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Fabulation: Toward Untimely and Inhuman Life in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*

Linda Daley

School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper brings together Alexis Wright's novel, *The Swan Book* [2013a, Artamon, NSW: Giramondo] and the concept of fabulation from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophical approach to literature. I employ their approach to explore the complex relation to history and language that Wright's highly poetic novel illustrates: a relation to untimely and inhuman life that suggests other possibilities for living within the body politic than are currently available.

Introduction: untimely and inhuman life

Alexis Wright's, *The Swan Book* (2013a) provides an image of relational identity between a barely-human girl character and a group of swan birds complexly narrated by highly poetic means. It performs both a critical and creative politics of engagement with language and history that expresses openness between human and non-human life forms. Oblivia's 'becoming-swan' image enables readers to view self-identity as a process continually formed and deformed by forces outside human agency. In *Swan Book*, this process occurs in an encounter between the girl who is lost to her community and family as a result of rape and its shame, and a group of birds that are far from their natural habitat at the swamp. The setting is about 80 years into the future of a recognisable present: extreme climate, dysfunctional political governance, and ever-shifting social relations of the northern Australia. The prospect for Oblivia to be open to the beauty and intelligence of the swans in a time of catastrophe seems impossible. Yet, she finds a mutual connection with what is beyond the conditions of her place and time to inhabit an untimely way of living that is receptive and adaptive to the birds, their language, and their movements. Hiding, shamed, and deliriously crazed by her situation, Oblivia and the swans travel across the continent in a movement of mutual regard that echoes the long- and deeply held traditions of Aboriginal groups toward their Country, and enabling of Oblivia's transformation (Moreton-Robinson 2007; Watson 2009, 2015).

Oblivia's mode of living through the time of disaster suggests a form of inhuman agency that emerges by the novel's final pages. Rather than the future being a

CONTACT Linda Daley linda.daley@rmit.edu.au School of Media and Communication, RMIT University, GPO Box 2746, Melbourne VIC 3001, Australia

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continuation of the familiar present that the novel narrates on one level, the girl–swan image opens to another level of futurity that is both inhuman and untimely. It is a future that is both yet to come and already past, but of a past that is not exhausted (by European invasion), nor a future that is calculable by its historical actualisation (the ongoing effects of colonialism). The untimeliness of the novel is inhuman because it is the time of forces other than simply human forces including language. Wright's novel not only shows how language has marginalised her people historically. It also shows the narcissism of Western thought that would have language an exclusively human trait, and what this presumption forecloses upon: a relation to Country where 'the land still speaks' even if humans no longer speak its language (Bell 1994; McKay 1996). If Western literature acceded to modernity by acknowledging language as its condition, then Wright is exploiting this insight to invent an Aboriginal modernism that eschews the realist conventions of narration (of speaking subject, of the logic of cause and effect, of a single order of reality, and of linear chronology) to express the social and political problems of modernity for her people and how speech acts participate in these problems. Wright's fiction performs a wider set of claims about the exclusionary and assimilationist effects of speech and writing comprising the nation's representational fabric in its maintenance of white governance. Her style also gives a form of expression to what Gilles Deleuze (following Friedrich Nietzsche) calls the eruption of the 'poetic under the historical': the untimely that history cannot exhaust or totalise (Deleuze 2004, 128).

This essay draws on concepts from Deleuze and Felix Guattari who look to modernist writers and artists throughout their career to find a vocabulary for their philosophy to address real social and political problems. Their approach to literature does not reduce philosophy to literature or make literature into philosophy. Nor does it ask of the work what it means and how well it says it, but what are its effects; how does it function. They view literature as an enterprise of health, 'sufficient to liberate life wherever it is imprisoned by and within man, by and within organisms and genera' (Deleuze 1997, 3). Deleuze and Guattari examine the relations between concepts (philosophy), percepts, and affects (writing, art), in order to express a different image to that of God, Man, and Subject as founding strata of Western thought. Their writings link the seemingly disconnected forces of language with technological, ethological, sexual, and cosmological forces (among others) to examine how exemplary writers experiment with the real of language to produce a style, the vibration of a 'language within language', that enables other ways of seeing and feeling that is not an image of the world founded by these strata (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 97). One of their literary concepts is fabulation that, according to Ronald Bogue, names the political possibilities shown by a writer in expressing the problem of history for a people (2010, 30). Fabulation's effect is achieved by means of various stylistic techniques with narration and syntax. The writer produces a 'strangeness and affective resonance' disruptive of standard language usage that is also potentially disruptive of the standards and regularities of forces with which language is implicated (Bogue 2010, 7). By these means, the political function of writing as a potential catalyst of transformations in power relations emerges. Reading *The Swan Book*'s untimely, inhuman image of the girl-swan by means of Deleuze and Guattari's approach to literature, I show how Wright opens to language's outside that links with forces that are non- or inhuman to suggest other possibilities for living and speaking within the body politic than are currently available.

