

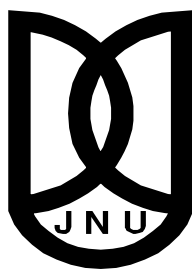
That Deadman Dance and The Swan Book:
An Ecocritical Reading

Dissertation submitted to
Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

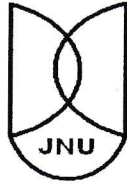
Master of Philosophy

by

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2017



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Date: 21st July 2017

CERTIFICATE


This dissertation titled “*That Deadman Dance and The Swan Book: An Ecocritical Reading*” submitted by **Ms. Priyanka Shivadas**, Centre for English Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy**, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.

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This dissertation titled “*That Deadman Dance and The Swan Book: An Ecocritical Reading*” submitted by me for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy, is an original work and has not been submitted so far in part or in full, for any other degree or diploma of any University or Institution.



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Acknowledgements

How does one grow interested in a subject? Does it happen through the medium of a passionate teacher who taught the subject or something related to it? Does it happen because of an intensified demand of scholarship from the academia in the larger subject area? Does it come calling in the middle of a semester when one is anxiously looking for preferable areas of specialization for the future? In my case, it began with a term-paper I was required to submit for the course ‘Australian Literature’ that I had taken in the monsoon semester of the year 2012, which was also the first semester of my Masters. The paper was a comparative analysis of Australian Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford Ginibi’s *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* (1988) and Maori writer Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People* (1986). From then, that is almost five years ago, I knew I wanted to specialize in Indigenous Literary Studies. So, I should, perhaps, thank (Retd.) Prof. Santosh K. Sareen, who offered the course on Australian Literature, for introducing the subject to his students and happily lending me his copy of *Don’t Take Your Love to Town* during the writing of my term-paper.

I would also like to thank my family for supporting me through thick and thin. Even though they don’t fully understand what is it that I write about when I am writing a dissertation, they have stood by me. Even when I have consciously or unconsciously taken them for granted, they have accepted it as a temporary phase and forgiven me easily. Big thanks to my family! And I know that my debt to them will remain life-long and not just during any particular phase of it.

Most importantly, I would like to thank Dr. Navneet Sethi who—as my supervisor for this dissertation—offered valuable insights and comments, directing my thinking and writing over the past one year. She has also been extremely kind and understanding. She built confidence in me and in this project. I believe she and I share similar concerns regarding the importance of the cultural heritage and knowledge of ethnic and racial minorities all over the world and why it must be researched upon through literary texts. I thank her sincerely for offering her mentorship during the completion of this research project.

Lastly, I would like to say to my friend, Epti, that having her in my life makes me believe good things can and *do* happen. Epti, you are a wonderful friend! Thanks for enquiring almost every single week about the status of my dissertation and my life. Yes, it is true that sometimes I couldn’t differentiate between the two.

Abstract

This dissertation is an analysis of Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010) and Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) from an ecocritical perspective. Kim Scott and Alexis Wright are two of the most prominent contemporary novelists of Australian indigenous heritage. Their novels have won worldwide critical acclaim, with *That Deadman Dance* winning the Miles Franklin Literary Prize in 2011 and *The Swan Book* being shortlisted for the same prize in 2014. At the core of this dissertation is an engagement with the concept of 'animism,' a chief feature characterizing the belief system of the indigenous people of Australia.

In **Chapter One** of this dissertation, I provide an overview of the emergence of ecocriticism and its intersection with indigeneity along with a brief look at the development of ecocriticism in the Australian context. **Chapter Two** traces the conceptual evolution of animism from being a "colonialist slur" used to stigmatize indigenous tribes to being redefined to imply, as Graham Harvey remarks in his *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, "worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectfully engage with other persons."¹ In **Chapter Three**, I illustrate how *That Deadman Dance* and *The Swan Book* manifest the different expressions of new animism. In **Chapter Four**, I explore through the aforementioned texts how an animist conception of the world not only dissolves the strict division between nature/culture—an absolutely necessary step towards a greener future—but also highlights the unique role indigenous people have to play vis-à-vis climate action and environmental sustainability. Finally, in **Chapter Five**, my inquiry focuses on the methodological and conceptual constraints I have experienced during the process of writing this dissertation.

Such a study not only demonstrates the potential of cross-fertilization between literary studies and environmental discourse but is also subterraneously a defence of literary texts in the face of increasing criticism from the outside of being of little practical value in solving the real crises facing the world. Global environmental threat is one of the most pressing concerns of this age, and as my hypothesis stands, indigenous animist realist literary narratives can effectively draw our attention to the scale and permanence of human-induced change on planetary systems while hinting at alternate views of existence that can provide a conceptual foundation for an ethical relationship between the human and non-human elements on earth.

¹ Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. Wakefield Press, 2005. p. xiv.

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Chapter One

Introduction

This research has been motivated by a strong and sincere interest in the area of literature that showcases the unique social and cultural heritage of the indigenous people of Australia. Here in the Introduction, I will be speaking of indigenous people in general before discussing them in specific contexts. Consequently, I will provide an overview of the evolution of environmental literary criticism or ecocriticism—the theoretical framework that has influenced this research—and its intersection with indigeneity. This section will also introduce the concept of ‘animism’ – an integral, even if a less-interrogated, aspect of ecocriticism which I have chosen to be the primary concern of my study. The concluding segment will outline the development of ecocriticism in the Australian context.

Who Are Indigenous People?

The International Labour Organization, in a report published in 2017, estimates indigenous peoples to account for five per cent of the world’s population.² But there is no single universally-accepted definition of indigenous peoples. Moreover, in some places, the term “tribal” has been used instead of indigenous. Spread over 90 countries with approximately 370 million people in number, they are also very diverse from region to region. A practical approach toward defining indigenous peoples has been to consider ‘self-identification’ as the primary criterion for belonging to an indigenous community. Official recognition of certain groups as indigenous peoples or tribes by governments has been also on the basis of objective factors such as if a people had inhabited a country or geographical region during pre-colonial times and/or still retain separate social, cultural, political conditions that distinguish them from other dominant sections of a nation’s population.

Despite the diversity, what brings indigenous peoples all over the world together is that in all areas of human development, whether life expectancy, education or per capita income, they stand to be among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable sections of people in the whole world. In the words of D.J. Kjosavik and N. Shanmugaratnam: “In spite of their historical,

² *Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents Through Decent Work*. International Labour Organization, 2017. p. ix. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_551189.pdf. Accessed 03 March 2017.

cultural, and geographic diversities, communities recognized as indigenous and tribal peoples share common experiences of conquest and resistance in modern times. Their histories are marked by colonization, dispossession, deprivation, and suppression of their collective identities. In the Global South, indigenous and tribal communities have been continuously subjected to top-down, and often violent, processes of post-colonial state and nation building and uneven development and underdevelopment. They were drawn by these processes into complex and contradictory dynamics of assimilation, ethnic differentiation, changing landscapes, class formation, marginalization and exclusion.”³

Kjosavik and Shanmugaratnam have worked extensively in the area of indigenous peoples’ affairs with special reference to the indigenous people of Kerala. They are aware that in the Indian context, the analytical category of indigeneity remains a highly controversial, politically-loaded term. Moreover, the vast majority of the population in the country is in some sense indigenous to the region or claim to be so. Even so, there are constitutionally-recognized indigenous communities in India that distinguish themselves from the mainstream population of the nation. They are commonly referred to as *adivasis*. The term originates from Sanskrit – *adi* means ‘beginning’ and *vasi* means ‘inhabitant’. So the word *adivasi* can be translated into aboriginal. The Indian Constitution uses the designation of Scheduled Tribe to address the *adivasi*. They may also be referred to as tribal people, hill tribes, or *Janajatis*.

In a very rare publication by India International Centre called *Indigenous Vision: People of India, Attitude to the Environment*, it has been stated that “the indigenous are those whose livelihood and lifestyle are tied up with the land in a system of mutual reinforcement—as a moral contract where social living and negotiation with human and non-human, animate beings are basically attuned to the sonic and sensual rhythms of the earth.”⁴ In other words, nature/land/environment figures prominently in the *adivasi* way of life. To this day, we can see this reflected in the traditional customs, mythology, songs and festive celebrations of indigenous tribes. To protect the earth which inclusive of all beings is sacred and the forests that feed them from the destruction wrought by neo-colonial forces, indigenous people of India in different parts of the country have fought very hard. The battle for Niyamgiri by Odisha’s Dongria Kondhs and the historic *adivasi* land struggle of Kerala led by C.K. Janu

³ Kjosavik, Darley Jose and Nadarajah Shanmugaratnam. *Political Economy of Development in India: Indigeneity in Transition in The State Of Kerala*. Routledge, 2015. p. 1.

⁴ Burman, B.K. Roy. “Homage to Earth.” *Indigenous Vision: People of India, Attitude to the Environment*, special issue of *India International Centre Quarterly*, vol. 19, no. 1/2, 1992. p. 3.

have caught much public attention.

Further away in the Pacific region, similar struggles continue to be forged by the indigenous people of Australia. But there are also many differences between the two regions. Unlike India, Australia is a settler-colony. This evokes a very different history and a different present for the indigenous people of Australia. This research is an attempt to gain an understanding of the Australian Aboriginal way of life and way of knowing through a study of contemporary indigenous literature of Australia within the framework of ecocriticism. From the trove of contemporary indigenous literature of Australia, the texts chosen for this study are Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) and Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* (2010).

Emergence of Ecocriticism and Its Intersection with Indigeneity

Ecocriticism as a critical school of thought consists of multiple shades and strands, all of which are complex in themselves. There have been many conceptual turns within the field, prompting Lawrence Buell, who in his *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005) gave us a far-reaching account of how ecocriticism developed, to remark that “the environmental turn in literary studies have been more issue-driven than method or paradigm-driven.”⁵ Before delving into these conceptual shifts, it would be fitting to take a brief look at the institutional formation of the field. As noted by Cheryll Glotfelty—who along with Harold Fromm edited *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, the pioneering anthology of essays exploring the connection between literature and the environment—Ecocriticism consolidated itself as a recognizable field of literary studies in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.⁶

The reasons for such a late arrival in comparison to other postmodern theoretical phenomena are held to be both external and internal. Externally, the theoretical developments of the 1960s drawing on a social constructivist perspective, rendered ‘nature’ very much like gender or identity to be something created and constituted with meaning by human acts. Renowned ecocritic Ursula K. Heise has highlighted this issue: “Under the influence of mostly French philosophies of language, literary critics during this period took a fresh look at the questions of representations, textuality, narrative, identity, subjectivity, and historical discourse from a

⁵ Buell, Lawrence. *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination*. Blackwell Publishing, 2005. p. 11.

