Plots without grounds: terrapolitics and the novel

Abstract

This essay describes an emergent rhetoric in which climate change is apprehended as a feeling that the ground is giving way. I suggest that this rhetoric affectively corroborates the interpretation of climate change as a crisis of modern and colonial discourses of environmental mastery, when from the perspective of the Indigenous and colonised climate change is instead the newest guise of the modern terrapolitical project. My essay traces and critiques the development of this discourse of ground in the key late works of Bruno Latour and explores how this discourse has shaped ecocritical accounts of the crisis of the novel in our epoch. My aim is to retrieve from these arguments the lineaments of a not yet fully realised *terrapolitical* criticism, while pluralising the ontological and historical scene in which the crisis of ground takes place. With this pluralisation in mind, I turn to Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), which generates a rethinking of grounds, plots and novelistic form from the *terra* of Indigenous Australia.

Keywords

Plots; grounds; land; terrestrial; ecocriticism; climate change; terrapolitics; novel; Indigeneity; econarratology

The very notion of soil is changing. The soil of globalization's dreams is beginning to slip away […] When the rug is pulled out from under your feet, you understand at once that you are going to have to be concerned with the floor… […] This is the new way in which we can experience the universal human condition — a wicked universality, to be sure, but the only

one available to us, now that the previous universality, promised by globalization, seems to be receding from the horizon. This new universality consists in feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way.

— Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, 4, 8, 9.

They already knew what it was like to lose Country.

— Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*, 40.

'The ground is collapsing', reads a recent *Guardian* headline about the over-extraction of groundwater in California.[1] Similar headlines report on the water crisis and land subsidence in Tehran, on shopping mall collapse in eastern China, and on the effects of subsurface heat islands in urban areas.[2] I am struck by the words of an Inuk interviewee in Zacharias Kunuk's extraordinary documentary film *Qapirangajuk: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, who observes that the 'land has deflated', the 'land is melting', 'the world is melting'.[3] These comments refer to the thawing of the permafrost, which renders the surface of the Earth in these northern regions chronically unstable, but both literal and metaphorical resonances seem to be in play: the land is collapsing, the substrate of the physical world is literally melting, and this is related to a larger destabilisation or loss of ground. It is as if the distance between the ground as a powerful metaphor for that which somehow founds or sustains a world, and ground as simply the physical earth beneath one's feet, is suddenly collapsed. This is Kunuk's film's larger charge: the actual disintegration of the ground generated by rising temperatures literalises and intensifies the long deprivation of ground that defines the experience of settler modernity for Inuit people.[4] To reference the film's subtitle, what is at

stake is not just the framing of climate change at this Anthropocene frontier through the lens of Indigenous knowledge, but also the sense in which climate change estranges such knowledge. Thus it is not simply the ground but *the world* that is melting.[5]

The ground really is collapsing, and for a range of interconnected reasons, but the contagiousness of this rhetoric of the ground also speaks to the emergence of a structure of feeling that apprehends climate change *tout court* as a phenomenon of a geophysical and ontological nature. Climate change brings to crisis the parametric environmental conditions in which our lifeworlds have developed, and in turn generates the experience of a kind of ontological subsidence. In this context, the meaning of 'ground' becomes at once resonant and ambiguous, as it seems to hold in the same moment ideas of worlding or ontogenesis, of the nature of the planetary surface, of a general sense of that which supports or of that which founds, is below or is prior (as in the German *Grund* defined as reason or first principle).[6] The very notion of 'ground' seems to have lost its footing, and this is symptomatic of the crisis of climate. As Bruno Latour asserts in my first epigraph: 'This new universality [of the climatic epoch] consists in *feeling* that the ground is in the process of giving way' (my emphasis).

The story of climate change as a deprivation of ground has been propounded most influentially by Latour. For him, climate change pushes us into a new epoch in which the old dualistic hierarchies that defined the world of 'the moderns' no longer obtain: there is no longer a foregrounded human subject that operates against a backgrounded and largely inanimate natural environment, as we find ourselves thrown into a world in which the relationship between figure and ground is unstable or even reversed. This argument has penetrated ecocritical accounts of the novel in the Anthropocene, such as those outlined by

Amitav Ghosh in *The Great Derangement*: Ghosh argues that the novel form, in its most canonical manifestations, inherits and even consolidates the dualistic constitution of modern thought, and so is brought to crisis in a world of multiplying and intensifying planetary agency.[7] There is a historical dimension to both of these arguments, if a broad-brush one. While Latour is hardly an anticapitalist or anticolonial thinker, he does indicate that the crisis of the ground is also a crisis of historical logics of territory and property. And Ghosh draws on the work of Franco Moretti to indicate that the backgrounding work of the modern novel expresses the values of propertied bourgeois society.[8] Climate change might then be described as the threat, or the promise, of a *terrapolitical* rupture, one that challenges the social and ontological formations founded upon a particular relationship to the earth and land, including in the space of literature.

In a recent study of the ontology of fiction, Daniel Wright writes of the *ground* of the novel. Wright explores how novels create their own grounds or enact, as it were, their own groundwork, so founding or generating the self-sufficiency of their universes. Ground is here, interestingly, definitively immaterial or virtual: the ground of a novel cannot literally be the physical ground upon which earthly things rest, but is rather a virtual ground posited within a properly groundless fictional universe. The ground, then, does not actually ground the novel but is retroactively proposed within a fictional universe that requires no real-world referential anchor.[9] Ghosh's argument, by contrast, implies a certain referentiality that operates at the level of form: it is not that *x* in the text refers to *y* in the real world but that the relations between *x* and *y* in the text refer to a relational system outside of it. This relational system has a history. The novel, to put it schematically for now, is grounded by property relations which it in turn grounds. In describing the novel as a terrapolitical form, I insist upon the need to reconnect ontological and ecological readings of the novel today with the historical systems

of earthly relation developed under colonial modernity.

I draw the concept of terrapolitics from Indigenous studies. Morgan Brigg develops the idea in an essay that distinguishes Aboriginal from settler-colonial political cultures in Australia. Terrapolitics works specifically in contrast to biopolitics: while the settler state seeks to capture its subjects within the biological field, terrapolitics implies a framework concerned with the meanings of land. In the Indigenous context, this divergence is crucial, since the postcolonial settler state deploys a formidable biopolitical apparatus in its treatment of Indigenous communities that is irreconcilable with Indigenous political self-conceptions, and so detrimental to the project of sovereignty, which necessarily includes ontological sovereignty. Within the terrapolitical frame, the 'whole land is full of signs ... as clearly as if it were bristling with notice boards', and land moreover 'participates', is not simply a signifying surface but 'is alive and "active" in ways that texts typically are not'.[10] The idea of terrapolitics indicates the irreducible significance of notions such as Country and Dreaming in Indigenous Australian worlds, where these terms are difficult to translate into a settler vocabulary in which *land* is precisely the thing that is subordinated to human projects.[11]

While Brigg opposes the biopolitical and the terrapolitical as a heuristic move, settler colonialism is a terrapolitical project through and through. We might think of 'terrapolitics' less as the characteristic mode of a particular kind of political culture than as a critical frame for interrogating the diversity of ways in which land is inducted into, or participates within, political projects. I wish to think less of a conflict between biopolitics and terrapolitics than of an internally riven field within which different and potentially incommensurable ideas pertaining not only to the ownership of land but to *what land is* circulate. If climate change in the contemporary imaginary is a crisis of ground then it reopens the terrapolitical as a matter

of concern: the ground no longer grounds, the land is no longer identifiable with property or territory. If colonial modernity thought that it had closed these questions, absorbing land and the earth into its temporality, climate change reopens them. This is the implication and the value of Latour's rhetoric of the ground, that it confronts us with modernity as a destructive regime of terrestrial relation that has ultimately undermined itself. But this version of the story of climate as the crisis of modern terrapolitics claims a dubious universality insofar as it positions climate change as the final ironic twist ('the revenge of Gaia!') in the metanarrative of colonial modernity. It privileges a monotemporal framework within which the deprivation of ground is absolute. It sidesteps a much longer history of the destruction of worlds and more complex *technai* of grounding that have survived this destruction.