The Swan Book

The novel opens in first-person narration with Oblivia anxiously reflecting on the delirium of her mind that has been invaded by a 'cut snake virus' with a 'nostalgia for foreign things' and is filling her head with ghosts and lost spirits while 'vomiting bad history' that 'channel [s] every scrap of energy towards an imaginary, ideal world with songs of solidarity, like *We Shall Overcome'* (3). Among the rubble of thoughts crowding her mind, Oblivia is clear: 'This is where it begins … This is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain' (2, 3, 4). Oblivia's mind is a projection of the external conditions of the 'bad history' of the lake's invasion and the desecration of the laws, languages, and cultures that had held together for millennia. The setting is about 80 years after the 2007 Northern Territory Emergency Intervention and disused ships have been dumped by the army in what was formerly a pristine lake, but now due to extreme drought, is a swampy detention settlement bounded by razor wire for unwanted peoples from all over the world. The people of the lake are 'invisible to the outside world', and this invisibility is exposed by the 'army's search lights, even in the middle of the day', causing the 'population to slink away' (9). The rotting ships and peoples arriving at the swamp are reminiscent the boatloads of asylum seekers in the contemporary present and the tall ships loaded with convicts more than two centuries earlier, historically linking diverse groups of dehumanised peoples due to their tenuous relation to the state. The planet is engulfed by environmental catastrophe (tsunamis, nuclear fallout, blizzards) and political crisis ('all around the world governments fell as quickly as they rose in one extinction event after another' [6]). Oblivia is living underground, inside a disembowelled tree before a European climate refugee, Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions, finds, adopts, and instructs her in the lore of the white swans who guided her during her perilous migration to Australia.

The rubble of thoughts troubling Oblivia's mind is externalised in descriptions of life on the swamp marking some of Australia's recent historical past: the Northern Territory intervention; Closing the Gap agendas; the 'treaty' campaign; the 'Constitutional Agreement' (103); references to 'land theft' and 'genocide' (104, 105), 'learning "lifestyle", (34), 'sav [ing] babies from their parents' (47), 'centuries worth of rent' (57), among others. Events are reported after the fact such as of the hijacking of efforts to ameliorate conditions with a cynical brand of politics that wedges one group of Aborigines (the Lake people) against another group of traditional owners (the Brolga people) whose greatest asset is Warren Finch. The treaty Warren's people have negotiated with the state has not secured the expected better future, not least because it has been achieved by the exclusion of the Lake people's country where Oblivia is from (105). The anonymous narrator's perspective on Warren and the Brolga people shifts from admiration to derision to now be perceived as the 'antithesis of those other [Lake] people, their over-the-hills so-called kinspeople in the swamp, mixed up, undone people and what have you' (95–96). The Brolga people say 'yes' or 'no' 'if white people say so' (97) and have developed a 'special crawling language' they speak with 'any professional white or black designer of black people's lives' (96). To achieve presidency of the Aboriginal National Government of Australia, Warren needs to marry his traditional 'promise wife', Oblivia (107). He claims Oblivia and takes her along with his three minders (Hart, Mail, and Snip who are protecting Warren from political rivals) across the continent from the dust-covered drought of the north to the flood-ravaged lanes of the southern city where he installs

Oblivia in a palace before signalling the swamp's destruction by remote control. In the journey across the land, they travel through the country of the minders who metamorphose from robotic caricatures (albeit good-looking 'like Indigenous football stars' [135]) into animated characters by virtue of their interactions with the land and creatures of their Country. We see their transformation when they are on ground they know as if it were their own flesh. In contrast to his bodyguards, when Warren is not on his own Country, his sense of self diminishes. After Warren is assassinated, Oblivia escapes the palace to make the lengthy return journey to the destroyed swamp, moving northwards with many refugees. She carries a cygnet she calls Stranger, wears a swan bone given to her by Bella Donna, and travels through different kinds of country. All the while, the swans' presence is guiding her:

> They had found each other's heartbeat, the pulse humming through the land from one to the other, like the sound of distant clap sticks beating through ceremony, connecting together the spirits, people and place of all times into one … She would follow them … walking under the cloud of swans moving slowly just above the water, their loud beating wings creating a mad turbulence in the water that kept her camouflaged. (303, 310)

Recounting the narrative in this linear way belies the density and chaos of its telling. It also belies the presence of a counter-story with the girl-swan image at its core where the girl and swan are organically linked by an energy ('the pulse humming') where the land itself is the conductor of this current that charges the 'all times' of past, present, and future, and all beings both physical and spiritual. While Aboriginal people name this experience in ways particular to their collective relation to Country, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy would seem to allow, in non-Aboriginal terms, what the ontology of this intensity means for literary expression.

After the novel's opening framing chapter, the first-person narration switches to third-person where the story begins again, and notably Oblivia's 'I' never returns. From that point on, an unidentified narrator is interrupted by other voices, which are variously anonymous and identified, singular and plural, living and non-living. In addition to multiple voices, the narrative's points of view are constantly shifting: from human to tree (79); to the junk of the rotting hulks (11); to the snake (183); to bird (15, 18, and 71), as well as shifts in the order of reality (dreamt, imagined, and reported). These different points of view dissolve the distinction between a human subject of perception and a world of non-human objects. They dissolve an external reality to show that each of these viewpoints has its own individuated reality. The positivist logic of cause and effect dissolves, and the narrative moves in a circular rather than a linear fashion so that the fabulous overtakes the form of its expression. It comes to resemble the myth of the lost child in the Australian bush to then become an inverted fairy tale of a 'promise wife' incorporating a Middle Eastern legend of genies in a desert. Myth, fairy tale, and legend are modes of narrating that seem distant in time and place from a representational narrative reporting 'things seen and heard' and anchored to a chronology.

Even though Deleuze does not emphasise the associations of 'fabulation' with the lesson-based 'fable', or the expression 'to fabulate', meaning the telling of a story of fantasy or deception, he does acknowledge one of fabulation's effects as its capacity for exhibiting 'the powers of the false' whereby the opposition of true and false becomes undecidable in the creation of a new form of story (Deleuze 1990a, 65). In *Swan Book*,

each of these associations of fabulation is present: as a lesson, as a fantasy and deception, and as a commentary on the undecidability of the truth of the story it tells (Deleuze 1990a, 66). At the start of the novel, we read: '[t]ime will tell if this [story] was true or false'; by the novel's end: [th]is might be the same story about some important person carrying a swan centuries ago, and it might be the same story in centuries to come when someone will carry a swan back to this ground where its story once lived (11, 333). The status of the story is equivalent to the content of the story such that the mode of its telling, the falsity of the mode of the story's expression, is also a commentary on the truth of the themes of its content. As Bogue reminds us, while the problems of history and narrative are never identical to each other, what is common to each is the recounting of events, which means the common problem of time (2010, 28). For Wright, her artistic problem, her literary challenge, is to give expression to the creative joy of Aboriginal cosmology's 'all times' amidst the 'bad history' experienced by Aboriginal Australians (2002, 17).

'Bad history' and the 'pure event'

In her essay, 'The Politics of Writing', Wright describes 'bad history', that is no less personal than it is collective, as the 'total colonial history of genocidal acts' and 'land theft' (2002, 14). In her essay, 'Fear', she declaims the ongoing nature of this colonial history:

> We continue to suffer some of the worst poverty among any people on earth and endure some of the worst socio-economic, health, mortality and education statistics imaginable. This situation was created through a historical chain of arrogance and ignorance from day one of colonisation … (2008, 142)

Wright pays careful attention to how words can obstruct, brutalise, and mislead in the communications between and representations of Aboriginal peoples and the state, while also expressing what the effects of language do not exhaust: the 'epical literature' written on the land as song lines mapping relations between peoples, places, animals, and spirit beings (2008, 142, 154). For Wright, 'bad history' is what 'spurs on our desperate need to write', which she views as a search for a mode of expression by means of the 'rhythms that can be created in sentences' (2002, 10). She notes that this writing is a form of expression that 'sometimes flies above the bitterness of pure logic and rational thought' or what might also be called ('bad') history (2002, 20). While Deleuze and Guattari say the writer's material is simply 'words and syntax', they overlook the importance of these materials within a time-based medium; narrative unfolds in time (1994, 167). Deleuze's distinction between the event and history, however, provides a way of understanding this time that bears on Wright's fabulatory novel.