⁶ Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. University of Georgia Press, 1996. pp. xvii-viii.

fundamentally sceptical perspective that emphasized the multiple disjunctures between forms of representation and the realities they purported to refer to. In this intellectual context, the notion of nature tended to be approached as a sociocultural construct that had historically often served to legitimize the ideological claims of specific social groups.”⁷

Internally, it was ecocriticism’s own character that in its initial years gave it the status of a subject of much speculation and suspicion, rather than a force to reckon with. Lawrence Buell notes that the “idea of nature” has been in existence from ancient times and in the Christian tradition, the Bible opens with Genesis that contains the “God’s mandate to man to take ‘dominion’ over the creatures of the sea and earth and ‘subdue’ them.”⁸ Without a clear point of origin which in other fields of literary theory is usually marked by the publication of a landmark text, ecocriticism struggled with its own form and function. Also, there was the nagging question of whether ecocriticism was simply nature writing—generally associated with Henry Thoreau and after him, John Muir—repackaged to fit a new, interesting name. Despite such formidable challenges, ecocriticism emerged to its present state largely motivated by a deep fear of an impending global ecological crisis induced by the travails of modernity.

A list of milestones in the institutional formation of ecocriticism has been offered to us by Cheryll Glotfelty. They include the publication in 1985 of Frederick O. Waage’s edited collection *Teaching Environmental Literature: Materials, Methods, Resources*, the founding of *The American Nature Writing Newsletter* in 1989 by Alicia Nitecki, and the establishment of the first academic position on Literature and the Environment in 1990 at the University of Nevada, Reno. At the same time, literary conferences also started investing in investigating further the relationship between nature and culture. The most notable of these efforts were the MLA special session of 1991, organized by Harold Fromm, titled “Ecocriticism: The Greening of Literary Studies,” and the 1992 American Literature Association symposium, chaired by Glen Love, called “American Nature Writing: New Contexts, New Approaches.” In the same year, a new Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) was formed at the annual meeting of the Western Literature Association. By “1993,” Glotfelty concludes, ecocriticism “had emerged as a recognizable critical school.”⁹

⁷ Heise, Ursula K. "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism." *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 2, 2006. p. 505.

⁸ Buell, 2005. p. 2.

⁹ Glotfelty, Cheryll and Harold Fromm, 1996. pp. xvii-viii.

Conceptually, it is perhaps the classification of ecocriticism, inspired by the waves of feminism, into first-wave and second-wave proposed by Lawrence Buell that has been the most cited. He maintains that while there may be some overlaps between the two, the first-wave was “marked by a commitment to preservationist environmentalism, an ecocentric environmental ethics, an emphasis on place-attachment at a local or bioregional level, a prioritization of the self–nature relation, and forms of literary imagination that especially reflect these;” the second-wave began with a greater emphasis on a sociocentric perspective, “attaching special importance to issues of environmental (in)justice, to collective rather than individual experience as a primary historical force and concern in works of imagination, and (increasingly) to the claims of a global or planetary level of environmental belonging.”¹⁰

Greg Garrard, a leading critique in the field of ecocriticism in his Introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014) has expressed that there may be ways better than Buell’s classification to characterize ecocriticism at present. For Garrard, instead of a first- and a second-wave, an effective way to capture the development of the field of ecocriticism is through the various “positions” within the broad spectrum of environmentalism. In *Ecocriticism* (2004), Garrard names these positions as: Cornucopia, Environmentalism, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Social Ecology and Eco-Marxism, and Heideggerian Ecophilosophy. Cornucopia, which is the anti-thesis of environmentalism, refers to the stand taken by those who don’t agree with the threats posed by rampant, unremitting environmental exploitation. They are usually free-market advocates, capitalists, or people with vested interests in economic growth at the expense of the natural environment. They argue that scarcity of resources will not arise as with a rise in population, there would be more number of attempts and more sophisticated technological attempts at finding alternate solutions to emerging resource-related or environmental problems. Environmentalism, which is next on the list of positions, identifies itself as “conventionally defined”¹¹ and not radical in its outlook. From recycling plastic to promoting organic food, the activists who belong to this position are an important group as they represent the mainstream and subscribe mostly to the agential force of governmental machinery and non-governmental organizations to advance their cause.

Of the radical forms of ecocriticism, deep ecology has gained much reputation, especially

¹⁰ Buell, Lawrence and et al. “Literature and Environment.” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, vol. 36, 2011. p. 433.

¹¹ Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004. p.18.

within the academia. The phrase was coined by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, offering a philosophical bedrock to environmentalism. At the centre of this philosophy is the assertion that human and non-human environments are deeply interconnected and are intrinsically valuable and human life cannot perpetuate itself at the expense of non-human life. There are other principles of deep ecology set forth by Naess that dictate that the diversity and richness of life forms must be preserved and the distinction between “life quality” and “standard of living” should be recognized.¹² This philosophy encourages policy overhaul, ideological transformation, and minimal human interference with the non-human world. It attacks Western religion and philosophy which institutes a sharp hierarchy between human beings and the non-human elements on earth, taking this separation to be at the root of the present environmental crisis. Instead, deep ecology is closer to Eastern religions such as Buddhism and pre-modern cultures in terms of its belief system.

Ecofeminism, another radical position, attempts to enjoin two of the most important political and social agendas of the century, namely, gender oppression and environmental degradation. Ecofeminism’s call to end patriarchy (because it is by and large a destructive and oppressive system) is preceded by the dictum that women are in essence nature’s best associate; if there is the denigration of one, there is the denigration of the other. Two other positions have been discussed by Garrard: social ecology coupled with eco-Marxism and Heideggerian ecophilosophy. Social ecology and eco-Marxism are considered explicitly political and take their stand against deep ecology accusing it of unnecessary mystification of the environmental movement. Social ecologists and eco-Marxists deny the possibility of a resource-depleted world resulting from an abuse of nature but argue that any disruption in the availability and access to natural resources is the result of inequality in income distribution and an economy skewed toward the wealthy property-owners. The last position on Garrard’s table is that of Heideggerian ecophilosophy which proposes “to ‘be’ is not just to exist, but to ‘show up’ or be disclosed, which requires human consciousness as the space, or ‘clearing’...”¹³ Here, the discovery of the “clearing” has been likened to the rediscovery of one’s relationship with the Earth, which is not the same thing as the world that we experience ordinarily.

¹² “The Deep Ecology Platform.” *Foundation for Deep Ecology*. <http://www.deepecology.org/platform.htm>. Accessed 08 Aug. 2016.

¹³ Garrard, 2004. p. 31.

Given the scope of this dissertation, the principle focus will stay on a specific area of interest of ecocriticism which is indigeneity. Indigeneity has been of interest to ecocritics right from the beginning and has persisted through the different stages of its development. Whether it was the tendency of first-wave ecocriticism to stress on the spiritual bond between the human world and nature, the philosophical position of Naess that founded deep ecology, or the emphasis on environmental justice brought in by the second-wave of ecocriticism, scholars have found a voice for their call through the specific concerns of indigenous people and indigenous literature. “This keen interest in indigeneity arose from the most fundamental world-historical concern that also gave rise to ecocriticism: disenchantment with the negative environmental consequences of industrial modernity.”¹⁴ Ecocritics were quick to realize that indigenous communities and the wisdom in their culture and traditions could offer alternatives to Western modernity. Of course, the ecocritics who have studied indigenous literature have also cautioned against stereotyping the native as the “ecological Indian.”¹⁵ Instead, the complexity of indigenous knowledge, it has been advised, is to be considered in advance and respected.

One of the characteristics of indigenous knowledge that has been particularly fascinating to ecocritics is “the nondualistic recognition within ‘native’ people’s collective imagination of non-human entities as fellow beings, whether at a sensory or a spiritual level or both,”¹⁶ which comes from their animistic beliefs and it is to this that my study is directed. Animism has been studied by researchers independently as a defining feature of certain ethnic groups and also in concurrence with deep ecology. The online edition of *Webster’s New World College Dictionary* defines animism as “the doctrine that all life is produced by a spiritual force separate from matter”¹⁷ and by the online edition of the *Oxford Dictionary* as “the attribution of a living soul to plants, inanimate objects and natural phenomenon.”¹⁸ In his consideration of animism’s contribution to environmentalism, Graham Harvey, who has edited *Indigenous Religions: A Companion* (2000) and *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism* (2014), and authored *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2005) remarks,

¹⁴ Buell, Lawrence and et al, 2011. p. 428.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 429.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Animism.” Def.1. *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*.

<http://www.yourdictionary.com/animism#websters> Accessed 02 Jan 2017.

¹⁸ “Animism.” Def.1. *English Oxford Living Dictionaries*. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/animism>. Accessed 02 Jan 2017.

animisms are “environmentalist in their intimate location in and conversation with particular places and particular communities of interactive persons.”¹⁹ A characteristic of most indigenous traditions, animism will be introduced here, elaborated upon in the next chapter, and discussed throughout the dissertation as a chief feature of the belief systems of the Australian Aboriginal people in the light of *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance*.

So far, the concept of animism has been of greater interest to anthropological and religious studies than literary departments. The term is believed to be coined by eminent English anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor (1832–1917) who is also the founder of cultural anthropology. As it comes to our notice, Tylor lived and worked in a Europe that had begun experiencing the spread of Enlightenment, the ideology of progress, and was exposed to the theory of evolution. Consequently, for Tylor, animism was not a desirable quality but it was rather an indication of primitiveness among certain cultural groups. It is in his text *Primitive Culture* (1871) that we find his first detailed account on animism.

Nurit Bird-David, who in her 1999 essay “Animism Revisited” re-examines the concept notes, “In Tylor’s view, animism and science ... were found antithetical. Consequently, animistic beliefs featured as ‘wrong’ ideas according to Tylor, who clinched the case by explaining in evolutionary terms (as was the custom at the time) how the primitive came to have this spiritualist sense of his ‘own nature.’ Tylor suggested that dreams of dead relatives and of the primitive himself in distant places had led him to form this self idea. The thesis projected the primitive as delirious as well as perceiving the world like a child.”²⁰ Her own point of view is that animism is a form of relational epistemology. That is to say, using the example that Bird-David herself provides, talking to a tree because you believe as someone who practises animism would believe it has a spirit of its own is to establish a two-way response system. As we realize, this has enormous implications on the nature/culture divide that modernity has instituted and on environmental sustainability but this would be worked out in detail in the following chapters. To conclude the Introduction for this dissertation aptly, it is also necessary that I proceed to provide an overview of what has been discussed in the field of ecocriticism in the Australian context.