My second epigraph is drawn from Indigenous Australian novelist Alexis Wright's work *The Swan Book* (2013), the focus of the second half of this essay. The novel narrates the predicament of an Indigenous community in the Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Australia suffering under the chronic emergencies of climate change and state violence. The loss of Country, of land understood in a more expansive sense than in the settler-colonial frame, defines the ongoing history of Indigenous Australians since the eighteenth century in Wright's account. It is then the case, as Kathryn Yusoff and Latour himself have emphasised, that the supposed novelty of the contemporary condition of groundlessness is merely the latest episode in a much longer history for Indigenous and colonised people.[12] If the ambition of a postcolonial ecocriticism is to 'parochialise the Anthropocene', Wright's novel parochialises more specifically this rhetoric of the loss of ground.[13] Such rhetoric, I argue, and the broader structure of feeling it invokes, assumes a notion of ground that is western, colonial, propertied, and territorial in the first place; it follows that the loss of ground in the epoch of climate cannot be a universal one. This has implications for how we think about the

novel in an age of ontological pluralisation. Wright's novel speaks from the ground of a different terrapolitics, in which the meanings of earth, land and ground diverge from dominant ideas of these concepts, and in which these meanings have long been threatened by settler colonialism. There is also a sense in which Wright's novel formally redirects the history of the novel as a terrapolitical form. If the narrative structures of the modern novel inscribe a relationship to the ground – to land and to space (as I will suggest in my second section) – then the question arises of how a different relationship to the ground might produce different kinds of plot. In the end, for all its bleakness and its often witheringly satirical tone, Wright's novel becomes an experiment in hope by mobilising ideas of grounds and plots, of grounding and plotting, beyond the colonial and capitalist frame.

The essay proceeds in four sections. First, I explicate Latour's reading of climate change, chiefly in *Down to Earth* and *Facing Gaia*, in order to critique how his language of ground and its deprivation serves to affectively corroborate or poetically license a reading of the New Climatic Regime (Latour's capitalisation) as a terrapolitical rupture. Second, I show how the tenor of these arguments permeates ecocritical accounts of the novel in the age of climate, especially through the work of Ghosh. In each case, these arguments absorb climate change into the temporality of colonial modernity while sidestepping terrapolitical diversity and ambivalence within and beyond the modern tradition. In my third section I reterritorialize these arguments through engagement with Wright's novel, before finally indicating the resources that Wright discovers in countermodern logics of grounding and plotting.

Novelists and ecocritics are ever more interested in how fiction can figure the more-than-human world. The Indigenous novel is a crucial vehicle for the regeneration of these planetary perspectival capacities. But it is critical to understand that the Indigenous novel is

not a supplement to an already ongoing and purely imaginative labour – that extra ingredient that achieves diversity of coverage, that additional resource that helps to re-enchant the world. On the contrary, Wright offers an antidote to the depoliticised nature of much of this work, by connecting the project of ontogenesis, or world-building, to the problem of sovereignty, understood capaciously to encompass mental and material self-determination and the ownership and meanings of land. To put it in the terms of Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Wright reminds us that ontological questions are always political because they imply not a war of words but an 'ongoing war of *worlds*' (original emphasis).[14] Within the environmental humanities, the language of more-than-human entanglement is increasingly favoured as an alternative to the instrumentalising regime of what I am calling here modern terrapolitics. But as Pieter Vermeulen has recently argued, this language appears to be more focused on training us to *admire* rather than to critique and may itself be derived from the neoliberal theology of spontaneous organisation.[15] Wright's novel by contrast is part of an imaginative and activist project that consistently links *ground* and *grounding*, that at once gifts us with a gesture towards the rethinking of planetary relations and the demand for a redistribution of the terrestrial commonwealth.

Becoming Terrestrial

It is a dictum of the later work of Bruno Latour that the climate emergency produces a feeling that the ground is in the process of giving way. The ground is literally sinking beneath our feet, he writes; our crisis produces 'a question of attachment, of lifestyle, that's being pulled out from under us, a question of land, of property giving way beneath us'; 'little by little … under the ground of private property, of land grabs, of the exploitation of territories, another

ground, another earth, another soil has begun to stir, to quake, to be moved.'[16] Latour is thinking of climate change as at once the activation and the deprivation of the ground. He draws on Michel Serres, for whom in *The Natural Contract* 'the Earth is quaking anew', shaking and deviating from 'expected equilibria' and becoming a subject through human activity.[17] In the opening arguments of *Down to Earth* in particular, Latour claims that what was once a condition of the colonised — of those who experienced land grabs, enslavement, enclosure, exploitation — has now become planetary. The only way in which we can experience the 'universal human condition' today, writes Latour, is in encountering this disturbing terrestrial metamorphosis. In an ironic reversal, then, the universal condition is achieved not through the teleology of modernity but through the nearly literal collapse of such teleology precipitated by an encounter with geophysical reality. In his perception of this as irony, Latour shares the perspective of Dipesh Chakrabarty, for whom a key dimension of the Anthropocene relates to the fact that 'we' entered it unwittingly: the burning of fossil fuels, the very project of extractivism that was supposed to emancipate at least a proportion of earthdwellers from nature, has produced a situation of terrible planetary enclosure. All human beings are now thrown back onto an earthly ground that can no longer ground them.

One of Latour's guiding terms is 'the Terrestrial', which he seeks to reimagine beyond the closure of what he calls the 'old climatic regime', beyond the now obsolete meanings that have historically accrued to land, locality, nation, territory and property in the epoch of the moderns. Latour writes of the need for us 'to become present again to the situation of terrestrial rootedness'; he asserts that we must return to the Earth, come down to Earth, or become Earthbound.[18] But this cannot involve the return to a stable ground, nor can the reference to 'rootedness' imply the resuscitation of older exclusionary myths of earthbound community. As we return to Earth, we approach a zone in which modern assumptions about

what the Earth *is and can be* encounter a profound challenge. Rather than being a name for the zone of inert materiality that colonial modernity sought to master and possess (land, resources, labour), the Terrestrial must now disclose the earthly entanglements which moderns miss even as or because they want to dominate matter. After an extended dialogue with the territorial thinking of Carl Schmitt, for example, Latour concludes that territory can no longer be identified with the question of land appropriation but now discloses 'the violent *reappropriation* of all human claims *by the Earth itself*' (original emphasis).[19] It seems that this imperative to get back down to Earth becomes all the more intense at the moment of this reversal, when we no longer know what the Earth and ground are — or when the Earth is no longer imaginable *as* ground at all.

While Latour clearly recognises that Indigenous and colonised people have been most historically exposed to the loss and theft of land and ground, the notion of the human universality of climate collapse should be approached cautiously. Chakrabarty claimed in 2009 that in the Anthropocene 'there are no lifeboats for the rich'[20], and yet it seems ever clearer that our epoch is precisely defined by the proliferation of new enclosures within and between nations, regions and peoples, and by the emergence of a planetary regime of 'climate apartheid', to use Philip Alston's phrase.[21] The Palestinian film-maker Elia Suleiman has spoken of the 'Palestinianisation of the globe'.[22] First, there is a stark inverse proportionality between the geographical distribution of damaging climate effects and the historical responsibility for climate emissions; second, we witness today an undeniable material and symbolic reinvestment in the politics and the infrastructures of separation, displacement, enclosure and incarceration.

To what extent, then, is the climatological deprivation of ground a universal one? It is

indisputable that Indigenous, poor and colonised people are more exposed than affluent global northerners and that this exposure extends a centuries-long history. Furthermore, there is a sense in which the very concept of 'ground' that is now unstable is already a parochial, western, colonial concept. In other words, *that which is lost or threatened* is only a partial reality in the first place, the product of a western, dualistic metaphysics based upon property relations and the conquest of the earth.