In *The Logic of Sense* (1990b), Deleuze distinguishes between historical time within which events occur, and a time of the event that is irreducible to history. These two times are relevant to the historical event of colonisation and its temporality. Chronos names historical time, while Aion names the temporality of the event (or the pure event) (Deleuze 1990b, 63). Chronos moves in a single direction from past through to present to the future; it focuses on the passing of the present. Aion, by contrast, is a time of flux; it focuses on a simultaneous time of past-future with the flux moving erratically forward and backward. While Aion is the time of becoming, and is anti-historical, it is not timeless or eternal in the theological sense, but rather 'trans-historical' or 'untimely:' 'a

new dimension of time which operates both in time and against time … [whereby] under the huge earth-shattering events are tiny silent events, which [Nietzsche] likens to the creation of new worlds' (Deleuze 2004, 130). Deleuze determines that events imply the contradictory, paradoxical properties of a thing that can be understood temporally in its evasion of the present, and furthermore, this paradox is essential to language. Lewis Carroll's fictions illustrate the paradoxical structure of the event for Deleuze. For example, to say, 'Alice grew' implies that she became taller than she was before. However, we can also say, 'she *became* shorter than she is now' (on the assumption that she continued to grow). It is nonsensical to say that she is taller and shorter at the same time; however, it makes sense to say 'she *becomes* taller and shorter at the same time'. While playing on the double meaning of *sens* (in French both 'sense' and 'direction'), Deleuze exposes the paradox of sense in containing its logical opposite, a paradox that is both logical and topological at once:

> It moves in both directions at once. It always eludes the present, causing future and past, more and less, too much and not enough to coincide in the simultaneity of a rebellious matter … It is as if events enjoyed an irreality which is communicated through language … [and] fragments the subject following this double direction. (Deleuze 1990b, 2, 3)

Deleuze adds: '[t]he agonising aspect of the pure event is that it is always and at the same time, something which has just happened and something about to happen; never something which is happening' (Deleuze 1990b, 63).

The large-scale event of colonisation of the Australian continent is a pure event that conforms to this paradoxical structure. For instance, when exactly did it begin: in 1770 with Captain Cook's explorations, or at either or both of the two separate British flag-raisings on 26 January 1788, or at some subsequent event of invasion and dispossession? As a consequence of colonisation, Aboriginal people were viewed (initially) as British subjects equal to others before the law, but also viewed as incapable of understanding the nature of taking an oath and therefore denied legal subjectivity. As a consequence of increasing European settlement of native lands that ensued from colonisation, Aboriginal resistance led to frontier violence and widespread Aboriginal decimation that the state-based Protection Acts allegedly sought to stop. 'Protection' for Aborigines meant being corralled within a designated reserve away from Country, living as outsiders to the body politic; protection was premised on their non-citizenship in their non-freedom of movement, denial of self-autonomy, and the dispossession of culture (Chesterman and Galligan 1997, 33–35). If it is impossible to say exactly when the event of colonisation began, is it possible to say that the event has ended? As Paul Patton argues, the pure event of colonisation can take the form of either being a 'noisy, Earth-shattering' event or an 'ongoing silent event' that may be achieved historically, but continue 'inaudibly' and imperceptibly to those who are not directly affected by it, but which 'haunts the societies' from which it is built (Patton 2010, 110). History recounts events from the outside and from the common sense perspective of the event being in the past; that is, from a perspective that assumes that the event has ended. The pure event articulates the temporality of the event in its singularity or immanence, what we could call its internal perspective, and as it is felt by those who are directly affected by it. From the perspective of history, the logic of the time of the event is paradoxical, nonsensical, and imperceptible. From the perspective of the temporality of the event, from the perspective of those directly affected by it, colonisation is felt as the

intolerable existence of its continuation. Notably, the only part of *Swan Book* that explicitly reports the novel's events chronologically is when we read: 'It was more than twenty years since the day Warren Finch had nearly killed himself for a swan' (115). Chronos rather than Aion emerges in this part of the narration as we learn that the Brolga Nation that had previously been true to its cultural traditions was now 'saying yes, yes, yes to anything on offer – a bit of assimilation, a bit of integration, a bit of giving up your own sovereignty, a bit of closing the gap' (116). We might say that Wright inverts the relation of the poetical and the historical by having Chronos stabilise Aion in the novel to emphasise the intrusion of the state into a sovereign cultural group.

