

Last Aboriginal Person Standing in a Climate-Changed Australia: A Conversation with Alexis Wright

Stef Craps
Ghent University

The award-winning Aboriginal Australian writer Alexis Wright is a member of the Waanyi nation in the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria. She is the author of three novels—Plains of Promise (1997), Carpentaria (2006), and The Swan Book (2013)—and several works of non-fiction. She currently holds the Boisbouvier Chair in Australian Literature at the University of Melbourne. What follows is an excerpt of a virtual live Q&A session with the author that took place at Ghent University, Belgium, in the spring of 2020.

*The event was part of a Master's course I taught that explored how contemporary literature is grappling with the problems posed by a warming planet. The course paid particular attention to the formal innovations demanded by climate change, a phenomenon whose sheer magnitude and complexity defy familiar forms of narrative, and to the ways in which writers address inequalities in the global distribution of responsibility for and vulnerability to climate change in their work. The students had just read *The Swan Book*, one of the key texts on the reading list, when, much to our delight, Wright joined the class via Zoom.*

*Strange and difficult but beautiful and essential, *The Swan Book* is a bleak, dystopian portrayal of Australia ravaged by climate change that centers on the experience of an Aboriginal community still living under the Intervention in the north at the end of the 21st century.¹ The book has been called “the first great novel of climate change, and perhaps the first truly planetary novel.”²*

To kick off the conversation, several students asked Wright whether she thinks climate change fiction can and should have an impact, or

¹ The Intervention is the name given to a controversial set of policies introduced by the Howard government in 2007 in response to a report claiming that the neglect and sexual abuse of children in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory of Australia had reached crisis levels. The federal government seized control of many aspects of the daily lives of residents in 73 targeted remote communities, implementing coercive measures that largely remain in place to this day.

² Jane Gleeson-White, “Going Viral: *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright,” *Sydney Review of Books*, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/going-viral/>, August 23, 2013.

*whether she sees the instrumentalization of literature as ecopropaganda as a pitfall to be avoided, and how she thinks writers can go beyond preaching to the already converted.*³

ALEXIS WRIGHT: When I started to do the research for *The Swan Book*, it was about 2002 or 2003, quite a long time ago now. The book took six years to write, and it was quite a journey really, quite a difficult book to try to write. Way back in 2002-2003, scientists were already talking about climate change. There was actually quite a lot of talk about climate change within the scientific community, though not many people were taking it seriously. At the time when I thought about writing this book, it seemed like a huge risk to write a book on climate change. There wasn't much written, not many climate change novels I recall at the time, at least in Australia. So I knew I was taking a risk. It would be a difficult book to write at a time when literary interests across the world were definitely not screaming climate change, even though I thought that millions of people across the world had to be asking themselves, "Where are we going? What is the future?" But I also took risks with my last novel, *Carpentaria*, because this was a book that had completely Aboriginal themes, and with all Aboriginal characters, and by an Aboriginal person, written in a country that really didn't want to hear Aboriginal stories (at that time). And the book nearly didn't get published.

What I try to do is to challenge myself to do something that I really think is important, and to do it the way that I want to do it. Perhaps you might say I'm not really thinking much about the audience at the time that I'm writing; otherwise perhaps if I thought about the audience too much, I may not write the book. When the book was published in 2013, it didn't have that instant success of *Carpentaria*, which won a bunch of awards in Australia right after it was published. A lot of people thought *The Swan Book* was very strange. But unlike *Carpentaria*, the literary critics took this book very, very seriously, and some really interesting reviews came out at that time. The book has had a slow journey, unlike *Carpentaria*, but it has gradually grown in its readership and in the way that people write about it. You know, you are studying it in a class in Belgium. It has been translated into Chinese and will be published in China this year, and it's taken quite seriously now.

So I'm not sure if climate change novels have an impact or not. We can only witness what happens to a book once it is published. *The Swan Book* has received serious literary criticism, and continues on

³ In this part of the conversation, Wright responded to questions from Bavo Sablon, Laura Verfaillie, Zenon Andries, and Amelie De Nobebe.

its journey of building readership and interest across the world. I have often been invited to write or speak about major environmental issues such as unprecedented floods and bushfires in Australia, and about the environmental concerns of people that have been subjected to a division of the world that has long been dominated by the rich countries of the Global North. The book continues to be taught in universities across the world and receives incredible attention through the work of academics and students in literary studies, law, and science.