Latour's effort to reimagine the Terrestrial also needs to be measured against its persistence in the rich world as a site of pathological over-identification. These older ideas of land, nation and territory are today more charged than ever, precisely *because* of the material waning in our time of territorial and corporeal integrity. As Wendy Brown has explained in relation to walls and borders, the pressures of financialisation, planetary heating, zoonotic disease, and rising sea levels produce the morbid political symptoms that seem to define the contemporary global North, from Trump to Brexit to Covid denial and far beyond.[23] As the permeability of the organism's membrane becomes less and less deniable, whether we are speaking of the human individual or the political body, an ever more virulent theatre of identitarian disavowal emerges. Latour is clearly aware of this: *Down to Earth* opens with a discussion of some of these morbid symptoms, and *Facing Gaia* includes a discussion of climate denialism through the lenses of medieval apocalypticism and early modern gnosticism. It is for this reason that it makes sense to think of the closure rather than the end of an epoch, implying that these ideas still carry a residual charge even if they are the expression of an older social-ecological regime.[24] But my point here is that the old metaphors, or the whole ontological settlement to which they refer, appear to be the only things that are proving dangerously resilient. Even as the ground beneath me sinks, it is still *my* ground, my property (Michel Serres has argued that pollution is an expression of ownership; I think of a bumper sticker

spotted in rural Ontario, proudly reading 'Burnin' Gas!').[25]

Why, then, should the properties of the earth and soil that Latour cites — 'materiality, heterogeneity, thickness, dust, humus, the succession of layers, strata, the attentive care that it requires' — render it inappropriable, or the site of a counterappropriation? The soil for Latour is 'just the opposite of a plot of ground that a development or real estate project has just grabbed'. It surely confuses things to argue that the complex heterogeneity of the soil is the opposite of a plot of ground that can be seized. On the very next page, Latour identifies the terrestrial not with the soil but with CO2 emissions: the terrestrial is 'literally atmospheric'.[26] But this manifestation of the terrestrial is related to the soil only because of the historical reality that the soil can and has been appropriated and extracted, with the attendant atmospheric consequences. The material properties of the soil belong to the plot of ground and are central to its value under the old terrestrial concepts.

Latour is employing the language of enclosure — of land, the terrestrial, the Earthbound and the soilbound — to signify the force of an opening, of a *dis*closure of earthly agency that is also a dis*en*closure of the modern human.[27] Climate change now signifies an enormous historico-ontological rupture, announcing our arrival into a new regime that renders the old modern concepts obsolete. The *terra* now generates a certain terror, a 'fear and trembling' born out of the encounter with a radical openness or uncertainty associated with the intensifying agency of matter in the 'metamorphic zone' which we inhabit.[28] Latour quotes St. Paul:

> Those who mourn [should live] as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of this world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is

passing away.[29]

The Earth no longer functions as ground, no longer validates the old earthly metaphors implicated in colonial domination and capitalist accumulation. The old colonial discourses of ground are challenged by the metamorphic agency of the earth system, which force a de-activation or suspension of possessive logics. Latour writes of 'the discovery of a new Earth considered in its intensity and no longer in its extension'.[30] But it isn't clear where this leaves us. The ground collapses, CO2 concentrations skyrocket, and extractivist capitalism carries on unabated, continuing to appropriate this Earth that, we are told, violently reappropriates 'all human claims'. Rather than climate change presenting a material assault on the dualism that de-animates the earth and licences capitalism, the present moment seems instead to be defined by a collision between two groundless agencies, the agency of the earth system and the agency of capitalism, neither of which require the support of an ontological system and neither of which are touched by the overturning of any such system.

The Grounds of Literature

Latour's ultimate intent with his language of groundlessness is ambiguous. In the end, for him 'the Earth' appears to be less an insurgent subject than a catachresis for a domain of competing interests; there is no 'Earth itself', no thing or subject that is now announcing its agency. Rather, the different agencies that comprise what is thought of as the Earth or the ground of existence must be described, negotiated and personified in a political process.[31] At the end of *Down to Earth*, he even positions the bureaucracy of the EU as the paradigmatic mechanism for the negotiation of these interests, in a gesture that holds out an unlikely hope for the stabilisation of the 'metamorphic zone' by minimally democratic parliamentary

mechanism.[32]

Latour ultimately ends in this place, but his evocation of the terrapolitical problem of climate has influenced recent ecocritical thinking that aspires to interrogate the formal and ontological dispositions of literature in our time. It is a widely rehearsed argument, in Anthropocene literary studies, that the modern novel in particular is uniquely ill-suited to depicting the shocks of climate change: Timothy Clark describes the novel, with its conventions of plotting and characterisation, as fatally bound up with anthropocentric delusion; Ghosh argues that the modern novel was born at the time of probabilistic reason that brought the regularity of everyday life to the foreground and relegated shocks and instabilities to the background.[33] In Ghosh's widely cited argument, it is the uniformitarian biases of the realist novel that militate against the narrative agency of climate. It appears, with Ghosh, that the modern novel is not so much formally predisposed as ontologically constituted by its 'inferiorisation' and 'backgrounding', in Val Plumwood's terms, of the natural conditions that sustain (and now threaten) the unfolding of human narratives.[34] The actual earthly ground of human life, the zone of terrestrial relations that, in the Holocene, provided the parametric conditions for the evolution of human societies, functions, as it were, only as the ground of the novel in a negative sense, only insofar as this agency disappears from the scene. The novel demarcates its terrain through a series of progressive exclusions, and these begin with the original exclusion of the terrestrial as its own agential site.[35]

Ghosh's book is animated by its engagement with ecological thinking associated with the Anthropocene, including the work of Latour, and it powerfully reterritorialises this rhetoric of the ground within the domain of literary criticism. We might say that the novel is here associated with Latour's 'old climatic regime', that it has not yet registered — is incapable of

registering — the shocks of terrestrial agency. Ghosh discusses his disturbing encounter with a tornado in the streets of Delhi, and reflects that he would never include such an event in his fiction because this would open him up to the charge of implausibility (though a cyclone is in fact crucial to the plot of his 2004 novel *The Hungry Tide*). The interest of this argument resides less in any claim about what novels in our epoch should really be *about* than in how it opens up the ways that ontology is encoded in literary form. There are pessimistic and affirmative versions of this critical attention to ecology, ontology and form, from Clark's critique of anthropocentric novelistic conventions to creative efforts to find different onto- and morpho-genetic grounds of the novel in the extrahuman sphere.[36]

This final solution to the problem of the novel in the epoch of climate — which might be characterised as flipping the background and foreground, by animating or perspectivising nonhuman agencies and de-centering the human — is in keeping with the arguments of Latour. The ground has given way, but this allows us to see that there is no single ground in the first place but rather a plurality of grounds and worlds with their own agencies and interests. Latour loosely refers to this recognition as 'animist' (Vermeulen, as I mention above, calls this 'neoliberal').[37] In a way, novelistic discourse creates the larger world within which this ontological diversity can be conjured and negotiated, becoming the cultural corroboration of Latour's parliament of earthly agencies. But this move, and particularly the progressivist temporality that is often at least rhetorically involved (as the novel *opens up new horizons* or at last *becomes ecological*) overlooks the extrahuman presences that make themselves felt even in the realist tradition Ghosh has in mind. While his account is in obvious ways a partial one (he has, for example, little to say about modernism), he neglects the way that earthly agencies emerge even in the canonised strain of the modern novel, in the wuthering heights in Emily Bronte, in the flourishing growth of Levin's fields in *Anna*

Karenina, or in the flood in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. We might say that, just as the heterogeneity of the soil is proper to the plot of ground under capitalism (*pace* Latour), so the animacy of the earth inheres in various ways within this bourgeois form. Ghosh, furthermore, recognises the existence of storytelling traditions that refuse the supposedly firm human/nonhuman, animate/inert bifurcation in oral modes of folk and epic, and these modes now undeniably inhere in the history of the novel itself, in the wake of writers such as Salman Rushdie, Patrick Chamoiseau and Gabriel García Márquez. The novel in this sense has never been modern but traffics with other ontoepistemologies, other ways of seeing and being that do not conform to this particular way of partitioning the world and that carry within them a different relationship to the ground. For this reason, it feels inadequate to reach for 'cli-fi' as a mode that offers a new and alternative path, not only because this is a generic term which carries its own problems (and around which an increasingly stable EuroAmerican canon has already congealed, featuring *inter alia* Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*, Ian McEwan's *Solar*, and Margaret Atwood's Maddadam trilogy) but because this gesture implies a narrow history, and theory, of the form. As I will show, even though *The Swan Book* has been marketed as a climate change novel, it departs from a very different set of assumptions and carries this label uneasily.