¹⁹ Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. Wakefield Press, 2005. p. 185.

²⁰ Bird-David, Nurit. “Animism Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational epistemology.” *Current Anthropology*, vol.40, no.1, 1999. pp. 69-71.

The Australian Context

Branded as ‘the first collection of Australian ecocritical essays devoted to Australian contexts and their writers,’ Cranston and Zeller’s *The Littoral Zone* is seminal in the process of understanding the theoretical beginnings of ecocriticism in the Australian context. The book’s central argument is that Australian literature is particularly amenable to ecocritical analysis because of its deep, multilayered connection with the landscape of the continent. The organization of chapters in this book is according to the different regions in Australia and how each region has informed and influenced Australian writing and not on the basis of certain chosen texts or scholars. Within the text, the issue of Australian indigenous population and its place in ecocriticism has been touched upon in a few essays. Mitchell Rolls in his “The Green Thumb of Appropriation” takes a provocative stand by arguing that it would be absolutely erroneous to propose that the Aboriginal traditional lifestyle could be the antidote to the environmental crisis that Western/European modernity has brought upon humanity and any piece of literature that has been built upon such a philosophy is merely playing on the stereotype that Aborigines exemplify a harmonious relationship with nature. Roth in essence rubbishes “the ecological Aborigine” motif found in literary texts.²¹ He takes two examples to prove that this motif is, in fact, used by writers, Australian and otherwise, sometimes for the sole and self-centred purpose of addressing the problems that Western civilization faces and at other times to fill in the place of the “exotic other” that the West has always needed to define itself against. Even more scathing is his attack that the Aborigines do not, in fact, deserve to be environmental exemplars as they use resources disproportionately and unconsciously and if their practices are found to be not detrimental to nature it is only because of their technological primitiveness. Also, he charges that the Aboriginal worldview cannot take environmental change seriously as any change is supposed to be rebalanced by the cosmos.

We can see that Roth’s refutation of the ecological wisdom of the indigenous people of Australia is damaging at many levels to the Aboriginal cosmology. In the same text, however, it has been acknowledged by scholars such as Kate Rigby the importance of the Aboriginal way of life and what it means to the country they inhabit.²² Moreover, Deborah Bird Rose, a founding figure in the environmental humanities in Australia, in her *Nourishing Terrains*

²¹ Cranston, CA. and Robert Zeller. *The Littoral Zone: Australian Contexts and Their Writers*. Rodopi, 2007. p. 110

²² Ibid. p. 156.

states that she does not think it is the level of technology that is available to the Aborigines that has prevented them from indiscriminately exploiting natural resources. She says, “I believe that Aboriginal people’s methods for managing the continent are not the outcome of an impoverished technology (as the most extreme materialists would insist), but rather are the outcome of ways of knowing and understanding the world which settlers have only just begun to appreciate... There is so much to be learned from Aboriginal people – about land management with fire, about the species of the continent, about relationships among living things, and between living things and the seasonal forces, about how to understand human society as a part of living systems, taking humanity seriously without making it the centre of creation.”²³ It is this longstanding indigenous philosophy and the existence of an ancient history of practice based on this philosophy that Roth cannot wish away with his tactful arguments and obscure illustrations.

Furthermore, there are other complications that the vision of the text itself presents. The concept of bioregional zones, that *The Littoral Zone* is concerned with, was introduced in the 1970s when the environmental movement gathered momentum in America. A group of thinkers referred to as the bioregionalists who shared their apprehensions with the environmentalists sought to imagine places as bioregions in their bid to move away from human-imposed political boundaries. But Libby Robin, who is a historian of science and environment, has claimed in her essay in *The Bioregional Imagination* (2012) that Australia cannot be discussed in terms of bioregions while drawing the meanings of the term from America. She insists that bioregionalism “has a different dominant meaning in Australia”²⁴ from that of the movement in the United States. Robin quotes Doug Aberley who defined bioregionalism of the United States as a response “to the challenge of reconnecting socially-just human cultures in a sustainable manner to the region-scale ecosystems in which they are irrevocably embedded.”²⁵ Robin argues that in Australia “it is seldom about human cultures at all, socially just or otherwise. It is a government word.”²⁶ Also, in most parts of Australia excluding the temperate zones along the east and the west coast where all the major cities are located, seasons are not cyclical. In such difficult landscapes, especially the deserts, the

²³ Rose, Deborah Bird. *Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness*. Australian Heritage Commission, 1996. p. 4.

²⁴ Lynch, Tom and et al. *The Bioregional Imagination: Literature, Ecology, and Place*. University of Georgia Press, 2012. p. 282.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

presence of nomadic lifestyle which was common and is still found among traditional Aboriginal communities is not considered by bioregionalists. In the face of so many real and conceptual challenges that Australia presents to environmental thinkers, Libby Robin asserts that new readings have to emerge. This dissertation proposes to produce a fresh, enchanting reading by taking up animism as the precise point of interconnection between environmental literary studies, the special needs of the Australian context, and the Australian indigenous people.

The following chapter of the dissertation will focus on the conceptual evolution of animism. The scholarly contributions of anthropologists E.B. Tylor to Graham Harvey and others will be consulted in this regard. In the third chapter, I will introduce *That Deadman Dance* and *The Swan Book* after providing necessary information on the authors of the novels and their general body of works. The main objective of this chapter will be to address the ways in which *That Deadman Dance* and *The Swan Book* bring in the possibilities of narrative representation inherent in the animist conception of the world. The fourth chapter will with the help of the two novels showcase how animism problematizes the hyperseparation between nature and culture – a divide that has enabled widespread destruction of the environment. It will also foreground the unique position of the indigenous people in the environmental discourse. The last chapter will sum up the study with a brief discussion on the methodological and conceptual constraints I have experienced during the research process. It will also address the potential of a study such as this.

Chapter Two

Animism and Environmental Ethos of the Australian Aboriginal People

What is animism? Since the term has been understood in different, sometimes dissimilar ways, the answer depends on the source of information one is referring to. More recently, scholars who are invested in radical forms of ecology have paid much attention to animism, stressing on its (more or less) egalitarian method of associating with the non-human environment. Their research has taken them into indigenous communities located in various parts of the world, the Australian Aboriginal community being one of them. This chapter will begin with a brief look into the evolution of the study and usage of animism in scholarly contexts and then move onto outline how it has been enacted and experienced by the Australian Aboriginal people and what it tells us about the environmental ethos practised by them.

Theories on Animism

The concept of animism was, as mentioned in the Introduction, established by E.B. Tylor. He had borrowed the term from, George Stahl, a German physician and chemist better known for his theory of phlogiston.²⁷ Stahl was also engaged in the study of vitalism, a concept that tried to explain life in terms of a vital force that was absent in nonliving matter. Stahl, called it “anima.” However, this was not taken up by many scientists and any discussion around it gradually declined. The most important contribution seems to have emerged from Tylor’s adoption of the term to describe his own observations related to primitive cultures.²⁸ Tylor was an evolutionist. As a cultural anthropologist, he tried to classify culture, too, into different stages of development. His most important work is the 1871 book *Primitive Culture*, published in two volumes, the second of which is where he elaborates upon animism. In the first volume of the text, he states his objective behind composing such a massive project as:

CULTURE or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other

²⁷ Phlogiston, according to Stahl, was the component that was released when a substance burned and if a substance such as wood was more combustible than another, like metal, for example, it meant that the former contained more phlogiston.

²⁸ Here, I would like to add that the term ‘primitive’ at present is most often considered derogatory when used to refer to certain ethnic groups or tribal populations. It is to be noted that when the term is used in this dissertation, it is used purely because it is so in the source texts.

capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes; while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future. To the investigation of these two great principles in several departments of ethnography, with especial consideration of the civilization of the lower tribes as related to the civilization of the higher nations, the present volumes are devoted.²⁹

Tylor, clearly, starts with an already-established hierarchical system with nations on a superior ground and tribes on a much lower plane. Interestingly, he has in mind not just a hierarchical system but also a social evolutionary scale that progresses from savagery to civilization. Using his methods of comparative and historical ethnography, he sets up an argument that after a careful examination of all aspects of human culture appeals to the science of ethnography to “expose the remains of crude old culture which have passed into harmful superstition, and to mark these out for destruction.”³⁰ In this exercise, he says, “The historian and the ethnographer must be called upon to show the hereditary standing of each opinion and practice, and their enquiry must go back as far as antiquity or savagery can show a vestige, for there seems no human thought so primitive as to have lost its bearing on our own thought, nor so ancient as to have broken its connexion with our own life.”³¹ Evidently, Tylor’s sole interest in studying, to use his term, the primitive cultures is to reform the world by ridding itself of that which might have made sense to the savages but does not fit in the modern intellectual and moral system. But what of the difference that exists between the different systems – the modern and the primitive? Can he study the latter while inhabiting the former? Tylor is aware of these differences and the resulting drawbacks but asserts confidently that “in examining the culture of the lower races, far from having at command the measured arithmetical facts of modern statistics, we may have to judge of the condition of tribes from the imperfect accounts supplied by travellers or missionaries, or even to reason

²⁹ Tylor, E.B. *Primitive Culture*. Vol. 1. John Murray, 1871. p. 1.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 410.

³¹ *Ibid.* p. 409.

upon relics of pre-historic races of whose very names and languages we are hopelessly ignorant.”³² We can see that his plan to rely on data that is firstly the result of colonial expeditions and secondly, “imperfect” as he himself admits it to be, is in itself incompatible with the spirit of scientific enquiry that he is utterly devoted to. Nevertheless, he carries on assuring his readers of the quality and viability of his sources.

The second volume which is subtitled *Religion in Primitive Culture* is on animism. Tylor saw animism to be the earliest form religion assumed and therefore at the core of religion; it was characterized by “the belief in Spiritual Beings”³³ and practised among indigenous populations. He does try to account for the native populations that were not known at his time and of those whose conditions were relatively obscure by stating that so far as he could gather from the immense amount of evidence he had collected, “the belief in spiritual beings appear[ed] among all low races”³⁴ that were brought into contact with the Western world, and that this belief had been transmitted, albeit with modifications, all the way to the high modern culture. He explains:

Animism is, in fact, the groundwork of the Philosophy of Religion, from that of savages up to that of civilized men. ... It is habitually found that the theory of Animism is divided into two great dogmas, forming parts of one consistent doctrine; first, concerning souls of individual creatures, capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body; second, concerning other spirits, upward to the rank of powerful deities. ... Thus Animism, in its full development, includes the belief in souls and in a future state, in controlling deities and subordinate spirits, these doctrines practically resulting in some kind of active worship.”³⁵

After introducing the theory of animism in the above manner, Tylor goes on to survey the different forms taken by animism among people found in different regions as far flung as Africa and Asia as long as he thought he had sufficient information to comment upon them. In his analysis he is careful to assert that animism was a particular stage in the development of religious system and it had its own logic as assumed by those who belonged to animistic cultures. The trouble, according to him, was that they were not exposed to the method of

³² Ibid .p. 10.