From free indirect discourse to collective enunciation

> Even when you think you're writing on your own, you're always doing it with someone else you can't always name. (Deleuze 1990a, 141)

In her 'Fear' (2008) essay, Wright decries the escalating silence of Aboriginal voices since the closing decades of the twentieth century. She muses whether this silence might be strategic given the fear of difference within the body politic that has been generated by speech acts of governments and media during this period (2008, 129–132). Wright views writing as a means of finding and inventing silenced Aboriginal voices, especially those of people who are 'treated like they don't exist' (2002, 13). Long before this strategic silencing, Aboriginal people were punished for speaking their language, and for speaking English in ways considered to be deficient or incompetent, each of which contributed to different modes of silence or quietude (McKay 1996; Bell 1994). If, as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, the political domain has contaminated every speech act, then it requires a different relation to both speech and to silence to express this contamination (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, 17). Wright's assertion that 'despair' spurs her to write must be seen as an acknowledgement that literary writing is not a retreat from, in her case, decades-long involvement in Aboriginal political organising (2002, 2008). Rather, it is politics by another means. Despair at the contamination of speech 'about' Aboriginal people among others requires literary writing to reshape the body politic by means of inventing a new relation to speech. Deleuze and Guattari call this new relation to speech the 'invention of a people to come', a people from whom new speech acts might be possible, and for that, it demands a new way of thinking the subjectivity of speech by means of literary writing that expresses the 'collective enunciation of a minor people, or of all minor peoples' (Deleuze 1997, 4). Deleuze and Guattari assert that this subject does not yet exist, and it would not be a unitary collectivity that represents the one voice (as was historically actualised, for example, under fascism), nor would it form a subjectivity of the true statement (1986, 84). Rather, the 'to come' of this people is virtual rather than actual. By virtual, this does not mean unreal or not real. Virtual refers to the non-actualised elements of reality that are 'impersonal and pre-individual' (Deleuze 1990b, 102). The virtual is immanent within the actual although each exists in different ways and has different characteristics, and each has a relationship to the other which is not one of cause to effect, or idea to embodiment, or plan to construction (Bogue 2010 24). To speak of 'a people to come' as a virtuality means that members of this potential collective actually exist now and have done so in the past. What is not actualised is a people whose speech acts shape the body politic.

Deleuze and Guattari look to literary writing to expose the multiplicity of voices from which language is composed, and by means of which a collective enunciation might be possible. Free indirect discourse is a technique of narration where there is a simultaneous utterance of two voices in one speech act (minus diegetic markers) so that a reader asks, who speaks? Sometimes, it is the other of the narrator giving her subjectivation simultaneously to that of her character. Sometimes, it is the author giving her voice by means of a character or narrator. For example, there are several passages after Oblivia's narration ends where it would seem that Wright herself is speaking directly through her anonymous narrator:

> There was not much choice about pure and pristine anymore … These people were hardened to the legendary stuff of fortune and ill fortune. They saw many children being born without any evidence of contamination [from the toxic junk sinking into the lake]. (11)

Who is speaking? From whose position are 'these people' and 'they' referred to? Is it the anonymous narrator speaking for one of the unnamed, unidentified characters, or is it Wright herself speaking directly to her reader?

And by this sub-division, of an unidentified narrator and the voice of an unidentified other, who (or what) appears in the writing? Deleuze calls the feature of split or doubled enunciation within a single utterance the fundamental act of language. Fiction exposes what linguistics cannot admit in viewing language as a homogenous system comprising stable universals (of subject, object, message, code, competence) (Deleuze 2007, 71). Free indirect discourse, however, does not go far enough in merely exposing the division within subjectivity; that is, showing only the internal multiplicity comprising individuation. It requires fabulation to invent a speech linked to an external multiplicity.

The politics of fabulation

> There is no literature without fabulation. (Deleuze 1997, 3)

Fabulation is a political concept that Deleuze and Guattari adapt from Henri Bergson's analysis of the hallucinatory power of perception to prompt or modify action. Bergson's examples of fabulation – the woman about to step into an empty lift shaft, and his friend William James's anecdote of another friend's anticipation of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake – describe events that induce a vision from the shock that is felt vividly by the one experiencing it. They develop Bergson's notion of the hallucination as an image induced from the affect (shock, wonder) that bypasses reason to work directly on the senses. The artist or writer converts the hallucinatory event into the material of artistic creation.