In another sense, however, Ghosh's critique doesn't quite go far enough. His arguments are consonant with a longstanding strain of criticism on the modern novel that focuses upon its constitution in the epoch of colonial modernity. But while his discussion of the 'regularity of bourgeois life' at least implies property relations, and while his sense that the novel inscribes the dualistic constitution of modernity necessarily invokes a whole series of racialised, gendered and environmental oppositions, his book tends to dilute the anticapitalist and antiimperialist tenor of much of this work since Lukács.[38] The specifically anticolonial

dimensions of these arguments in the writings of Raymond Williams, Sylvia Wynter and Edward Said are particularly pertinent.[39] The novel, in the light of this earlier critical tradition, does not only exclude from view natural agency but also the real processes and histories by and for which this exclusion was achieved: primitive accumulation, terrestrial globalisation, the monopolisation of the earth's productive powers. The real scene of 'inclusive exclusion' may be *ob*scene, even if an early English novel such as *Robinson Crusoe* allegorises this foundational violence.[40] Generally speaking, however, work in the emergent field of econarratology, much of it inspired by Ghosh's intervention, has so far had little to say about the ecological rift in the terms in which it has been elaborated in Marxist ecological thought, or about the relevance of historically materialist traditions of literary criticism in general.[41] The index to a recent edited collection suggests only one reference to Raymond Williams, where he is described as a theorist of science fiction.[42] And yet it would seem that the gestures by which the novel conjures its sense of the real have as much to do with the exclusion of nonhuman agencies as with the externalisation of the history of its own constitution in property relations. The novel is not only a formal construct that mirrors or inscribes ontological relations but at the same time an often fraught narrative recoding of property relations, a plot, as Williams and Wynter emphasised, about plots.

The problem with the novel form, even if we follow the broad contours of Ghosh's argument, is then surely less that it reflects the climatological complacency of the Holocene than that it expresses the outlook of the Plantationocene. For Wynter, the novel form and the plantation society are precisely 'twin children of the same parents': the plantation system is predicated on the 'reduction of man to labour and of nature to land', where use value is superseded by exchange value at the advent of the global market economy.[43] But Wynter also distinguishes between the plantation system and the plot system: the plot system emerges in the Caribbean

not as a residual pre-capitalist regime of value but on the terrain of the actual plots on the ground, outside of the plantation, where the enslaved and indentured grew their own food and developed nonalienated forms of relation with human and nonhuman nature. Here, 'the land remained the Earth'.[44] The novel, for Wynter, is characteristically ambivalent (her examples include Vic Reid's *A New Day* and V. S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas*): it is a product of the market economy, its exchange structure, its individualism, but develops and grows as a form of resistance to its enabling social and, by implication, ecological conditions. We might imagine the plot in Foucault's term as a heterotopia which 'suspends, neutralises or inverts' the spatial regime of the plantation.[45] But even though Wynter indicates that the novel is potentially affiliated with the resistant spirit of this heterotopic space, her short essay does not offer any developed account of the second dimension of the plot as story. If the space of the plantation grounds the plots of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel, then what is the plot of this other plot, the narrative plot of the land that remains the Earth?

In *Reading for the Plot*, his landmark study of the temporal dynamism of narrative, Peter Brooks alights upon the semantic richness of *the plot*. Here, plot refers to the basic actions and events that comprise the story (*fabula*) as well as to the order in which that story is told (*sjuzhet*) (Brooks questions the viability of this distinction). The first meaning of plot, though is, even here, the plot of ground. What, in literary discourse, might connect these two meanings of plot? Brooks writes that

> common to the original sense of the word is the idea of boundedness, demarcation, the drawing of lines to mark off and order. This easily extends to the chart or diagram of the demarcated area, which in turn modulates to the outline of the literary work. From the organised space, plot becomes the organising line, demarcating and

diagramming that which was previously undifferentiated.[46]

All stories rely upon an initial gesture of setting apart, of enclosure and demarcation, with the simple function of indicating the difference between the story-world and the everyday world of the reader ('Once upon a time…', 'Here is the house…'). But this basic recognition opens up the more complex relationship between spatial and temporal order in literary texts. Brooks exemplifies this connection in a close reading of the plot of the Arthur Conan Doyle story, 'The Musgrave Ritual', in which Sherlock Holmes must first literally plot out upon the physical ground the points that demarcate the space of the ritual, pacing off measurements, thrusting pegs into the ground, and so on. The detective story is for Brooks the exemplar of the hermeneutic plot, in which the conclusion of the story is nothing less than a solution to the problem in which the reader and characters are initially mired; such plots are satisfying because, in the end, they effect a retroactive dissolution of this confounding problem-space. Brooks doesn't put it quite like this, but what is implied is that the clarity of the demarcation of the terrain upon which the action has unfolded, the strength of the initial gesture of enclosure that marks off the plot on the ground, is closely related to the quality of the plotting that unfolds in time, including the satisfaction and force of the story's closure.

Brooks offers a poststructuralist and post-Freudian reading of the dynamic energies of narrative and desire in the realist novel. He does not speculate about any consequences of the manifold valencies of 'plot' from a historically materialist perspective, and does not mention, for example, Williams's *The Country and the City*, or Wynter's essay, both published a decade or so before *Reading for the Plot*. For Williams, as I have indicated, the paradigmatic plot of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century novel concerns the inheritance of plots of land. The marriage plot that dynamically structures the narrative of a Jane Austen novel transposes

the plot of inheritance into the plot of romance. And behind the latent plot of inheritance lies the yet more recessive plot of primitive accumulation, by which large plots of land were appropriated and rendered heritable in the first place. As Williams and, later, Edward Said showed, the processes by which plots of land were engrossed and consolidated to create large estates were closely related to slavery and imperialism. Notwithstanding the virulent contemporary pushback in the UK against recognising the historically incontestable dependency of land-owning wealth upon enslavement and the plantation economy, Williams's reading of Cobbett alongside Austen indicates that this relationship was well understood at the time.[47]

Said's reading of *Mansfield Park* pushes beyond Williams and Wynter in his attention to how imaginative geography is re-cast in narrative dynamics.[48] Said explains, famously, that it is the departure of Sir Thomas Bertram, the proper figure of patriarchal authority who leaves Mansfield Park for his Antigua plantation at a key juncture in the narrative, that enables the unfolding of a subplot in which the characters plan the staging of a play, *Lovers' Vows*, through which they scandalously subvert their assigned social roles, much to the worry of Fanny Price. This subplot veers dangerously away from the sanctioned 'master plot' of land, as displaced into the plot of marriage and inheritance. This master plot resumes only once Sir Thomas returns and proper authority is established again. Said's analysis shares at least the spirit of Peter Brooks's, in its attentiveness to the intricate and energetic internal dynamics of plotting, even as it emphasises the constitutive obscenity of slavery.

