign subject is human, consubstantiated in a particular relation with Country, if colonialism and its associated devastations prevent that relationship, prevent Country from being cared for? The human imagined and indeed idealized by new materialism—the human that understands its constitutive relation to other living forms—is at risk, if not already lost, in Wright's futuristic text because of colonialist anthropocentrism.

In each of Wright's novels, strange weather is linked to colonialism. In *Plains of Promise*, the rains will come only when Indigenous people's relations to and responsibility for Country are restored. In *Carpentaria*, cyclones of record-breaking force are associated with the damage done to Country by mining. In *The Swan Book*, the link between strange weather and colonialism is fully realized. *The Swan Book* is a Book of Revelations. What is revealed is the link between colonialism and the apocalypse that for many Indigenous people arrived in 1788. In *The Swan Book*, there is no longer a character that could carry the name of Hope.

Instead, there is Oblivion Ethylene. Oblivia subsists in a world where “there are droughts, high temperatures and winds in some countries, or in others, the freezing depths of prolonged winters.”<sup>56</sup> The Earth's peoples are now on the move, desperate to find a place that can sustain life. In Australia there are cyclones, floods, tidal surges, and violent hailstorms, and yet its shores are still sought by some Europeans fleeing from wars incited by the desperation of climate change. Bella Donna is one of these who takes up residence in Oblivia's community, a swamp into which has been dumped abandoned naval ships, leaking radioactivity into the already-polluted waters

54 Stanner, “Religion, Totemism and Symbolism,” 166.

55 Amnesia is often associated in Australia with the colonizers forgetting the fact of invasion, sometimes consciously so, in an act of denial, but also unconsciously forgetting, in an act of repression. That is, in this colonial position one does not know that one is amnesiac: for instance, one would believe in one's own stories of the heroism of the pioneer. Here in Elias Smith, however, is a man who *knows* he is suffering from amnesia; he is, you might say, “awake” to his loss. In *The Swan Book*, Ethyl Oblivia also suffers amnesia, in her case because of the degree of her suffering, and she must be called into wakefulness.

56 Wright, *The Swan Book*, 25.

of the swamp. The swamp is controlled by the army—the Northern Territory interventions are still in effect in these days at the end of the twenty-first century. Oblivia is forced into marriage as the “promised wife” of the first Indigenous president of Australia, Warren Finch from the neighboring Brolga Country, and is taken from the swamp—optimistically called Swan Lake—into the city where she is held in Finch’s private apartment, isolated, frightened, and furious. Finch is assassinated, and Oblivia makes her way back to the swamp with the aid of black swans.

This account, though, must rob the text of its wonder for a reader unfamiliar with its extraordinary stylistic accomplishments. I have argued elsewhere for reading each of Wright’s novels for their departures from conventional realist modes and for considering the generative possibilities of bringing into play critical strategies associated with excess and uncertainty.<sup>57</sup> In a similar vein, in pointing out how surprisingly sparse is the number of Australian novels dealing with climate change, Jessica White has asked whether the problem doesn’t lie in the inadequacy of realist and other traditional forms to “render the complexity and enormity of climate change,” and she reads *The Swan Book* as a novel whose significance in part lies in its form.<sup>58</sup> As James Bradley has observed, too, “[i]t’s very difficult to imagine how one could encompass such a subject in a conventional novel without projecting some sort of coherence or shape onto it which does violence to the scale and difficulty of the problem.”<sup>59</sup>

In another reading of *The Swan Book*’s aesthetics, Emily Potter has posed the question of climate change and the forms of its textual “representation” as having socio-historic specificities (where Potter deliberately puts the possibilities of representation into question by her use of inverted commas). “[I]n the strongest critical responses to the question of climate change genre and style,” Potter writes, “we are called to see the impossibility of sustaining certain literary modes in a time of climate change. If this is the case, what modes might endure or emerge in this wake?”<sup>60</sup> Potter’s answer includes *The Swan Book*, for its “complex and multi-stranded narrative . . . [that] works against a linear mode of storytelling, populated with multiple and diverse narrators, voices, species, cultural references (Ancestors, Dreaming stories, fairy tales, William Black, and ABBA jumble together), and most significantly for the question of time, ghosts, who co-exist, and interact, with the living characters of the text.”<sup>61</sup> This “text’s intertextual plays (including the use of Waanyi language itself), as well as its non-linear loops, textual punctuation and rhythms, asserts this, too, that the real is multiply textual.”<sup>62</sup> The multiply textual, the nonlinear, and the intertextual play do not make for easy reading, at least not for the non-Indigenous reader limited by her own expectations of narratives and narrative forms. As Potter says of teaching

57 Ravenscroft, *The Postcolonial Eye*.

58 Jessica White, “Fluid Worlds: Reflecting Climate Change in *The Swan Book* and *The Sunlit Zone*,” *Southerly* 74.1 (2014): 144.