³³ Ibid. p. 424.

³⁴ Ibid. p. 425.

³⁵ Ibid. pp. 426-27.

rationality and science, which was available only to the ‘civilized’ people of the modern world.

These views of Tylor were then propagated and many scholars, especially of anthropology identified animism with primitiveness, low intellect, irrationality and savagery. Much later, when anthropologists revisited Tylor’s study, they referred to it as old animism, by way of ushering in the concept of new animism. New animism is animism reinterpreted and redefined to become “a self-designation among some indigenous and nature-venerating religionists, many of whom are well aware that it can carry negative associations but reject these in favour of its more positive associations.”³⁶ Of the academics who have produced scholarly work on the subject of new animism, the most prominent are Graham Harvey, Nurit Bird-David, Val Plumwood, and Deborah Bird Rose. Harvey’s *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (2005) is in many ways an introductory reader on this subject, especially with the first chapter which serves as an honest, if not extensive, attempt to showcase the history of the term by drawing our attention to how its meanings have changed over a period of centuries.

In Harvey’s account, David Hume, Thomas Huxley, Sigmund Freud, Stewart Guthrie among other scholars have had significant things to say about animism or in relation to it. Hume’s *A Natural History of Religion* (1757), though it does not contain the term ‘animism’, made note of a particular tendency among human beings to “attribute to the world around them signs of human-likeness.”³⁷ Hume noted that in poetry, this might give forth to beautiful expressions but as religion and philosophy, it signalled ignorance. This tendency bears resemblance to Freud’s theory of psychological projection wherein one projects onto others one’s own unconscious attributes majorly as a move of self-defence and to some extent also to align the world with one’s own internal biases. Likewise, Guthrie also thought of animism and anthropomorphism, which according to him is the former’s subset, to be a survival mechanism. It is a strategy with which human beings familiarize themselves to the strange or the unknown so that in the case of an attack, one does not feel completely out of one’s wits. Huxley, on the other hand, joined the ranks of those who ridiculed animist beliefs, placing his confidence in modern science considered to be essentially antagonistic to animism.

³⁶ Harvey, 2005. p. 3.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 4.

To Harvey, the figures who played a greater role in the eventual arrival of new animism were Emile Durkheim and Irving Hallowell. In fact, Durkheim's concept of 'totemism' and Hallowell's 'other-than-human persons' are crucial turning points in the understanding of indigenous cultures that originated from the West. Durkheim was a pioneering French sociologist who was deeply preoccupied with social structures such as the family. In 1895, after the publication of *The Division of Labour in Society* in which he separated social organizations into two types where one is based on "mechanical solidarity"³⁸ (for example, the clan-system) and the other on division of labour (such as in an industrialist, capitalistic system), it struck him how crucial a role religion played in the organization of social life.

When Durkheim began, inspired by John McLennan and William Robertson Smith who formulated the concept of totemism and elaborated upon it respectively, he wanted to go back to the beginning or the origin of religion, which he located in clan totemism. His central assertions on this subject have been summed up as follows:

Durkheim's thesis (further developed in his *Elementary Forms*) was that the structural type of a society determined the nature and function of the social units. The simplest forms of society were made up of undifferentiated and repetitive units, which he called clans. These units could be organized internally in many ways. They might be consanguineal or simply local groups. But in any case they shared one fundamental need: the need for an emblem. This was the origin of the totem. At first it was a badge of clan identity. Rites and beliefs associated with the totem then developed. The religious features of totemism – the rituals, the prohibitions, the beliefs – followed from the identification of the social unit, the clan, with an emblem, the totem.³⁹

When totemism is revisited by Harvey much later, he adds that it is a "sociological structure in which animist persons (human and other-than-human) meaningfully, respectfully, morally and intimately engage with one another."⁴⁰ According to this view, totemism and animism are both ways of relating, with the latter underwriting and encompassing the other and I would support this view.⁴¹ Durkheim in his work had familiarized himself well with the

³⁸ Kuper, Adam. "Durkheim's Theory of Primitive Kinship." *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1985, p. 229.

³⁹ Ibid. p. 233.

⁴⁰ Harvey, 2005. p. 168.

⁴¹ For a different view, see Ingold, Tim. *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge, 2000. p. 112. Ingold's contention is that in totemism, the land is the source of all vital energy because it contains the essence and creative powers of the great ancestral beings whose creation the land

Australian totemic system. His research dictated that “Australian totemism reveals all the traits which, in higher form, reappear in the world’s great religions: it has a social aspect, clan totemism, and an individual aspect, the belief in guardian spirits; it possesses a cosmogony; it involves prayer and sacrifice and a belief in the soul.”⁴² More recently, Deborah Bird Rose has gone further in the ethnographical study of Australian Aboriginal culture, providing us with valuable insights on Australian totemism. Before deliberating on the case of Australia in detail, one must also mention the scholarly contribution of American anthropologist Irving Hallowell who has been a foundational figure in the conceptualization of new animism.

Hallowell’s research is situated mainly in southern central Canada on the indigenous people of Ojibwa, the results of which are summarized in “Ojibwa Ontology, Behavior and World View.” In the essay, Hallowell begins by clarifying the meaning of the term ‘world view.’ He quotes Robert Redfield who said, “*World view* differs from culture, ethos, mode of thought, and national character. It is the picture the members of a society have of the properties and characters upon their stage of action. While ‘national character’ refers to the way these people look to the outsider looking in on them, ‘world view’ refers to the way the world looks to that people looking out. Of all that is connoted by ‘culture,’ ‘world view’ attends especially to the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else.”⁴³ The next step for Hallowell is to find a key to interpret the Ojibwa world view and as he discovers, this happens to be “the action of persons.”⁴⁴ The key point here is that unlike in Western culture, to the Ojibwa, persons don’t mean only human beings.

To illustrate his point, Hallowell gives the example of how “grandfathers” to the Ojibwa can also be used in reference to spiritual beings, particularly when used as “our grandfathers”.⁴⁵ The matter is further complicated as a grandfather, even when human, need not be related by blood to a child but can perform very important roles such as naming the child; this name that has been assigned is special as it has reference to a dream that the human grandfather has had

is but in animism, “Vital force, far from being petrified in a solid medium, is free-flowing like the wind, and it is on its uninterrupted circulation that the continuity of the living world depends.”

⁴² Goldenweider, A.A. “Religion and Society: A Critique of Émile Durkheim’s Theory of the Origin and Nature of Religion.” *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, vol. 14, no. 5, 1917. p. 115.

⁴³ Hallowell, Alfred Irving. “Ojibwa Ontology, Behaviour and World View.” *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*. Columbia University Press, 1960. p. 2.

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4os7g99Xa8BYTUyMDYwMTgtZGRhNC00MTY5LTlkOGUtZWUzMjE0ZjJmNGVk/view>. Accessed 07 Jan. 2017.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 3.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 4.

in which he received blessings from the other-than-human grandfather. Throughout the child's life, the help of grandfathers—both human and other-than-human—are held indispensable but it is only possible to enter into direct social-interaction with the other-than-human grandfather after sexual maturity. So “all Ojibwa boys, in aboriginal days, were motivated to undergo the so-called ‘puberty fast’ or ‘dreaming’ experience. ... It was the opportunity of a lifetime. Every special aptitude, all a man's subsequent successes and the explanation of many of his failures, hinged upon the help of the ‘guardian spirits’ he obtained at this time, rather than upon his own native endowments or the help of his fellow *anicindbek*.”⁴⁶ *Anicindbek* is the Ojibwa term for human beings.

Furthering his examination into the cognitive orientation of the Ojibwa, Hallowell points to how the categories of animate and inanimate reflect linguistically in the Ojibwa. At the outset, he indicates that the categorization seems random very much like the arbitrary association of gender (masculine/feminine/neutral) with nouns in certain Indo-European languages. For example, just as rivers are assigned masculine gender in German (der Mississippi), in the Ojibwa language, the natural phenomenon of thunder or the physical object of stone is classified animate. This classification is however deeply embedded in the psyche of the Ojibwa people. Hallowell in his attempt to understand the basis of such a linguistic classification reaches a particularly fascinating insight with the help of evidence gathered through several native informants that only some stones and *not* all are treated as animate. Hallowell explains, “the Ojibwa do not perceive stones, in general, as animate, any more than we do. The crucial test is experience. Is there any personal testimony available?”⁴⁷ And there were testimonies of native informants that Hallowell could record who had seen stones move on their own volition and listened to them talk or open their mouths, especially during ritualistic ceremonies.

Additionally, Ojibwa mythology and dreaming experiences are also crucial indicators of how the Ojibwa orient themselves to the world. The characters in myths “are regarded as living entities who have existed from time immemorial. ...Whether human or animal in form or name, the major characters in the myths behave like people, though many of their activities are depicted in a spatio-temporal framework of cosmic, rather than mundane, dimensions. There is ‘social interaction’ among them and between them and *anicindbek*.”⁴⁸ In dreaming

⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 19.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid. p. 7.

experiences, too, those who appear interact with the Ojibwa and sometimes, the dream visitors are other-than-human grandfathers who offer valuable advice or powerful blessings. But there is a taboo against the retelling of dreaming experiences except under special circumstances and also against the narration of myths unseasonably.

One required to comment on Hallowell's study can quickly identify several conceptual as well as methodological issues with it. For example, there has been very little discussion about the experience of Ojibwa women. Also, as Hallowell himself admits most of his native informants were "acculturated"⁴⁹ and with the existence of taboos on the disclosure of certain aspects of the lives and beliefs of the Ojibwa, the data that was available to Hallowell for his study could not be considered thorough or complete. However, the study is significant because of what it implies about the nature of relations that the Ojibwa conscientiously maintains amongst each other and with the other-than-human. To the Ojibwa, sharing is considered critical for a balance to be sustained in the cosmos and sharing takes places across kinds of persons.⁵⁰ Each person feels obligated to maintain such a system. Similar principles of kinship, mutuality, and recognition of sentience in the non-human are found among the indigenous tribes of Australia. Hallowell's research into the other-than-human through the Ojibwa, even with its failings, is significant precisely because it was one of the firsts to look at indigenous lifeways without denigrating them and by leaving aside Western subjectivity as much as possible. It was in this regard an inspiration for all those who followed, mainly the new animists.