Such a reading of Austen is 'terrapolitical' in the sense that it reveals the text's fraught negotiation with the systems of earthly domination that were intensifying in the early nineteenth century, and with how this negotiation is manifested on the level of narrative

form. If *Mansfield Park* sanctions the master plot it is still open to a counter-reading; if the novel disavows the realities of slavery, the gesture of disavowal itself becomes a rich interpretive site. The plantation grounds and disturbs Mansfield Park, financially securing the territory of the narrative and becoming the abyssal site, the 'dead silence', around which postcolonial readings have revolved.[49] But this only takes us so far. Said and Williams both counterpose the culture of imperialism with resistance literature by figures such as C. L. R. James, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Aimé Césaire, and W. B. Yeats (Wynter's own *Hills of Hebron* could be added to the list). For Williams, it was in postcolonial locations that the real dialectic of the country and the city was playing out when he was writing, where land ownership and dispossession were live topics in a way that they seemed not to be in the overdeveloped world.[50] And this conflict over land and earth ownership, as Wynter shows, coincides with an ontological breach between divergent conceptions of what land and earth are. For Locke, land is acreage; in Austen, it is income. But when we move out of the dominant realist texts of coloniality, we encounter a different sense of land as storied, of the earthly ground as a participant in the production of worlds. Similarly, if a terrapolitical interpretation of the realist novel (after Wynter, Williams, Brooks and Said) reveals how the novel's grounding operations depend upon plots in space and on land, which may be internal or external to the primary narrative site, then what might the formal consequences be of different relationships to the ground, of different conceptions and historical experiences of land and space? How might a different idea of 'ground', and a longer history of its deprivation, challenge the grounds of novelistic form, the plots in space and on land that support the unfolding of the hermeneutic or end-directed plot? In pursuit of these questions I wish to turn to the work of Alexis Wright.

Losing the Plot

Wright is a novelist and activist who belongs to the Waanyi nation in the Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Australia. In a review of Wright's work in the *London Review of Books,* Elizabeth Lowry writes of the anxiety expressed by Aboriginal Australian novelists about 'thinking' or 'sounding white': insofar as the novel form arrived in Australia through invasion and settlement, so there emerged a concern about the dangers of assimilating to a EuroWestern cultural norm that incubated settler epistemological values.[51] Aboriginal storytelling traditions are not, as Alexis Wright has argued, novelistic. And this is so in a way that directly relates to the problem of ground. If modern novels are ontologically dualistic, or operate through the distinction between a stable milieu and a narratively animated human story, then they contravene the nondualistic orientation of Indigenous thought. Brigg writes the following about the Aboriginal relational system, a system of mutual or reciprocal grounding:

> It is perhaps more accurate to say that the landscape exists in reciprocal relation with humans: land supports both people and the signs which people read in order to undertake ritual and ceremony to sustain the landscape which will in turn sustain people. This generates Dreaming, Law and political order in Aboriginal traditions.[52]

The terrapolitics of colonial settlement are, by contrast, grounded in land's nonparticipation, in the instrumentalization of its productive capacities and the negation of its meanings. This isn't just a philosophical contrast or ontological divergence, but a difference that is espoused and absorbed with the larger plot of settler time, which backgrounds and inferiorises land while assimilating Indigenous people to it in part *because* of their alternative relationship to it. The theoretical operation that works through the discourse of 'animism' in colonial

anthropology, for example, aims to associate Indigenous people with a denigrated nature on the basis that they have failed to distinguish themselves from nature, as if this comes to justify their dispossession.[53] Wright emphasises that this plot (what Brooks would also call a *complot*, a scheme or ruse) persists to this day.[54]

The familiar problem of writing within and against the colonial form of the novel is then compounded by a sense of ontological collision that is highly historically charged. The challenge is to write not just within and against the novel, not just to do 'unheard of things' with its language, but specifically to write against the whole plot of settler time, including to the denigration, de-animation and de-temporalisation of land.[55] According to the doctrine of *terra nullius*, land is simply space, a surface to be emplotted and appropriated. Wright has written about how, even with the legal overturning of this doctrine after the Eddie Mabo case in the 1990s, this idea continues to inform the ongoing negation of Indigenous relationships to place. Land rights cases are often lost precisely because Indigenous people have been displaced over time, and so struggle to evidence their claims to traditional territory in terms that are satisfactory to the courts. While communal and ancestral stories are fundamental vehicles for land rights cases because they witness past relationships to land, Wright makes the point that even when successful these cases have not been won on the terms of Indigenous law or within the framework of Aboriginal terrapolitics, but rather within a colonial legal idiom which asserts land's transferability in settler-capitalist terms. Even here, there is the danger of losing the plot, losing control of the Indigenous story, and this leads, for Wright, in only one direction: towards assimilation and cultural destruction.[56]

The task facing the Aboriginal writer is then centrally related to questions of political and ontological sovereignty and to the ownership and meaning of land. While *The Swan Book* has

been marketed as a climate change novel about a dystopian future, it insists that from the Indigenous perspective this future is merely an extension of the long terrapolitical crises of invasion and enclosure. The novel refuses speculative or dystopian impulses that would imagine a (happily or negatively) transformed world at a remove from our own to assert instead the *chronic* emergency of invasion. In the novel's world, the Indigenous peoples of the Northern Territory continue to live under the notorious 'Intervention', a measure imposed by John Howard's collapsing government in the run-up to a general election (and still extant in modified form) that imposed neoliberal welfare discipline on Northern communities and stripped back native title and land rights.[57] The novel's initial gesture is not to build a world but to refuse to do so, to dwell within the condition created by the *unworlding* forces of settler time, of which climate change forms just one dimension.

The Swan Book concerns the story of Oblivia, a young Indigenous girl living in Northern Australia in a climate-ravaged future. She belongs to a community who once thought of themselves as the 'ancestral people of the lake' but who are now simply the 'swamp people', whose lands have been decimated but who are out of touch with the meaning of this ancestral desecration.[58] The contaminated swamp around which they reside is filled with junk cleared from the sea which is used as target practice by military bombers. Oblivia seems to be our storyteller: a complicated and ambiguous 'Prelude' establishes that Oblivia is assembling the tale from the swamp in a state of outward disarray and ruin: 'I stumble around through the rubble. See! There I go — zigzagging like a snake over hot tarmac through the endless traffic. Here I am — ducking for cover from screeching helicopters flying around the massive fire-plume storms' (1-2). And what immediately emerges as the story proper unfolds is that it will not be told through the confident plotting in temporal sequence of narrative material but loosely gathered together in a way that lacks a clear narrative centre, a privileged

subjectivity, a perspective or voice that would ground the community's recollections. The 'I' of the prelude does not appear in the novel proper, and the character of Oblivia is mute. There is instead the sense of a vocal cacophony, a plurality of stories and storytellers which are hard to isolate or integrate:

> In every neck of the woods people walked in the imagination of doomsayers and talked the language of extinction. They talked about surviving a continuous dust storm under the old rain shadow, or they talked about living out the best part of their lives with floods lapping around their bellies; or they talked about tsunamis and dealing with nuclear fallout on their shores and fields forever (6)

The storyworld is composed by the partial recollections of those who inhabit it, by rumour, chatter, nostalgia, suspicion: 'Some say that there was an accident before the drought…' (7). Rather than world-building, the novel throws us into a world that people themselves are trying to build or re-build through talk — though elsewhere on this planet ravaged by extinction events, the narrator tells us sardonically, you could bet that some people weren't talking (6-7)!

Through this de-centred communal chatter, we learn in the opening pages that Oblivia was raped by a gang of petrol-sniffing youths years ago (the time is as ambiguous as the narrative focalisation), after which she fell into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree. This story is repeated over and over in different fragmentary forms, and is therefore not vouchsafed by the authority of any privileged storyteller but inscribed through repetition and recirculation. After the passing of some years, Oblivia is drawn out of the tree by another character, Bella Donna, an 'old gypsy woman' who becomes a mother-figure to the orphaned Oblivia and is herself a refugee from the land-grabbing wars of climate change in the

northern hemisphere (thus the global northerner has now become a boat person). Oblivia becomes closely associated with this sacred tree and, in due course, with the swans that give the book its title, whose stories Oblivia learns from Bella Donna as they inhabit a ruined hulk on the swamp. The hulk is full of these swan books that Bella Donna has accumulated over the years, featuring among others works of Baudelaire, Yeats, Whitman, Tennyson, E. B. White, Bari Karoly, Ch'i-chi. But the swans are not only book-bound presences within this world; instead there is an obscure sense in which the swan stories beckon the swans themselves, who land and nest at the swamp, miles away from their traditional routes and habitats: they too are climate refugees. The swans come and go; it is their movements that give the novel its rhythm. The stories of Oblivia and Bella Donna, the swamp people and the boat people, and the stories of these black swans are woven together: the book is about these 'obsolete people' (56), surplus populations — a surplusness which seems to encompass nearly all living beings — who are suffering in different ways a radical loss of Country.