Wright claims that the idea for *Swan Book* came to her while working in Central Australia when others told her of seeing swans in the sewerage dam in Alice Springs, and similar sightings were reported from her homeland in the Gulf region of northern Australia. The swans were far from their natural habitat of south-eastern and south-western Australia, and Wright became, to use her own word, 'obsessed' with finding out more about swans (Wright 2013b, n.p.). Wright's vision of the swan out of place is viewed by her and others as a form of dislocation that raises questions about what its presence harbours for their country. It also raised a pragmatic, ethical question: can you eat a swan when it is a

bird from another country without a story to guide it, and for locals whether it was right to treat as food (Wright 2013b, n.p.). The sightings of swans out of place resulted in another seed of obsession when Wright discovered the Latin phrase, 'rara avis in terries nigroque simillima cycno' ('a bird as rare upon the earth as a black swan'), a line from one of the satires of classical poet Juvenal. In European thought, the millennia-old myth that black swans not only did not exist, but also they were the very figure of impossibility remained intact until 1697 when Dutch explorers sighted black swans on the Australian continent. From that time, the black swan became the very sign of *mistaken* impossibility. The sighting of the black swan bird would have been almost as miraculous to Wright and others in Central and northern Australia in the late twentieth century as it would have been to the Dutch explorers three centuries earlier. The black swan is the very sign of difference, not simply from a white swan, but from the concept of possibility itself. Not only simply the bird, but also the poetic representation of the bird, the black swan is a figure of instability within thought and the (various natural) languages through which this thought is given expression. The sightings of the swans out of place also make perceptible something that is invisible: the earth's time, currents, and forces. The black swan dislocated from its proper place, and both similar to and different from the white swan structures Wright's artistic problem in *Swan Book* and links it to the problem of her people's relation to the time of the nation.

Becoming through writing

> The image is precisely this: not a representation of an object but a movement in the world of the mind. (Deleuze 1997, 169)

In addition to Bergson's idea of the hallucinatory image providing a new way of seeing and feeling, Deleuze and Guattari draw on Maurice Blanchot's account of the hallucinatory effects for the writer in their encounter with language in the act of composition itself (Deleuze 1997, 3; Deleuze 1990a, 97). For Blanchot, the image constitutes the very 'space of literature' as such (Blanchot 1982). What is behind or beneath writing's surface of signifying discourse, says Blanchot, is not the nothing that discourse would have us believe; it is the image of the thing that the word has replaced. Blanchot calls this space where one loses the power to say 'I' one of two versions of the imaginary (1982, 27, 254–56). Although Deleuze says that he does not attach much importance to the concept of the imaginary, his description of the crystal image as an image that becomes autonomous accords with Blanchot's idea of the writer engaging with the being of language when consciousness suspends the sign's function of mediation (Deleuze 1990a, 66).

For Blanchot, the image is not the faculty of imagination, but another order of consciousness: one where the image is understood as prior rather than subsequent to the figure to which ideality becomes attached. And not only prior to the object or figure, the space and time of the image mark the event as such when the 'I' has moved from holding itself at a distance from the objects it perceives to another dimension wherein the distance holds us, and does so as an extreme proximity. What is 'seen' as an image is the double of what no longer 'is'. The image constitutes itself, says Blanchot, under 'the reign of passivity', but within this passivity, 'it wants to act upon the world … '

(1982, 262). Blanchot describes this disorienting, vertiginous experience with language as one where

> everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of the ink, the book. Yes, happily language is a thing [...] it is a written thing [...] Literature now dispenses with the writer [...]. (Blanchot 1995, 327)

Through Wright's percept of the swan out of place that links with Juvenal's poetic line, the force of the real of the hallucination of the swan's untimeliness enables something larger than the object to be seen that changes the viewer of the perception as much as it changes the object of that perception; there is an affective consequence of such a percept that enables this new way of seeing by means of a new mode of feeling. Rather than the perception being of an object perceived by a viewing subject, the percept is the undoing of that subject in her passage to another perspective on language's possibilities (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 164). Literature now dispenses with a writer's self-consciousness to attain its own self-consciousness; words now become things rather than signs of information or communication.