Before proceeding any further, perhaps it would be wise to settle on one definitive and principal way of describing animism. Keeping in mind the critical work Harvey has produced in updating and refining the study of animism, his description of (new) animism as that which "names worldviews and lifeways in which people seek to know how they might respectfully and properly engage with other persons"⁵¹ and animists as those "who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others"⁵² emerges as the most appropriate. Henceforth, this description would remain operational when animism is being discussed in the context of Aboriginal Australia.

⁴⁹ Ibid. p. 12.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 20.

⁵¹ Harvey, 2005. p. xiv.

⁵² Ibid. p. xi.

Australian Aboriginal Animism and Environmental Ethos

In Australia, indigenous people are spread out according to the different geographical regions of the continent and a tribe may be identified by the region or the linguistic group to which they belong. General statements on and about all Australian Aboriginal tribes are ideally not to be made but specificity is also not possible in this scenario due to the bewildering diversity of the community and more importantly, because the need here is to communicate some common aspects, practices, and beliefs of the Aboriginal people of Australia at the centre of which is an active engagement with the concept of animism.

The foremost principle in the Aboriginal worldview is that everything draws its essence from the land and the land is never to be mistaken for inert matter composed of minerals and decomposing organic life; Aboriginal land is sentient. The Aboriginal people prefer to address their land as ‘country’. As Deborah Bird Rose explains:

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country, and long for country. People say that country knows, hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. Country is not a generalised or undifferentiated type of place, such as one might indicate with terms like ‘spending a day in the country’ or ‘going up the country’. Rather, country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life. Because of this richness, country is home, and peace; nourishment for body, mind, and spirit; heart’s ease.⁵³

Rose’s account comes after long years of engagement and discussion with Aboriginal people in addition to anthropological and historical research. In a later publication, Rose discusses “indigenous animism” in terms of certain aspects of the Aboriginal way of life, namely “attentive presence, knowledge and gratitude.”⁵⁴ Rose was inspired by eminent environmental philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood who worked with her at the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, Australian National University. Plumwood had made it her life’s mission to expose the dangerous fallacy behind the hyperseparation of nature/culture and denounce anthropocentrism which is the cause and the result of such a

⁵³ Rose, 1996. p. 7.

⁵⁴ Rose, Deborah Bird. “Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World.” *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 3, 2013. p. 94.

division. After Plumwood's death, Rose wanted to build on her thought and continue her mission.

In "Val Plumwood's Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World," Rose recounts the event in which Plumwood was attacked, almost killed and eaten by a crocodile. The accident occurred when Plumwood was canoeing down the East Alligator Lagoon at Kakadu National Park in the Northern Territory of Australia. Much after the incident, Plumwood wrote down her own views in a thought-provoking essay called "Being Prey." In the essay, Plumwood confesses that it took her almost a decade to "repossess" her story, as immediately afterwards she found herself caught in the deadly grip of "the cultural drive to represent [the attack] in terms of the masculinist monster myth: the master narrative."⁵⁵ As played out by the media in particular, she writes, "The imposition of the master narrative occurred in several ways: in the exaggeration of the crocodile's size, in portraying the encounter as a heroic wrestling match, and especially in its sexualizing."⁵⁶ This happened even as Plumwood felt that *her* narrative was something else altogether.

In the moment of near-death, Plumwood had understood that she—a human being—was to a crocodile its prey, its food whereas the entire "human supremacist culture of the West"⁵⁷ has been based on denying the reality that humans are part of the food chain and thereby part of a cycle of reciprocity that links the natural world with the cultural sphere of the human. To make her point clear, she explains how enraged human beings feel when there is an attack on them by animals even as factories are setup to raise animals only for human consumption. By refusing to be part of the food chain, human beings have assumed the role of the master, the one with the mind, the one that can think, communicate, and with the agency to act wilfully. Her encounter with the crocodile, however, turned this notion on its head—she saw how the human became the prey and this became a humbling, insightful experience for her. Now, suppose there was no perceived tension between nature and culture and humans were not attributed a place separate and superior from the non-human, would there have been such a lack of prior understanding of the latter on the former's part?

⁵⁵ Plumwood, Val. "Surviving a Crocodile Attack." *Utne Reader*. July & Aug. 2000. <http://www.utne.com/arts/being-prey>. Accessed 10 Jan. 2017.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

Indigenous animism recognizes that there is no nature/culture divide and the whole Aboriginal country is sentient, relational, and interactive. Deborah Bird Rose tells us of how the non-human world is always actively paying attention and communicating in their own ways. She speaks of tellers “who provide information: they give news of what is happening in the world.”⁵⁸ She gives a few examples from local knowledge of the natives: “when the march flies bite, the crocodiles are laying their eggs or when the fireflies come, the conkerberries (*Carissa lanceolata*) are ripe.”⁵⁹ She stresses that all these tellings are languages of the non-human kind. In an animist understanding of the world, human beings could never afford not to listen to the voices and the messages of the non-human world. Plumwood, too, in “Being Prey” points out that she had been warned by rocks before she was attacked by the crocodile. She recalls how her attention was drawn to a strange, striking rock formation of “a single large rock balanced precariously on a much smaller one.”⁶⁰ Intuitively, she knew that she was not safe. The rocks brought to her mind two things: one that she had not sought the advice of the indigenous Gagadgu owners of Kakadu before she set out canoeing and secondly, standing in a lagoon known to be infested with predatory saltwater crocodiles, she felt how precarious human life, including hers, was, after all. Even long after the attack she continued to feel that the rock formation was trying to convey a message to her which she sensed but could not act upon. Plumwood concludes: “I learned many lessons from the event, one of which is to know better when to turn back and to be more open to the sorts of warnings I had ignored that day. As on the day itself, so even more to me now, the telos of these events lies in the strange rock formation, which symbolized so well the lessons about the vulnerability of humankind I had to learn, lessons largely lost to the technological culture that now dominates the earth.”⁶¹

Furthermore, in the Aboriginal worldview, the human and the non-human are related through strong kinship ties; this system is encoded in the Aboriginal Law made by the Dreaming. According to the most prevalent sense of the word, the Dreaming is that which encompasses all, from which everything came into being and continues to. It refers to “ongoing creation.”⁶² In the words of W.E. H. Stanner, the anthropologist who was a key figure in correcting some of the misguided perceptions of the Australian society with regard to the indigenous

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 103.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Plumwood, 2000.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Rose, 1996. p. 26.

population and the author of the famous text *White Man Got No Dreaming*: “A central meaning of The Dreaming is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither ‘time’ nor ‘history’ as we understand them is involved in this meaning. ... We should be very wrong to try to read into it the idea of a Golden Age, or a Garden of Eden, though it was an age of Heroes, when the ancestors did marvellous things that men can no longer do.”⁶³ Clearly, it is a difficult term for outsiders of the Aboriginal community to comprehend. A Yanyuwa man from the Gulf of Carpentaria, Mussolini Harvey, tries to explain and is worthy of being quoted at length:

White people ask us all the time, what is Dreaming? This is a hard question because Dreaming is a really big thing for Aboriginal people. In our language, Yanyuwa, we call the Dreaming Yijan. The Dreamings made our Law or narnu-Yuwa. This Law is the way we live, our rules. This Law is our ceremonies, our songs, our stories; all of these things came from the Dreaming. One thing that I can tell you though is that our Law is not like European Law which is always changing - new government, new laws; but our Law cannot change, we did not make it. The Law was made by the Dreamings many, many years ago and given to our ancestors and they gave it to us.

The Dreamings are our ancestors, no matter if they are fish, birds, men, women, animals, wind or rain. It was these Dreamings that made our Law. All things in our country have Law, they have ceremony and song, and they have people who are related to them ...

The Dreamings named all of the country and the sea as they travelled, they named everything that they saw. As the Dreamings travelled they put spirit children over the country, we call these spirit children ardirri. It is because of these spirit children that we are born, the spirit children are on the country, and we are born from the country.

In our ceremonies we wear marks on our bodies, they come from the Dreaming too, we carry the design that the Dreamings gave to us. When we wear that Dreaming mark we are carrying the country, we are keeping the Dreaming held up, we are keeping the country and the Dreaming alive. That is the most important thing, we have to keep up the country, the Dreamings, our Law, our people, it can't change. Our Law

⁶³ Stanner, W.E.H. *White Man Got No Dreaming*. Australian National University Press, 1979. pp. 23-24.

*has been handed on from generation to generation and it is our job to keep it going, to keep it safe.*⁶⁴

Since the Dreaming and the Law is considered significant to the point of being sacred and inviolable, a form of intense, powerful connection is formed between all creations. There is an understanding that no one's survival takes precedence over someone else's because all beings are socially and spiritually related. Stanner recalls that in one of the tribes that he studied, "all women, without exception, call particular birds or trees by the same kinship terms which they apply to actual relatives. In the same way, all men without exception use comparable terms for a different set of trees or birds."⁶⁵ Also, Dreaming figures such as the kangaroo or emu are identified as the common ancestor of totemic clans. The totems not only represent clans but become sites of intersection between its human members and non-human members. Thus there are Emu clans, Kangaroo clans, and so on. The Kangaroo people of a tribe are also connected to others of their totem in other tribes present all across Australia, wherever kangaroos can be found. It is the responsibility of a clan to direct its energy toward sustaining its totemic species, especially through ritualistic acts. There is also interdependence between the clans. As Deborah Bird Rose illustrates with the help of the Red Kangaroo totem:

The study of the ecological relevance of totemism seriously began with Newsome's 1980 study of the Dreaming track of the red kangaroo in Central Australia. This Dreaming track traverses some of the toughest desert country in the world, and the sacred sites coincide with the most favoured areas for kangaroos. In particular, there is a strong correlation between Red Kangaroo Dreaming sites, and the permanent waters which are the sources of fresh herbage during drought. The red kangaroo relies on fresh green herbage; after rains the animals forage widely, but in drought they must rely on restricted areas. As the sites are protected, so too are the kangaroos at these sites. These are places to which living things retreat during periods of stress, and from which they expand outward again during periods of plenty. Clearly, opportunistic predations at these sites, especially during periods of stress when humans, too, are stressed would have long-term negative effects on red kangaroos and other species.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Rose, 1996. p. 27.