If Bella Donna and the swans are displaced, Oblivia and the swamp people suffer a displacement *in* place, a displacement that occurs without them moving from their ancestral territory.[59] As the lake is buffeted by sandstorms it becomes a swamp; but the community experiences an ecological violence that targets not only the environmental premises of human existence — water, food, atmosphere, temperature — but also the whole framework in which land participates in human worlds. If climate change can be redescribed as an intentional project, in light of the fact that the very phrase 'climate change' was first deployed by colonising thinkers in the eighteenth century who wanted to transform local environments to suit their purposes, including in Australia, then this encompasses an ontological violence too.[60] Climate change becomes not just an environmental but a terrapolitical project perpetrated against non-modern systems of ecological relation.

A key scene in which this violence is depicted comes in the destruction of the giant eucalyptus tree with which Oblivia is associated, a tree described as so sacred, holding all the doctrines of ancestral law, that it was unthinkable for it to be violated. The tree is not merely a tree but an ancestor, 'our oldest living relative for looking after the memories'. But it is destroyed by the Army, under the benevolent rationale of 'clos[ing] the gap' between white and Aboriginal people (a phrase associated with contemporary Aboriginal policy). It is significant that all of this is described as a story, narrated without the clear linear chronology that would frame it as a moment of rupturing spectacular violence, but rather as part of the cacophonous 'talk' that creates the texture of the novel. Crucially, this story is about the place of the stories and the destruction of this place, and the novel itself is telling this story about the story of the stories, so that there is a grammatical nesting of different story levels: 'There was a story about a sacred tree where all the stories of the swamp were stored…'. There is this sense again of a de-centering or fragmentation, as if to emphasise the complicated challenge of 'making sense of our selves' under the violence of epistemicide.[61] These stories persist but their location is as uncertain as the location of the narrative voice: the pronoun shifts from us, to they, to we, marking a shifting and a fracturing of both perspectival locale and narrative time:

> Those stories scattered into the winds were still about, but where, that was the problem now. It made us strong and gave us hope that tree. The kinspeople of the tree had believed this since time immemorial. Really all that was left behind of the story were elders and their families whose ancestors had once cared for the old dried and withered, bush-fire burnt-out trunk of a giant eucalyptus tree through the eons of their existence. They were too speechless to talk about a loss that was so great, it made them feel unhinged from their own bodies, unmoored, vulnerable, separated from

> eternity. They had been cut off. They called themselves damned people who felt like strangers walking around on their country. The reciprocal bond of responsibility that existed between themselves and the ancestors had always strengthened them. This was what held all times together. Now we are sick of it. Sick of that girl bringing up that memory to make us feel bad. (79)

Speechless, unmoored, estranged: these people remain on their ancestral land and yet are now 'strangers' there, displaced without having moved. The tree's physical destruction constitutes the extirpation of a privileged node in a web of multispecies kinship, one that is incompatible with the colonial division of being and with settler time. The tree is not part of the environment, an inert feature of the background conditions for the story of human life, but rather an archive and a kinsperson. It is not part of the unchanging natural time against which the dynamism of human histories and human plots unfold, but the very power of temporal binding: it is 'what held all times together'. And yet, '[now] we are sick of it', sick of the very memory of this loss. Who is this 'we'? The tree's loss threatens this further disaster: the loss of the capacity to interpret this loss, to understand *what has been lost*. Here, the perspectival breaks and temporal shifts introduce an effect of bitter irony: the narrative voice refuses to offer us a stable ground from which to survey this destruction. Even the language of Aboriginal cosmology — all the times in one time — is riven and contaminated by doubt and cynicism.

Within the novel, it is ironically the character of Warren Finch who orders the destruction of the sacred tree. Finch is a celebrity Aboriginal politician who lives in the capital city and denigrates the swamp people while speaking a vacuous language that has nothing to do with their lives. He also wants to repackage Aboriginal knowledge and market it to the world as a solution to its manifold planetary crises, and the novel is witheringly satirical in its

representation of this kind of discourse (106, 107, 122, 127, 130). He is a figure who thus wishes to destroy the living ground of Indigenous worlds while instrumentalising Indigenous thought as a free-floating ecological toolkit for saving the planet. He has an important role in the narrative, as he abducts Oblivia and forces her to marry him, and in the process destroys Bella Donna's swan books (Bella Donna has died by this point in the story, though continues to exist in ghostly form). It is only after his death (and public funeral) that Oblivia returns to the swamp where she can await the return of the swans and (it seems) tell her story.

The scene of the destruction of the tree echoes the real-world destruction of sacred Indigenous sites such as the Juukan Gorge, a sacred rock shelter blasted by Rio Tinto in Western Australia, or the Djab Wurrung directions trees, destroyed and vandalised in a major road building project in Victoria.[62] This destruction is compounded by climate change: Australia is currently experiencing a mass dieback of eucalyptus forests. The destruction or loss of land is the destruction or loss of story, as the ground is denuded of its meanings. Insofar as such destruction is related to a larger project of cultural genocide, then what is also threatened is the very story *of* storied land, the ontology or terrapolitics within which the ground *grounds,* is itself involved in the ongoing creation of ground.

The Dene political theorist, Glenn Coulthard, has used the phrase 'grounded normativity' to express the value systems of first nations peoples:

> Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating,

> nonexploitive manner… Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems.[63]

Coulthard is responding to what he sees as the myopic critiques of Indigenous thought developed by theorists such as Jared Sexton, who claim that the problem with the Indigenous attachment to land is that it leaves little space for Black people and migrants. This critique assumes that land is understood in a western, colonial frame in Indigenous discourse, in terms of exclusionary property rights and in accordance with a conception of nature that is subordinated to the needs of exclusively human culture. In Wynter's terms, it assumes the land of the *plantation* rather than of the *plot.* While Coulthard is writing from North America, in the context of Indigenous Australia too, the notion of Country encompasses the idea that land itself is storied, is the source of stories, the ground of, rather than the disavowed condition for, human lives.[64]

How might such 'grounded normativity' also inform the formal systems of the Aboriginal novel? If, as Ghosh has claimed, the novel itself is constitutively modern insofar as it enshrines nature/culture dualism in its formal architecture, then it is imperative for a writer like Wright to step beyond the supposedly modern, colonial trappings of the novel form. This seems to explain some of the more challenging aspects of *The Swan Book* – its 'eschew[ing] of the realist conventions of narration, of a speaking subject, of the logic of cause and effect, of a single order of reality, and of linear chronology'.[65] But as the description of the sacred tree suggests, this 'grounded normativity' is menaced and problematised under the conditions of settler colonialism. What could it mean under such conditions to affirm a grounded normativity, as if the ground can subsist outside of the destructive realities of colonial invasion and climate collapse? On the one hand, *The Swan Book*'s formal features express a critique of the dualism of the modern novel; but on the other, they seem at the same time to

symptomise this loss of ground. Wright has written of her desire to create voices that sound like old Aboriginal storytellers but, if Oblivia is this storyteller, she struggles to envoice and organise this history.[66]

Plots without ground

In a reading of Wright's novel in *The Sydney Review of Books*, Jane Gleeson-Wright writes of Oblivia's 'quest to regain sovereignty over her own brain':

> Wright's stakes are high. She is concerned with the human mind and its capacity to imagine, with the way stories are born from particular locales and yet can spread like viruses, travelling gypsy-like across the planet in the way of migratory birds, taking hold of minds in places they don't belong. *The Swan Book* suggests that stories, their dissemination and cross-pollination, bear upon the ability of Indigenous Australians to govern their own minds, and by extension their land (these are inextricably linked) – and that this has implications for the future of human life on Earth.[67]

The implication of this reading is that Bella Donna and her swan stories are foreign impositions upon Oblivia and the swamp people and for this reason symbolic of the imposed stories Wright discusses in her political writings. This is a conservative reading. The novel's dedication references a group of swans spotted outside of their habitual territory, 'In the Todd River next to Schultz Crossing / And thirty flying north along Larapinta Drive / in Alice Springs on the 14 January 2010', an apparition that in Wright's own account inspired the novel.[68] The novel's epigraph is a poem by Robert Adamson, 'After William Blake' —

A wild black swan in a cage

Puts all of heaven in a rage

— as if the whole book is motivated by a vision of the black swan as an icon of disenclosure, of energies that push against capture and belonging.