59 James Bradley quoted in *ibid*.

60 Emily Potter, “Postcolonial Australia, Indigenous Realism and Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*,” in *Teaching Climate Change in the Humanities*, eds. Stephen Siperstein, Shane Hall, and Stephen LeMenager (Oxfordshire, England: Taylor and Francis, 2016.) <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/latrobe/details.action?docID=47f0872>.

61 *Ibid*.

62 *Ibid*.

*The Swan Book*: “My students . . . have described their engagement with the text in terms of an epic journey towards comprehension.”<sup>63</sup>

In all of Wright’s novels, but perhaps especially in *The Swan Book*, the complexities of the telling reach into the use of language itself, which is always evocative as well as humorous language and works in ways that are in excess of any conventional uses of English. This is language that arrests this reader, gives pause to her otherwise headlong rush into meaning-making, and makes her wonder how well she knows English after all. Whose English is this that it can make “soddening rains”?<sup>64</sup> What is it to speak of being propelled “blasphemously, while hollering over some invisible howling rain”? Here are unfamiliar verbs—to spell blind;<sup>65</sup> to peal hotly (“Noisy mina birds pealing hotly at one another”); to be augured (“Too augured in dusty city mythologies”).<sup>66</sup> Unfamiliar adjectives appear (a “long ago belief”),<sup>67</sup> and then again familiar adjectives are transformed into unfamiliar nouns (“a nasty episode of aghast”).<sup>68</sup>

Wright’s textual practices call for reading practices that are as inventive as the text itself, reminiscent of Elliot’s strategy in *Plains of Promise* for reading Country that was not his and into which he entered as a stranger. I’ve suggested that the story that Ivy’s country writes is illegible to him, and he approaches its interpretation provisionally. The punctures to expectations of story don’t prevent him from reading, however, if by reading we mean bearing the unexpected, the unknown and the unknowable, and sustaining a practice that persists, is mobile, agile, alert for signs but not pinning down meaning. This might be to read poetically, as Roland Barthes suggested in another time and place when he distinguished poetry from prose. A poem, he said, belongs to the *improbable*.<sup>69</sup> To read Wright’s texts poetically would be to allow that what appears to a non-Indigenous reader as improbable, perhaps unbelievable, might nevertheless be given serious consideration, stayed with. Elizabeth A. Povinelli has pointed to the fact that Indigenous materialisms may be unbelievable to many Australians, happily so because being unbelievable means they can be dismissed as impossible and therefore have no claim in Australian law. A question, then, that Wright’s texts and other figurings of Indigenous materialisms pose is: How to believe in the unbelievable? When Wright hopes her readers will “believe in the energy of the Gulf,” this is not the same as to feel or experience it as a Waanyi might but to undertake a “thought experiment” of a kind that asks: “What if it were true?” Indigenous textualities invite the reader-as-stranger to suspend the ideas of human and inhuman that they brought with them to their reading.

There are gaps in any story, and never more so than when we are reading across differences as significant as those between an Indigenous writer and her non-Indigenous readers. There are some places where Wright’s texts refuse to enunciate themselves to the stranger. In these places, it is as if the ground on which this stranger

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid., 269.

65 Ibid., 295.

66 Ibid., 271.

67 Ibid., 270.

68 Ibid., 287.

69 Barthes, “The Metaphor of the Eye.”

stands opens up into “non-sense”: where no sense can be made. This is what I take to be one of the ways in which the estrangement of the reader effects resistance: in refusing to provide a steadying ground. A reading strategy based in uncertainty is very hard to sustain, and indeed for some might be unbearable. Yet it is this reading practice before Indigenous textuality that contributes in important ways to the very destabilization of the Western knowing subject at which new materialism takes aim and which it otherwise risks re-enlivening.