In *Swan Book*, language's thing-like status appears on many occasions: for the 'sleepy children ... [who] felt words chasing after them, surrounding their feet like rope trying to pull them back as they ran away' (8); for the elder who signed the treaty, and who is suspicious of its force because the words on the treaty paper are fading in the sun, unlike the delicious taste of the word rolling around inside his mouth (104). Most centrally, language's thingness is shown by Oblivia, who is rendered mute from trauma, but who also decides not to take up speech, viewing words as merely a 'geographical device to be transplanted anywhere on earth' (23). When she is on country with the minders, she discovers that the 'words trampling her into the ground could also pick her up' (179) or as Wright says: 'words are our weapons too' (Wright 2002). Conversely, non-human language is given expression: the swan talk; the tree song; the swamp's sounds. As McKay points out in his report on the status of Australian Aboriginal languages, aptly titled *The Land Still Speaks*, he notes that Aboriginal languages have always had an assumption of the land as both an addressor and an addressee, where land is spoken to and returns that speech to its initiated inhabitants (1996, xxvii). Language is not only the preserve of the human being. At the novel's end:

> The swans welcomed into the country's song now spend days in the swamp while it never stopped raining. They danced the water, stirring it up, even at night with wings spread wide, lifting and dropping as they ran along the surface of the water, as though dancing in wing-exercising movements. In this way, they communicate with each other – while the girl watches, knowing how she must read the country now as they do to follow them home. (325)

As Elizabeth Grosz reminds us,

> human vocalisation is ... only one form of articulation, one form of language-becoming, and by no means the only path to language. The human represents one branch of an anthropoid line of language, birds an altogether different line ... Language needs to be placed in its 'properly inhuman context'. (2011, 21)

In *Swan Book*'s epilogue, the myna birds' language is described:

> [Y]ou could hear these birds searing at the grass in throwback words of the traditional language for the country that was no longer spoken by any living human being on the

> Earth. While crowding the stillness the little linguists with yellow beaks sang songs about salvaging and saving things, rearranging sound in a jibber-jabbering loudness. (329)

Swan Book's style

> And whenever a language is submitted to such creative treatments, it is language in its entirety that is pushed to its limit, to music or silence. (Deleuze 1997, 55)

What is the syntactic creation that makes *Swan Book* a poetic eruption into the historical? In what senses is it making literature anew through the material of language that is more than a critique of the history of the Australian nation-state? In linguistics, syntax refers to the accepted, conventional ordering of word units in a sentence to best convey sense. These conventions are 'order words' (and phrases) or 'precepts' that identify the normative and authoritative character of language (Deleuze 1990a, 189, n.5). In the novel, our attention is drawn to the order words in being reminded that '[t]he old lady's [Bella Donna's] speech was considered quite charming … *Very good English for sure, and would go far for the language betterment of Australia, but not here* … where all English language was spoken for political use only' (22). English is the language of government, of the state that has its standard level of competency that is constantly measured and reported on as 'the big national benchmark for Indigenous people, to be literate in English' (Wright 2013a, 93).

In contrast to the language of the state, syntactic creations emerge through deviations from the norms and conventions of language to 'reveal the life in things' (Deleuze 1997, 2). This is another way of saying that Wright makes the state language stutter or stammer, and by that means, finds another language within that language. This minor language is another component of fabulation and Wright achieves this by three means.

First, she puts Waanyi words into circulation not only within the state language of English, which Wright reminds us is an impure amalgam of Latin, French, and German (among other) words that are also in the novel. Waanyi is the cultural and language group to which Wright belongs. She has drawn on this language by means of the Waanyi dictionary, of which there are many such lexicons across the continent retaining words in a dormant state for their future revitalisation (2013a, 338).

Second, in many places in the novel, characters speak Aboriginal English, or 'old time blackfella English' (Wright 2013a, 133), the language that emerged from contact between an Indigenous language and English. Of the roughly 250 distinct Aboriginal languages that existed prior to colonisation, initially, many pidgins arose across the continent, which in turn gave rise to many creole languages. Creole is identified as the fastest-growing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language in Australia today (Bell 1994, 55). McKay tells us:

> Aboriginal English is a distinct form of English from the standard, but has not had the developmental history of a creole … It is more likely to be the form of speech used by Aboriginal people in speaking with whites. (1996, 8)

Whether as Creole or Aboriginal English, these languages are distinctly different from (standard) English, but it is this standard English against which Aboriginal speech is assessed for competency, and usually evaluated as deficient, '[j]ust like eye-sore words, standing out in normal conversation that attract everyone's attention … ' (Wright 2013a, 83).