It is through its figuration of the swan that the novel pushes beyond the terrapolitical predicament it frames. It is *as* a 'swan book' that the novel indicates a hope 'without optimism', becoming an allegory of how to ground after the deprivation of ground, or of how to plot beyond the logic of plot-as-property.[69] The swans of *The Swan Book* are black swans: it is these swans that are native to Australia, rather than the white swans of the Northern Hemisphere. But black swans do not historically reside in the areas in which they appear in the novel, in Waanyi territory near the Gulf of Carpentaria. The swans enter Oblivia's dreams, but she could not know anything of how 'long it had taken the huge black birds to make the migratory flights from so far away, to where they had no storyline for taking them back' (15). The swans, like the humans, have Law, they have Dreaming, they have Country; but after the destruction of their land, they have become migratory, discovering not new territories but rather new powers of territorialisation: 'the swans had become gypsies… nomads… migratory like the white swans of the northern hemisphere' (16).

The novel assembles a diverse cultural archive of the swan, referencing poetry, myth and legend (the swan knight, Brahma's swanlike steed), music, such as Wagner and the Hamsadhvani or swan raga of South Indian Carnatic music, and early colonial accounts, such as those of the Dutch explorers who encountered this supposedly impossible bird off the coast of Australia and captured and displayed it (81). The swans are never just swans, then,

but discursively saturated and even enclosed, as captured by imposed plotlines as the human inhabitants of the swamp. But Wright's wager is that there is something to be discovered here, such as in the melodic protocols of the swan raga, or in the transcultural migrations of these figurations themselves. What the swan raga and the movements of the swans themselves seem to enact is something like the 'life of lines', as they open up intersecting routes and paths beyond the enclosures of territory, tradition, species, language and mode: they deterritorialise and destratify, in Deleuzian language.[70] Indian classical music, it seems, is radically 'proairetic', to use Barthes's term, where each melodic elaboration becomes a further opening onto new lines, new melodies. In contrast to the plot-as-property, or to the hermeneutic plot that requires a clear spatialisation of its territory (as in Brooks's discussion of Holmes measuring the lawn), this proairetic logic implies a 'loose stringing together', a logic of succession rather than resolution, of ongoing movements rather than the extraction of a final meaning.[71]

Bella Donna hears the 'bell-beat of their wings above [her] head', a reference to Yeats's 'The Wild Swans at Coole', one of the novel's many poetic intertexts, and one in which the speaker appears to ask a question, or to express a wondering, at the swan's capacity not so much to ground itself in a given enclosure – the lake of this country park in Coole – but to weave routes that intersect with and travel beyond the life-line of the poet: 'Among what rushes will they build, / By what lake's edge or pool / Delight men's eyes when I awake some day / To find they have flown away?' The poem appears as a site of momentary intercapture between text and swan. Seamus Heaney's 'Postscript', also referenced in the novel and itself in dialogue with Yeats's poem, witnesses a stunned encounter between the lines of poetry, movement, coast and life which blows all of them open. And it is as if Yeats's clamouring wings, the sudden scattering and wheeling of the swans that interrupt the poet's count and

after which he ‘trod with a lighter tread’ upon the ground, is expressed in Heaney less by the movement of the swans themselves (who do not fly in this poem) than by the ‘big soft buffettings’ that catch the car and heart, as proof of their shared inhabitation of the terrestrial medium of the air. ‘Useless to think you’ll park and capture it more thoroughly’: rather than existing as a transient encounter with difference enshrined or parked in poetry, this moment ties a knot between life-lines, and is charged with the promise of a larger enmeshing of human and more-than-human lives.

These are only some of the valencies of *The Swan Book*’s intertextual choreography. The novel mixes traditions and it is crucial that the swans in some sense are plotless, storyless, deprived of their ancestral ground and the stories and routes that make sense of it: Oblivia knew ‘as a fact that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her’ (15). But in arriving at the swamp, this swan ‘placed itself within the stories of this country, before it restored the rhythm of its flapping wings, and continued on its flight’ (19). The swan has, boldly, ‘mix[ed] the Dreamings!’ (81), where the use of this word implies a direct affiliation with Aboriginal thinking about Country. The swans become an agent of what Edouard Glissant calls ‘relation’ between different orders and histories and traditions and times. Wright has written of Glissant’s influence on her own thinking and of affinities between his poetics of relation and Indigenous Australian cosmology.[72] Dreaming, relation, becoming, (de)territorialisation: there is kinship between all of these terms, which speak to ideas of plotting beyond the settler-colonial frame, to ideas of grounding that do not presume a solid ground that would be alienated from the flux and interfusion of things. There is a clear sense in the novel that the swans’ movements along their unfolding storylines are forms of Dreaming, but Country for the swans extends beyond any plot — theirs is a planetary storyline (they appear to northern hemisphere refugees at one

point in the novel (29)). And this resonates with the openness of Aboriginal conceptual systems, which integrate new landscapes in the wake of displacement as well as all of the signs of settler modernity (cattle ranches, barbed wire, etc.).[73]

The Swan Book thus draws on a literary and aesthetic tradition in which processes of grounding and ungrounding enter dialectical relation, rather than the dualistic or hermeneutic tradition of the realist novel. This process is explicitly thematised through the presences and movements of the swans, for whom the discovery and rediscovery of a plot *is* the plot: their own and, it seems, Oblivia's. The ungrounding to which this plotting responds is given a tangible colonial character: the destruction of the sacred gum, the desecration of the lake, the rape of Oblivia, the denial of Indigenous sovereignty, the expropriation of Indigenous ontology itself, the destruction of ancestral homelands through climate collapse – the swans are woven into this terrapolitical history. It is necessary to begin from the condition of groundlessness, from deracination and displacement in place. But somehow the swans promise to give Oblivia a route back into the Dreaming, into the meanings of land and the ongoing composition of the world. The swans are proposed as a kind of surrogate, a surrogate for the swamp people's grounding activity that they cannot undertake, except through Oblivia alone, who can begin, in the novel's final pages, to imagine a regrounding if only through the writing of the damaged, strange book that we are reading.

In one sense, it might seem that we are back to the framework articulated by Latour. Climate change precipitates a loss of ground that is disturbing but ultimately positive: now that the Earth is quaking beneath our feet we can recognise that the modern project of earthly domination and disavowal is no longer fit for purpose. But the loss of ground can never be positive for Wright, because what is threatened by invasion and climate change isn't the

ground of property or territory that concerns Latour but grounding itself. The theft and destruction of land targets the mutual and reciprocal powers of grounding that Brigg describes in his idea of Aboriginal terrapolitics, or that Coulthard develops in his theory of grounded normativity. The swans in the novel disseminate the promise of grounding in the wake of this groundlessness, from within the context of Indigenous deracination and displacement. It is only in this way that the novel can glimpse a renovated novelistic terrapolitics: the swans are not the site of an alternative ontological ground through which the novel generates an extrahistorical world but are entangled within the long history of displacement, dispossession and climate change. In this sense, *The Swan Book* reopens and extends the history of the novel as a terrapolitical form, within which the different and connected meanings of grounds and plots, land and story, have always been at stake.