There are a lot more people writing about climate change now. In America there's a hell of a lot of books about climate change, and in a lot of other places as well. I believe it is true what Richard Powers, author of *The Overstory* (2018), said in an interview last year, that stories about climate change will become more commonplace in literature. Before, global warming may not have seemed a reality to include in literature, but it is the reality now.

I'd like to change the world. And you'd like to think that your books will have a great impact. But when I write, and when I think about the books that I'm writing, you can only concentrate on what you're trying to write. In *The Swan Book*, for instance, I was trying to do a lot of things. I was thinking about climate change at the time and what the scientists were saying, and I wanted to try to give a reality to what the science was saying, to portray a reality to the dry facts of scientific knowledge. I wanted to create a story around this, to give it life, to see what could happen in the world and particularly in Australia, what it all meant. I wanted to paint that picture, to bring the facts and the speculation about climate change to life in my fiction. That's what fiction can do: it can bring dry facts to life.

At the same time, I was also concerned with issues affecting the Aboriginal world, which were quite dire at the time, particularly through the deterioration of our relationship with a very conservative government and their policies, which were really taking the advances in self-determination after the destruction created in our world in Australia's colonial history back about thirty years. I was wondering, if climate change denial continued here, alongside really negative policies towards Aboriginal people, how could I imagine what our world would look like in, say, 100 years' time if we continued on this path. That's why I took the book 100 years into the future. I wanted to ask: what would the last Aboriginal person standing be like in 100 years' time? How far would we be willing to go to keep on trying to save ourselves and what we believe in, while being attacked all the time, while our culture is being destroyed? So that was the creation of the story of Oblivia in *The Swan Book*.

But what I'm trying to say is that when you're writing a book, and trying to challenge myself to write something that I think is right and important and worth spending six years on, it's a matter of me and the page in that time. Not so much who will read this book, or will I change the world with this book. I'm trying to address something in a really honest way, and I'm trying to take myself on a journey as well. A literary critic in Australia called the book a curse poem in the vein of *The Iliad*. He talked about the inward migration of Aboriginal people in relation to Homer, and it's true: that is what I was trying to address in *The Swan Book*, the inward migration that we are undergoing as people in our times. It's quite complicated to explain what I'm trying to do, but it was a difficult journey to write this book. Definitely, if I worried about readership or impact, I probably would have given up. I thought my publisher hated it initially when I gave him the manuscript. I worried that he felt he was going to get something like *Carpentaria*. But it's quite different, and it's probably more bleak, though it's got a funny side too, if you've got my sense of humor. So I think that for anyone wanting to write seriously about what they believe in, you can't sit there and think about the impact you're going to have on the world. It's something I learned with *Carpentaria* as well: it will follow its own journey, it will make whatever mark it will make. I tried to do the best I could. And then I let it go. I don't know how to weigh up the impact of a climate change novel or any novel, I think they take their own journey.

In The Swan Book, Wright provides a powerful illustration of what Naomi Klein calls the "sacrifice zone mentality," the mindset underlying the carbon economy that justifies environmental destruction and social injustice.⁴ Unlike much climate change fiction produced by white male Western writers, the novel pointedly highlights the plight of those most vulnerable to global warming and effectively exposes and denounces the various systems of othering that strip them and the land on which they live of value, dignity, and protection. Hence, a second set of questions for Wright revolved around the Aboriginal experience, institutional racism in Australia, and the relationship between writing and activism.⁵

⁴ Naomi Klein, "Let Them Drown: The Violence of Othering in a Warming World," *London Review of Books*, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n11/naomi-klein/let-them-drown>, June 2, 2016.

⁵ The questioners were Emma Caus, Lies Coornaert, Lisa De Weerd, and Aulikki Lefèvre.