⁶⁵ Stanner, 1979. p. 34.

⁶⁶ Rose, 1996. p. 12.

All of the above translates into ecological sustainability. Moreover, the preservation of an overall sense of stability or in grander terms, the cosmological balance which Stanner sums up as “a metaphysical emphasis on abidingness”⁶⁷ is of the highest importance to the Australian Aboriginal people. The sustenance of this stability is dependent on a strict adherence to a pre-conceived way of life or several recurring patterns set by the ancestors. This also means that apart from minor clashes, large-scale wars over land or resources risking a breakdown of these ancient patterns are rarely encouraged. Stanner explains further that in the Aboriginal world, unlike among African tribes or Polynesian groups, “institutionalized chieftanship” is not practiced, eliminating possibilities of hostility between people for power.⁶⁸ What he observed dictates that there is discrimination, especially against young men in favour of older men who are more experienced and thought to be wiser and more so against women but generally notions of generosity, reciprocity, and equity prevail and are preferred over self-interest and greed. His observations also dictate that even though Aboriginal people practice a nomadic lifestyle, even as they left a place, they did not irreversibly alter it. According to Stanner, “The whole ecological principle of their life might be summed up in the Baconian aphorism—*natura non vincitur nisi parendo*: ‘nature is not to be conquered except by obeying.’”⁶⁹

To summarize this chapter, the Australian Aboriginal belief system works itself out predominantly through the exercise of kinship that unifies the human sphere of existence and the natural world and unwavering faith in a sentient interactive country, both of which rests on an animistic conception of the world; it also tells us volumes about the environmental ethos practised by them. My research is aimed at discovering how active animism, which as the anthropological studies mentioned so far show to be ingrained in the Australian worldview, reflects in literary texts and what this means for the environment. The next chapter would serve as a critical appraisal of *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* when considered essentially as animist realist texts. Primarily, it would deal with the following question: How do the novels bring in the possibilities of narrative representation inherent in the animist conception of the world?

⁶⁷ Stanner, 1979. p. 38.

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 39.

⁶⁹ Ibid. p. 32.

Chapter Three

Animism in *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance*

The previous chapter, introducing the various theories on animism and documenting the turning points in its evolution, referred largely to the works of anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers and/or religious studies scholars. Their research on animism depended on the observed sociocultural practices of their subject of study. Scholars of literature, acting along similar lines, extended the discussion on animism to fictional writing with Harry Garuba being one of the first to do so. In his article, “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture and Society,” he introduces the term “animist realism” while giving us examples of its manifestation in various novels. Garuba begins his article by inviting our attention to the “larger-than-life statue of Sango, the Yoruba god of lightning, clad in his traditional outfit”⁷⁰ installed at the headquarters of the National Electric Power Authority in Nigeria.

The statue, according to Garuba, plays an important function in the society. He points out how, “the Sango statue was particularly meaningful to the new ‘educated’ leaders who were supposedly alienated from their traditions by their Western education. For them, Sango was not only a figure from the historical past; he was more importantly a symbol of the meeting point between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity.’ He was a mythological figure whose incipient scientific consciousness was demonstrated in his ability to harness the electrical charges of lightning to serve his own sometimes undisclosed purposes.”⁷¹ This kind of commingling of elements which are generally considered imports of European modernity with the broader rubric of African culture has been much commented upon by social scientists interested in postindependence Africa. As Garuba remarks, “This practice which has been referred to as ‘re-traditionalization of Africa,’ can be observed in different aspects of life on the continent from the introduction of praise singers into the protocols for the inauguration of Presidents Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki in South Africa to the induction of ‘ancestor worship’ into some African churches.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Garuba, Harry. “Explorations in Animist Materialism: Notes on Reading/Writing African Literature, Culture, Society.” *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no.2, 2003. p. 261.

⁷¹ Ibid. p. 262.

⁷² Ibid. p. 264.

According to Garuba, the existence of this practice throughout Africa is a result of an underlying factor that hadn't been recognized till then; to bring this factor to light is, in fact, the objective of his article. Garuba states, "I argue that the colonization, so to speak, of technology and the instruments and ideologies of the modern world by traditional culture is not wholly the result of a conscious nationalistic appropriation (as the Sango story suggests), nor is it entirely a consequence of the dialectic of 'residuality' and 'emergence' (in the manner in which Raymond Williams discusses it in *Marxism and Literature*). It is, at a much deeper level, a manifestation of an *animist unconscious*, which operates through a process that involves what I describe as a *continual re-enchantment of the world*."⁷³ The phrase—continual re-enchantment of the world—Garuba doesn't fail to remind us, takes us back to the expression "disenchantment of the world" which Max Weber had used to refer to "the historical process by which the natural world and all areas of human experience become experienced and understood as less mysterious; defined, at least in principle, as knowable, predictable and manipulable by humans; conquered by and incorporated into the interpretive schema of science and rational government."⁷⁴ By re-enchantment then Garuba is implying the "obverse of the process that Weber describes, a process whereby 'magical elements of thought' are not displaced but, on the contrary, continually assimilate new developments in science, technology, and the organization of the world within a basically 'magical' worldview."⁷⁵ This said, Garuba proceeds to offer a detailed definition of animism. Considering the complicated evolutionary history of the concept and the contextual variations it has been through, he says:

Perhaps the single, most important characteristic of animist thought—in contrast to major monotheistic religions—is its almost total refusal to countenance unlocalized, unembodied, unphysicalized gods and spirits. Animism is often simply seen as belief in objects such as stones or trees or rivers for the simple reason that animist gods and spirits are embodied in objects: the objects are the physical and material manifestation of the gods and spirits. Instead of erecting graven images to symbolize the spiritual being, animist thought spiritualizes the object world, thereby giving the spirit a local habitation. Within the phenomenal world, nature and its objects are endowed with a spiritual life both simultaneous and coterminous with their natural properties. The

⁷³ Ibid. p. 265.

⁷⁴ Jenkins, Richard. "Disenchantment, Enchantment and re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium." *Max Weber Studies*, vol. 1, 2000. p. 12.

⁷⁵ Garuba, 2003. p. 267.

objects thus acquire a social and spiritual meaning within the culture far in excess of their natural properties and values. Rivers, for example, become not only natural sources of water but are prized for various other reasons.”⁷⁶

After offering such an incisive description of animism, Garuba devotes the rest of his article to discussions on literature which have entrenched in them an animistic mode of thought. Linearity and stability in the narrative form and content seem to be the markers that are notably absent from such literature. Garuba points out that writers from Africa, Latin America, and India have been actively deploying literary devices that are born out of an animist unconscious in their creative work. He notes, “There can be little or no doubt that the animist worldview presents writers such as Ben Okri, García Márquez, and Rushdie with the techniques and strategies to construct a narrative universe in which transpositions and transgressions of boundaries and identities predominate.”⁷⁷ He also notes that this literary practice has already been widely discussed under the conceptual term magical realism. To Garuba, however, the theory of magical realism is rather limited in comparison to animist realism. Magical realism, especially as “developed by Latin American writers and theorized by its foremost critics possesses an urban, cosmopolitan aspect (from the prospective of the writers) and an ironizing attitude, which are not necessarily elements of the animistic narrative or its writers.”⁷⁸ Animist realism, claims Garuba, is a broader concept. Rather, magical realism is enabled and encompassed by animist realism. Making a case for animist realism, Garuba provides us with examples from the writings of Toni Morrison, Wole Soyinka, and Niyi Osundare, demonstrating the animist code upon which they are built. According to Garuba if one were to miss the “animist intertext”⁷⁹ in these writings and other such works of African writers much would be lost in our appreciation of the richness of meanings they otherwise offer.

Graham Harvey in “Animist realism in indigenous novels and other literature,” building on Garuba’s study offers more examples from literatures, especially indigenous novels and poetry, that exhibit an animist conception of the world. The purpose of these examples is, of course, to be able to determine across various texts and indigenous cultures characteristics

⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 267.

⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 271.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 274.

⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 280.

that can be regarded as animist. Here, I would like to list these characteristics that Harvey's essay has spread out for us:

1. Indigenous animist realist novels, plays, or poems are not defined solely or predominantly by the presence of magic or spirits in their content but their primary trait is that they habitually assume a radically plural, "larger-than-human social cosmos"⁸⁰ in which it is possible for human beings to relate intimately to non-human beings, whether they are animals, plants, spirits, artefacts, ancestors, or divine beings.
2. Another significant feature of indigenous animist realist texts is that boundaries are transgressed all the time. "Whether it is in relation to the putative division between this and other worlds (whether of spirits or other species), between times, between conscious states (wakefulness or sleep) or between the everyday and the larger-than-human, boundary crossing is rife."⁸¹
3. Indigenous myths and folktales are used extensively as reference material and inspiration for indigenous animist realist texts.
4. Land is regarded sentient and interactive in indigenous animist realist texts.
5. Land is populated by multiple species of organisms that require being paid attention to. This is recognized in indigenous communities. Subsequently, "most indigenous novels include moments of polite etiquette across species boundaries."⁸²
6. In indigenous animist realist texts, other-than-human persons such as rocks or metal, for example, are imbued with agency and intentionality.
7. The temporal structure of the text more often than not does not follow the principle of linearity. That is, time is not seen to move sequentially with a beginning, middle, and an end in the narrative of indigenous animist realist texts.
8. Ancestors are accorded a special place in indigenous animist realist texts. They are "not merely 'dead people', nor even 'people who have died' (that is, their having died is not heavily emphasized). They are people who are visibly involved with their descendants in

⁸⁰ Harvey, Graham. *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. Routledge, 2014. p. 461.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 465.

⁸² Ibid.

various ways throughout history.”⁸³ Moreover, ancestors can materialize in multiple forms in the text.

9. The figure of the trickster borrowed from indigenous folktales is frequently used in indigenous animist realist texts. This is because the trickster is a boundary-crosser, a shape-shifter, effectively questioning our normative understanding of what something is in any given situation.

10. “Animism and animist realism entail personalist rationales rather than merely mechanical ones.”⁸⁴ For example, it is acknowledged that traces of practices such as sorcery, witchcraft, and cannibalism which are shunned by modernity can be found in indigenous communities. Indigenous animist realist texts do not stigmatize these practices but accommodate them because they are also “possible modes of relationship and may therefore explain negative experiences”⁸⁵ for the indigenous people. Consequently, events in animist realist texts are not always interpreted in a logical positivist, cause-and-effect framework but personal or individualistic views are given due consideration.