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[1] Gabrielle Canon, "California Cracks Down on Water Pumping: 'the Ground is Collapsing,'" *The Guardian*, April 17 2024.
[2] Shabnam von Hein, "Iran's Water Crisis Leads to Alarming Ground Collapse," *Deutsche Welle (DW)*, June 19 2024; Sammi Chan, "Shopping Mall Floor Collapses, Swallowing Customer in China," *South China Morning Post*, March 27 2024; Jacopo Prisco, "'Underground Climate Change' is Deforming the Ground Beneath Buildings, Study Finds," *cnn.com*, July 17 2023.
[3] Zacharias Kunuk, Ian Mauro, dirs., *Qapirangajuk: Inuit Knowledge and Climate Change*, Isuma Productions, 2010, 00:27:22.
[4] In the case of the Inuit in Canada, this encompasses the theft of land, residential schools, enclosure in settled communities, illegalisation of language, religious conversion, and the destruction of nonhuman cultural infrastructures; see Sheila Watt-Cloutier, *The Right to be Cold* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).
[5] Kunuk and Mauro, 00:31:21.
[6] For a reading of the ambiguity of ground in German idealism, see Ansgar Mohnkern, "Grund/abgrund: On Kant and Hölderlin," in Juliana Albuquerque, Gert Hofmann, eds, *Anti/Idealism: Re-interpreting a German Discourse* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 187-208.
[7] Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2016), 31.
[8] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 17.
[9] Daniel Wright, *The Grounds of the Novel* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024).
[10] Morgan Brigg, "Biopolitics Meets Terrapolitics: Political Ontologies and Governance in Settler-Colonial Australia," *Australian journal of political science* 42, no 3 (2007): 408.
[11] Deborah Bird Rose, "Indigenous Ecologies and an Ethic of Connection," in *Global Ethics*

and Environment, ed. Nicholas Low (London: Routledge, 1999), 177-78.
[12] Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), xiii.
[13] Elizabeth DeLoughrey, *Allegories of the Anthropocene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 5.
[14] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Who is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf?: Some Comments on an Ongoing Anthropological Debate," *Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 33, no 1 (2015): 2-17, 9.
[15] Pieter Vermeulen, "Forests as Markets: *The Overstory*, Neoliberalism, and Other Fictions of Spontaneous Order," *Environmental Humanities* 15, no 2 (2023): 142-161.
[16] Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime,* trans. Catherine Porter (London: Polity, 2017), 273; Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* trans. Catherine Porter (London: Polity, 2018), 8, 17.
[17] Quoted in Bruno Latour, "Agency At the Time of the Anthropocene," *New Literary History* 45, no 1 (2014): 4.
[18] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 212.
[19] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 276.
[20] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no 2 (2009): 221.
[21] Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, "Climate Change and Poverty," *United Nations Human Rights Council*, vol A/HRC/41/392019, 1-19.
[22] Tobias Grey, "Film-Maker Elia Suleiman on 'the Palestinianisation of the Globe,'" *Financial Times*, June 10 2021.
[23] Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone, 2010).
[24] Timothy Clark, "Some Climate Change Ironies: Deconstruction, Environmental Politics and the Closure of Ecocriticism," *Oxford Literary Review* 32, no 1 (2010): 131-49.
[25] Michel Serres, *Malfeasance: Appropriation Through Pollution?,* trans. Anne-Marie Feenberg-Dibon (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).
[26] Latour, *Down to Earth*, 92-93.
[27] On disenclosure or déclosion as 'the reversal of a prior closing,' see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity,* ed. and trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), ix.
[28] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 209.
[29] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 213.
[30] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 290.
[31] Latour, *Facing Gaia*, 276.
[32] Latour, *Down to Earth*, 100.
[33] Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 191.
[34] Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993), 21.
[35] Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 59-61.
[36] Richard Powers, *The Overstory* (London: Heinemann, 2018); E. J. Swift, *The Coral Bones,* (London: Unsung Stories, 2022); Martin MacInnes, *In Ascension* (London: Atlantic, 2023).
[37] Latour, "Agency," 7.
[38] This is despite the fact that Ghosh is implicitly situated in this tradition given his reliance on Franco Moretti. Ghosh references Moretti's *The Bourgeois* which in turn draws on Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*, which is effectively an elaboration at scale of Hegel's claim that 'a novel in the modern sense of the word presupposes a world already prosaically

ordered' (quoted in David Cunningham, "Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics: Lukács, Abstraction and the Novel," in Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall, eds, *George Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence* (London: Continuum, 2011) 49-64, 50). We can see the afterlife of this claim in Ghosh's arguments about backgrounding. My thanks to Miguel Vatter for opening up these genealogies. For a recent critical work which draws on Lukács's later Marxist writings on the novel to emphasise property relations, see Carolyn Lesjak, *The Afterlife of Enclosure: British Realism, Character and the Commons* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021).

[39] For more on the relationship between these figures, see Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 226-247. An important mediating figure was Lucien Goldmann, whom Wynter directly cites in "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation." For Williams's account of how Goldmann brought Lukacs's ideas to Cambridge, see "A Man without Frustration," *London Review of Books* 6, no 9 (1984).

[40] Robert Marzec, "Enclosures, Colonization, and the *Robinson Crusoe* Syndrome: A Genealogy of Land in a Global Context," *boundary 2* 29, no 2 (2002): 129-56.

[41] John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2010).

[42] Ursula Heise, "Econarratology for the Future," in Erin and Eric Morel James, eds, *Environment and Narrative: New Directions in Econarratology* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 209.

[43] Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (1971), 95-102, 95, 99.

[44] Wynter, 99.

[45] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16, no 1 (1986), 22-27, 24.

[46] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 12.

[47] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 112-19; Corinne Fowler, "Revisiting *Mansfield Park*: The Critical and Cultural Legacies of Edward Said's Essay 'Jane Austen and Empire' in *Culture and Imperialism*," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 4, no 3 (2017): 362-81.

[48] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

[49] Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (London: Penguin, 2003), 184.

[50] Williams, 279-288.

[51] Elizabeth Lowry, "The Fishman Lives the Lore," *London Review of Books* 30, no 8 (2008).

[52] Brigg, "Biopolitics Meets Terrapolitics," 8.

[53] See for instance Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), Mark Rifkin, *Beyond Settler Time:Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

[54] Alexis Wright, "What Happens When You Tell Someone Else's Story?," *Meanjin* 74, no 4 (2016): 58-76.

[55] Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975), 61.

[56] Wright, "What Happens," 71. For a theoretically elaborated version of this argument, see Robert Nichols, "Theft is Property! The Recursive Logic of Dispossession," *Political Theory* 46, no 1 (2018): 3-28.

[57] Richard Phillips, Peter Symonds, "What the 2007 Northern Territory "Intervention" Reveals About Australia's Voice Referendum" (2023): wsws.org.

[58] Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (London: Constable, 2015).
[59] Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 19.
[60] Eyal Weizman, "Are They Human?," *e-flux architecture*, October 2016, n. p.
[61] Wright, "What Happens," 63.
[62] My thanks to Lucy Benjamin for reference to the Djab Wurrung case.
[63] Glenn Coulthard, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Grounded Normativity / Place-Based Solidarity," *American Quarterly* 68, no 2 (2016): 254.
[64] W. E. H. Stanner, *On Aboriginal Religion* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2014), xxiii.
[65] Linda Daley, "Fabulation: Toward Untimely and Inhuman Life in Alexis Wright's *the Swan Book*," *Australian Feminist Studies* 31, no 89 (2016): 305–18, 306.
[66] Alexis Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," *Heat* 13 (2007): n. p.
[67] Jane Gleeson-Wright, "Going Viral: *The Swan Book*," *Sydney Review of Books* (2013).
[68] Alexis Wright, "A Journey in Writing Place," *Meanjin* 78, no 2 (2019): 50.
[69] Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
[70] Tim Ingold, *The Life of Lines* (London: Routledge, 2015).
[71] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 30.
[72] Wright, "On Writing *Carpentaria*," n. p.
[73] David Trigger, "Change and Succession in Australian Aboriginal Claims to Land," in P. G. Toner, ed, *Strings of Connectedness: Essays in Honour of Ian Keen* (Acton: ANU Press, 2015), 59-60.