ALEXIS WRIGHT: Institutional racism and domination is still here, and it continues to create further harm and injury for those of our people experiencing far warmer and extended summers on their traditional lands and communities in central and northern Australia due to global warming. It will become more difficult to live or survive in these conditions, and as the climate becomes even warmer. And it's always difficult: there is racism in all of its manifestations in different parts of Australia, and in some places it is more prominent than in other places. And there are a lot of good people as well, but it's always a very difficult relationship. We can't manage to get our sovereign rights addressed in a way that we feel is necessary to rebuild our cultures and our communities. A lot of people live in poverty, and it's very difficult for a lot of Aboriginal communities. Up in my own area in the Gulf of Carpentaria, in a place like Doomadgee, or Mornington Island, for instance, these communities were former government control missions established on our traditional lands, and there are a lot of communities like this across Australia, where our people have no real ability to take control of their lives. The federal government's Intervention in the Northern Territory that began in 2007 was a huge backwards step: it took away our people's ability to control their own communities and to move forward to a future that they owned and controlled. I worked for a long time in the Northern Territory with a group of our senior representatives, men and women of their communities across central Australia, calling for Aboriginal self-government. And it didn't go anywhere. So all that is still there, and I don't know when or if it will ever get better. I think quite a number of Aboriginal people have to compromise a lot, just in order to get a small bit of funding for basic services in their communities, and over decades where this has been happening, government has taken away our sense of our own ability to be in control of our futures.

On the other hand, there are groups in Australia, as I address in *The Swan Book*, who fare better, if they work well with the government and if they are seen as assimilated enough. Then there are also those among our people who seek greater independence to build our culture. My Gangalidda countryman Murrandoo Yanner has said: "I'm building my own piece of sovereignty." And they are very successful in shaping their future on their traditional country, they're doing it very well. But Murrandoo Yanner is an exceptional Aboriginal leader, and there are not a lot of people like him across Australia. I think people can learn from him and many other Aboriginal people of great knowledge across the country. I wrote a piece about the bushfires in January for the *New York Times*, and I talked about how Murrandoo has an encyclopedic mind and assimilates knowledge from all over the world into Gangalidda

culture. He doesn't assimilate himself into Western culture, but brings that knowledge into a Gangalidda understanding, to see how it fits into the traditional knowledge and realities of his cultural world.

As for the question of activism, I don't know if I'm an activist or not. I feel that I do what I can do, and I think it's more a way of thinking. And the way I think, the way I understand things, has been shaped by a lot of our people. I grew up with a wonderful grandmother, who looked after me when I was little. She was really important in my life, and I'm not too sure what I would have done without someone as wonderful as she was. She was a great storyteller, she saw the world differently, and that shaped my work. I've worked with our communities and with very senior people in a number of our communities, and I've been really lucky to have their guidance in shaping the way I think and what I needed to do in my writing. It gave me more discipline. And as is the case with a lot of people like myself, when we were young and under their guidance, they gave us a lot of responsibility. They had great expectations of us. But they had strong authority, and we wanted to respect that. And we did, and we worked really hard. So that helped shape a lot of what I was going to do next.

I knew that I would write one day, and as a young woman I was already writing for the older people in the community. They were the bosses who couldn't do that writing themselves and needed the younger people to do their research. And we needed to find out a lot of things; we had a huge responsibility. We were fighting for rights, for land rights, protection of sacred sites, stopping huge multinational mining companies from ripping up our land, fighting for healthcare, for roads, for basic services, for water, for everything, for constitutional recognition. I mean, normal people don't do those things. We had to take on all these things, so we learnt to take on a lot of responsibility to do what we had to do. So they shaped the way we thought.

I feel very lucky. And I think about that in my writing. I think about where that authority comes from, and the powerful sense of how our people are and how we represent, and the powerful way that our people take on the huge things that are confronting us. I write about this in *The Swan Book* and in some of my non-fiction. I don't understand where all the authority comes from in our culture that has survived here for tens of thousands of years. We are the oldest surviving culture in the world living on the oldest continent. Our stories and laws go back tens of thousands of years, and scientists are only now understanding how our stories are connected to events that happened thousands of years ago. We have been able to hold those stories to our traditional lands through laws that tell us how to look after the country and all things that exist on it. When you

meet some of the elders who carry those really strong laws, it's really hard to comprehend the depth of their knowledge. So this is what I'm trying to do—trying to understand, though I don't know if you would call that activism. It is what it is, and so when I write, I'm also trying to understand some of these deep things that come from our culture.