The above points by no means constitute the most comprehensive catalogue of elements that characterize indigenous animist realist texts but pave the way for a detailed analysis of animism in *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance*. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to this analysis.

The Swan Book and That Deadman Dance as Animist Realist Texts

The Swan Book

The Swan Book is Alexis Wright’s third novel. Wright is a member of the Waanyi nation of the southern highlands of the Gulf of Carpentaria who attributes her love for stories and writing to her grandmother with whom she spent a lot of time during her childhood and who had passed on to her stories of her country and her heritage and the importance of not letting it go. Wright says referring to her grandmother, “She was our memory. She was what not forgetting was all about.”⁸⁶ As a political activist involved mainly in the struggle for Aboriginal self-determination and land rights, Wright has been working with Aboriginal

⁸³ Ibid. p. 464.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 466.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Wright, Alexis. “Politics of Writing.” *Southerly*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2000. p. 10.

communities since the 1970s. Her participation in various government forums and Aboriginal agencies has been recounted below:

In 1978 she worked for the Queensland Aboriginal Legal Service as a representative of the Lardil people on Mornington Island, in the political fallout from the winding-up of the Uniting Church mission. This was about self-determination in the face of attempts by the then Bjelke-Petersen Queensland government to control the island. In 1984-85 she was involved in the McLelland Royal Commission on Maralinga Nuclear Tests, in the 1985 Nicolson River Land Claim (aka the Waanji/Garawa claim), and as a coordinator in 1993 of the Northern Territory Aboriginal Constitutional Convention. In 1996 she was commissioned by the Warramungu people of Tennant Creek to produce a study of the effect of alcohol on their community, published as *Grog War* in 1997. At the time she was writing *Grog War* she was community writer-in-residence for the Central Land Council, in Alice Springs. In 1997 Wright also coordinated the Kalkaringi Convention, a response to a convention for Northern Territory statehood held in Darwin earlier that year and that refused to significantly acknowledge Aboriginal rights of self-determination and self-government. ... In 1998 Wright also edited *Take Power: Like this Old Man Here: An Anthology of Writings Celebrating Twenty Years of Land Rights in Central Australia, 1977-1997*, an historical account of the first twenty years of the Land Rights movement in Central Australia, drawing on archival research and interviews with Aboriginal people involved in the movement as well as lawyers and anthropologists.⁸⁷

After having been so strong an advocate of indigenous rights at different places and worked persistently for decades to contribute to the Aboriginal struggle for self-determination, Wright continued to feel saddened at the state of affairs of Aboriginal communities. In her own words – “Every idea and goal was overtaken by others. Governments found new ways of making our lives harder. We did not seem to gel as a political movement at either the national, state or regional level.”⁸⁸ This was how she turned to writing fiction as a means of decolonization which of course, began with telling the truth about the Aboriginal people. She had found that “Literature, the work of fiction, was the best way of presenting a truth – not the real truth, but

⁸⁷ Mead, Philip. “The Geopolitical Underground: Alexis Wright’s *Carpentaria*, Mining and the Sacred.” *Decolonizing the Landscape: Indigenous Cultures in Australia*, edited by Beate Neumeier and Kay Schaffer. Rodopi, 2014. p. 194-195.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 195.

more of a truth than non-fiction.”⁸⁹ Speaking at the Tasmanian Readers’ and Writers’ Festival, 1998, Wright confirmed once again the pressing importance of telling the truth and the role of literature in this enormous task – “I want the truth to be told, our truths, so, first and foremost, I hold my pen for the suffering in our communities. ... I do not write stories of ‘getting on and getting by.’... What I know of our struggle gives me no cause for celebration or hearty optimism.”⁹⁰

Wright published her debut novel in 1997 titled *Plains of Promise* which targeted the assimilation policies put in practice by the government and state authorities of Australia that had a shocking impact on the Aboriginal people. The year 2006 marked the publication of *Carpentaria* which won the Miles Franklin Literary Award. The huge success of this novel catapulted her to the position of being one of the foremost contemporary indigenous writers of Australia. “There is anger in the book – anger at unyielding officialdom and an exploitative mining company – but Wright insists that [*Carpentaria*] is not principally a polemic. ‘It includes the realities of the indigenous world,’ she says.”⁹¹ *The Swan Book* converges with the first two of Wright’s novels in that they are all part of her heartfelt and conscientious undertaking to talk about the devastating effects of European colonization on the Australian continent and its indigenous people.

Reviewed widely, *The Swan Book* has been called a “counter intervention,”⁹² in direct reference to the attack it poses among other things to the Australian government’s Northern Territory Intervention of 2007.⁹³ Writing for the *Sydney Review of Books*, Jane Gleeson-White notes, “It bears all the hallmarks of Wright’s astonishing narrative powers: her linguistic dexterity, mashing words and phrases from high and low culture, from English, Aboriginal languages, French and Latin; her humour and scathing satire; her fierce political

⁸⁹ Wright, 2002. p. 10.

⁹⁰ Wright, Alexis. “Breaking Taboos: Alexis Wright at the Tasmanian Readers’ and Writers’ Festival, September 1998.” *Australian Humanities Review*, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-1998/wright.html>. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017.

⁹¹ Moss, Stephen. “Dream Warrior.” *The Guardian*. 15 April 2008.

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/apr/15/fiction.australia>. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017.

⁹² Williamson, Geordie. “Alexis Wright stages a counter intervention with *The Swan Book*.” *The Australian*. 10 Aug. 2013. <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/alexis-wright-stages-a-counter-intervention-with-the-swan-book/news-story/01891a074e8371288af74460c0f0f69e>. Accessed 26 Feb. 2017.

⁹³ The Northern Territory National Emergency Response of 2007, famously called the ‘Intervention’ was started as the Howard government’s response to cases of child sexual abuse in the Aboriginal communities living in the Northern Territory. The intervention included a series of steps ranging from installation of pornography filters on public-funded computers to deployment of armed personnel and police officers in the traditional land of remote Aboriginal communities.

purpose; her genre bending; her virtuosic gift for interweaving stories on multiple levels, from the literal to the metaphoric, the folkloric and the mythic. But *The Swan Book* takes all these – especially the last – to new levels.”⁹⁴ In another review, Katherine Mulcrone remarks, “Nothing about *The Swan Book* is easy or straightforward, least of all a conclusion on its merit. ... Wright, it seems, is determined to keep her readers unmoored, which she accomplishes via omniscient narration that tends more toward stream of consciousness than linear thought, challenging readers to untangle which strand of narration belongs to which character. The author complicates this task by dispensing with any commitment to standard syntax, so that sentences wind over and around themselves in such a way that only multiple readings can unpick the threads.”⁹⁵

It is true that the composition of the novel consistently evades the usual conventions of literary narratives, making any understanding of it seem less thorough than it should be. The story, set in a near future (with no specific dates), takes place when the world as we know it has changed drastically because of anthropogenic climate change. People have been rendered stateless and homeless and have migrated to any place possible on the planet where life can be sustained even in a nominal condition. Consequently, hordes of climate refugees have forced themselves into Australia. The central character of the novel—Oblivion Ethylene (or Oblivia)—is a young Australian Aboriginal girl, who was raped by a gang of petrol-sniffing youths after which she fell into the underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree where she remained locked in a state of sleep. Her family and her community had stopped searching for the missing child, when Bella Donna of the Champions—a European climate refugee in Australia—found her. Bella Donna tried to return Oblivia to her parents but they would not take her back as they had been shattered by the trial of trying to locate the child. This was how Bella Donna said she ended up keeping Oblivia. She wanted to assume the role of the saviour to the child when her own people had abandoned her. Together they lived in a swamp which was an Army-run Aboriginal detention camp, on an old rusty hulk stuck in the middle of it.

Oblivia, however, is unable to recover from the trauma of what happened with her. Symptomatically, she remains mute for the entirety of the novel—literally, silenced by her

⁹⁴ Gleeson-White, Jane. “Going Viral.” *Sydney Review of Books*. 23 Aug. 2013.

<http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/going-viral/>. Accessed 26 Feb. 2017.

⁹⁵ Mulcrone, Katherine. “Wright’s cygneture achievement eludes conclusions.” *Antipodes*, vol. 28, no. 2, 2014. p. 518.

past. On the outside, she remains looking like a child even as she grows older as though the ability to grow up into a mature adult has been taken away from her. Her education essentially consisted of Bella Donna's stories about swans and to anybody or anything else around her, she had very little contact. After the death of Bella Donna, she is claimed as wife by Warren Finch, the first Aboriginal President of Australia, who comes for her from the other side of the swamp. She had been "promised" to him when they were children, before she was raped and had gone missing. Warren Finch belonged to the Brolga Country, a place "chosen by an international fact-finding delegation to be their showpiece of what a future humane world was all about" and the elders of the Brolga Country "had hand-picked their brightest child – a gift from God even though he was a half-caste – and had gone so far as to have bequeathed him to their vision of the new world."⁹⁶

Finch wanted to marry Oblivia because as he saw it, she "was the last real link" to the Aboriginal "world [that] he had severed, the attachment he had planned to keep."⁹⁷ Shortly after the wedding, however, Finch leaves Oblivia behind in a city in the south of Australia, locked in a building called The People's Palace in the care of a man called Machine, much to her fear and distress. In the building, which was more of a cage than a palace to Oblivia, she is joined by the Harbour Master, the traditional healer from the swamp, and his talking monkey, Rigoletto. In the meantime, the swamp is destroyed by Warren Finch because he does not want Oblivia to have a place to run back to. Stuck in the palace, one night, suddenly, Oblivia finds that the black swans that were with her in the swamp have come back to her.