Along with language activists like Jeannie Bell, Wright shows that the speech patterns, the musicality and non-standard syntax of Aboriginal English express precisely the relation of a people to the state language as one of adaptation and inventiveness with phoneme, syntax, case, tone, and word-aggregation variations. In *Swan Book*, expressions such as 'You got to give up that ting you are doing' (85); 'I am asking you with my own mouth … ' (86); 'Long time we been fight for that [treaty]' (103), interrupt the standard speech of narration. In several places in the novel, the speech of these voices, unattributed to a character, murmur in the spaces between actions and reflections on actions to indicate a speech that has not been silenced, but is 'off-stage' so to speak and encapsulated by the collective voice that erupts through the narration of the event of the 2007 Northern Territory Military Intervention: 'The Army men sent by the Government in Canberra to save babies from their parents said that they were guarding the sleep of little children now. The swamp bristled' (47). This murmuring speech of the swamp – suggesting the voices of both the physical topography of the swamp and the people to whom it is attached – speaks an anonymous plural speech of a collective. By means of words, Wright's narration reports a plural, impersonal speech that is not impersonal like the utterances of institutional, governmental, and media discourses that also circulate, but is the immanence of impersonal life itself (Deleuze 2007, 390). It is the speech of language itself untethered from discourse.

Third, and related to Aboriginal English, is the pattern of speech whereby words from pop song lyrics (and other mass-mediated phrases) are inserted into speech acts that carry both the musicality to which those lyrics are attached, and also expose the sometimes haphazard ways in which Aboriginal peoples learn to speak English (as their second, third or often fourth language) from outside formal institutional structures of education or workplace. In *Swan Book*, Wright has a bird mimicking the pop song lyrics, 'lines from that famous old ABBA song – *Money, money, money, it's a rich man's world* – which its ancestors perhaps learnt from listening to a truckies' roadhouse jukebox where they had spent decades pilfering scraps … (177). On the swamp, the surveillance of the people by search light was so relentless that it is expressed as 'the torchlight of armed men flying in the skies like Marvin Gaye's ghost looking about the place, to see what was going on. *Yes! Well! You tell me what was going on?*' (47).

Conclusion

Wright's fictions are no less political than her essays that explicitly address the politics of writing, speaking, and living by means of the propositional language of the essay form. Indeed, all Aboriginal-signed writing is political, in that by its very publication, it effects an act of decolonising the historical record that has been built on fictions of an absent people whether by means of *terra nullius* or the pseudo-theses of a 'dying race' (Heiss 2003, 37; Griffiths 2013; 18; Jose 2013, viii). Among print forms of Aboriginal literature, the publication of life-writing is arguably the most closely associated with its power to decolonise the historical record by telling personal, communal, and often collaboratively written stories that puts a speaking subject into history (Griffiths 2013). Wright's *Swan Book* marks a risky departure from the recent emergence of Aboriginal print literature because it reveals the means by which language *un-works* a speaking subject's time and place *in* a chronology (whether personal or historical) and therefore the novel

might be viewed as failing its political task to decolonise the record. Yet, wherein does *Swan Book's* politics lie? Not in telling a story of Aboriginal people's place *in* a history that has marked it as absent. Rather, it is in telling a story of Aboriginal people's paradoxical relation *to* that history, a relation that seeks expression. Deleuze's most persistent question of literature is to ask what are its uses, and it is the organising question in this paper. Unlike much contemporary literary theory, Deleuze (with Guattari) places the artist in the world she invents – 'places the writer in the articulated voice of a written line' – in order to show the de-subjectivation of the writer-subject in the writing itself in order to link her subjectivation to the collective that is yet to be actualised (Deleuze and Parnet 1987, 74). For Deleuze and Guattari literature that opens to the fabulating function does not propose an ideal or utopian future, but rather hints at possibilities of a future by opening a way forward through an experimentation on the real of language that is an unsettling of the powers – the institutions, conventions, categories, and habits of thought – that are constitutive of language. In *Swan Book*, Wright has found the passage to language's outside to express the internal structure of the event of colonisation, an event that is large in scale and catastrophic in its effects, but one that is not exhausted by its historical actualisation. She has articulated the passage to life that no amount of lived experience exhausts.

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Notes on contributor

Linda Daley is a senior lecturer in literary and communication studies at RMIT University, Melbourne. Her research focuses on the intersections of philosophy and literary and cultural forms and practices. Her current research projects include examining the ontology of literature.

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