Soon after the arrival of the swans, Warren Finch is assassinated as he enters the city, leading to the Australian government's decision that "Warren Finch would be taken on a final journey to farewell the nation,"⁹⁸ during which the government would settle on the burial place of his coffin. It was also decided that as long as the decision was not made, the journey would go on and Oblivia would accompany Finch's dead body in a vehicle. After some days, Oblivia, however, leaves the corpse of Finch behind. She has found yet again her black swans from the swamp. "They were heading north, on the way home."⁹⁹ She decided to follow them. In fact, she and her swans were not the only ones on a journey; people were migrating in huge numbers from the south to the north. In the end, we are told that Oblivia can be

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

regularly spotted walking around the old dry swamp as a teenage girl “screaming, *kayi, kayi kala-wurru nganyi*, your country is calling out for you ...”¹⁰⁰

With such a complex narrative, the novel opens up discussions on themes that include Aboriginal traditions, Aboriginal rights and sovereignty, Stolen Generations, detention camps, dispossession, and the disappearance of Aboriginal languages. Every sentence is a reflection on all these issues. Quotations from the text have been deliberately interspersed with the plot summary in the above paragraphs to offer a taste of the desperation, sadness, and sardonicism that underlie the story. However, the idea for writing *The Swan Book*, as Alexis Wright reported in an interview with Arnold Zable, came to her when she was working in Central Australia in the year 2003 and people started telling her about “swans that they had seen in the desert, sometimes on very shallow stretches of water. People were surprised to see them in these places, so far away from coastal and wetter regions of Australia.”¹⁰¹ The swans had basically moved far from their natural habitats and this was accompanied by a change in the weather patterns, explaining why the swans were migrating in the first place. More importantly, it was the cumulative result of human activities; climate, the environment, and non-human beings were being impacted by human beings. Inspired by these events, Alexis Wright wanted to write a story for the Anthropocene. Thus, *The Swan Book* can be considered to be first and foremost a climate change novel.

In literary fiction, climate change is generally regarded an intrinsically difficult topic to write about. Greg Garrard, one of the founding members of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment (UK & Ireland), notes “it is vast in temporal and geographical scale, and it is caused not by individual protagonists but by the aggregation of myriad acts of human societies – albeit that wealthy people contribute far more than poor people. An author’s choice of genre in writing about climate change is crucial: it makes some sorts of action possible and others impossible.”¹⁰² In an article, Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra, note the same difficulty that authors confront when writing about climate change. It is a complex “scientific and cultural phenomenon and demands a corresponding degree of complexity in fictional representation.”¹⁰³ In their survey of fictional

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Garrard, Greg. “Solar: Apocalyptic Not.” *Ian McEwan: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, edited by Sebastian Groes. Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. p. 124.

¹⁰³ Trexler, Adam and Adeline Johns-Putra. “Climate change in literature and literary criticism.” *WIREs Climate Change*, vol. 2, 2011. p. 185.

representations of climate change, they conclude that anthropogenic climate change attained widespread attention only from 1970s when awareness regarding environmental pollution, ozone depletion, and global warming began to spread. They also note that the genre of science fiction in particular has adopted the issue of climate change as a key theme.

The depiction of climate change in literary fiction, especially as seen in science fiction, relies on the construction of other-worlds. These other-worlds are either planets other than Earth made habitable for life or Earth with an altered climate located in the future. Narratives set on Earth rather than other planets have been referred to as “future histories.”¹⁰⁴ *The Swan Book* is a future history in this regard. But it also goes beyond many other climate change novels which are also future histories by exhibiting an exceptional approach in terms of its setting and characterization. It has not only tried to depict how different (human and non-human) communities can be affected by climate change but has constructed the space or setting of the novel such that it helps us think about the environment and the effects of climate change in radically new ways and this has been achieved by grounding the text in animism. The following section is an exploration of the expressions of animism in *The Swan Book*.

The principal way animism materializes in the text is through the narrative space. “Spaces function in a story in different ways. On the one hand they are ‘only’ a frame, a place of action. In this capacity a more or less detailed presentation will lead to a more or less detailed concrete picture of that space. The space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is ‘thematized’: it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake.”¹⁰⁵ In *The Swan Book*, the narrative space is never just the physical environment to frame the interaction between the characters of the story; it exists for its own sake. In fact, what stands out when one reads the novel is that sometimes the language of the text resembles a body of coded messages emanating as though from the narrative space itself and existing by itself for others to perceive, listen to, and respond. “Space thus becomes an ‘acting place’ rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes sub-ordinate to the presentation of space. The fact that ‘this is happening here’ is just as important as ‘the way it is here,’ which allows these events to happen.”¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. p. 186.

¹⁰⁵ Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 1997. p. 136.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

In *The Swan Book*, the narrative space is one that has been altered irreversibly by climate change. In this altered condition, if the characters have been shown to suffer the consequences of the climactic derangement, the space or the Aboriginal country, has been presented as one suffering equally. In fact, there is no separation between the characters' experience and the country's; they are interconnected and deeply entangled with each other. In the first chapter "Dust Cycle," Oblivia's rape and her subsequent fall into the bowel of a eucalyptus tree has been linked with the severe drought that set in the country in a manner that one's trauma has a bearing on the other. Please note the following sentence from the chapter: "Some say that there was an accident before the drought. A little girl was lost."¹⁰⁷ By speculating on the supposed connection between the natural phenomenon of drought and the Aboriginal girl's missing, the narrative is drawing a parallel between the suffering of the country (induced by climate change) and the traumatic experience of Oblivia. Furthermore, from within the bowel of the tree and locked in a world of sleep, Oblivia is described as writing on the country with her little fingers in ancient symbols "dredged from the soup of primordial memory,"¹⁰⁸ of the country. These words or ancient symbols "resembled the twittering of bird song speaking about the daylight"¹⁰⁹ and was understood by the ancient river gum. This section of the text neatly illustrates how in the Aboriginal cosmology everything relates to one another and how the country along the same lines as a living person possesses language, memory, story and even, emotions that are always being transmitted and transcribed on itself.

In another section, the swamp people listening to Bell Donna talk about her country of origin and how climate change has made it uninhabitable, feel overwhelmed as they are "trying to imagine this ghost country where nobody goes. *Then, without country, imagine that? Imagining! Can't imagine. For country never leaves its people.*"¹¹⁰ Thus we can see that in the ontological reality shared by the indigenous people of Australia, the country is alive with a spirit that never leaves its people. To recall Rose's words, "country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and a will toward life."¹¹¹ By urging Bella Donna to speak of her country, the swamp people were seeking to draw out the spirit of a country they had not seen but believed it existed.

¹⁰⁷ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Rose, 1996. p. 7.

To go back to Harvey's definition, animism recognizes that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human beings. Wright understands the nonmutability of this statement and the role it plays in the indigenous worldview, thus weaving non-human agency and subjectivity seamlessly into the narrative of *The Swan Book*. Jean Skeat has commented on this in "Political Poetics and the Power of Things: Non-human Agency and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*." She remarks, "On the simplest level of non-human agency are examples of anthropomorphism such as the lonely crow that 'chuckl[es] its secrets' into Warren Finch's ear and communicates its feelings of loneliness through an ABBA rendition; or Rigoletto, the talking monkey who is a major presence in the second half of the novel as he accompanies Oblivia on her journey home until he departs with the Harbour Master (an elder who arrives at the swamp early in the novel and remains with Oblivia on her journey) in search of a palace."¹¹² At a more intricate level and going beyond anthropomorphism, the swans in *The Swan Book* offer a figure of extreme complexity that remains irreducible and yet open to interpretation. It is true that Wright's intense research into the ecosystems and behaviour of swans has influenced her description of the birds and their activities in *The Swan Book* but what is quite remarkable is that the characterization of the swans has escaped the instrumentalization that non-human characters are often subjected to in literary fiction. The swans in *The Swan Book* are animate beings and bring their own unique energy to the environment they are present in. Please note the description of the event when Oblivia sees a swan for the first time:

Oblivia remembered thinking that dust had a way of displacing destiny the first time she saw a swan. ... In all of this vast quietness where the summer sun was warming the dust spirit's mind, the swan looked like a paragon of anxious premonitions, rather than the arrival of a miracle for saving the world. Seeing the huge bird flying through the common dusty day like this, disturbed whatever peace of mind the stick-like Oblivia possessed. Everyone watched a swan's feather float down from the sky and land on her head. Oblivia's skin instantly turned to a darker shade of red-brown. ... She did what was expected. She nose-dived like a pitchfork into the unbearable, through broiling dust vats, to countless flashbacks of what was over-the-top and dangerous. Everything in her mind became mucked up. This is the kind of harm the accumulated experience of an exile will do to you, to anyone who believes

¹¹² Skeat, Jean. "Political Poetics and the Power of Things: Non-human Agency and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*." *Transformations Journal of Media & Culture*, vol. 27, 2016. p. 4.

that they had slept away half their life in the bowel of a eucalyptus tree. Well! Utopian dreaming was either too much or too little, but at least she recognised that the swan was an exile too.

... She 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.¹¹³

In the above passage, the figure of the swan, grey-black and alone, has been presented not as a bird that has found itself in a new place, looking perturbed or guarded to be devoid of its flock and away from its former habitat. But it presents a powerful image of a person that has arrived with a mysterious purpose. The purpose unfolds as it drops a single feather on Oblivia. In my reading of the text, this is the moment of entangling when Oblivia and the swan(s) become conjoined in their common purpose of finding a place of belonging. The swamp people who paid little attention to Oblivia suddenly turn their gaze to her as the swan feather falls on her. This is symbolic in that the swan has recognized that Oblivia is of the swamp people the most marginalized and traumatized and her silence has enabled everyone else to conveniently look past her horribly tragic past and how it was all too representative of what had happened with Aboriginal lives as such. The swan and Oblivia are also together in that they were both banished from their place of belonging, dispossessed by historical events. That is to say, climate change had rendered the otherwise natural habitation of swans unfavourable for them, forcing them to migrate to unknown territories. Similarly, Oblivia was dislodged from her home and her community by the incident of her brutal rape and what followed afterwards. It marked a shift in Oblivia's life as decisive and catastrophic as climate change in the lives of swans.

In the Prelude, the only section of the text written in the form of a first-person narrative told from the viewpoint of Oblivia, she says, "And so I travel, fired up with the fuel of inquiry about what it means to have a homeland, to travel further into strange and unknown lands covered with holy dust and orchards of precious small, sun-ripened fruit that are sometimes half-destroyed by war, and at other times, slapped hard in the face by famine. ... I tell the virus that I have felt more at home with the cool air flowing on my face from a wild Whistling Swan's easy wings sweeping over snow-capped mountains in its grand migration across continents, than in those vast ghostly terrains of indescribable beauty that have given

¹¹³ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

me no joy. I must continue on, to reach that one last place in a tinder-dry nimbus where I once felt a sense of belonging.”¹¹⁴ This confirms the connection between the swan(s) and Oblivia. They are fellow-travellers on the same journey—exiled from their homeland and in search of a home that has perhaps been lost forever to the ravages of time.

Speaking of the swans that had migrated to unusual places away from their natural environment, thus inspiring the story of *The Swan Book*, Wright emphasizes that the ecological damage induced by human activities had forced the swans to move to new locations and points out how the traditional owners of land in these locations were worried because those swans didn’t have a story in those places. In her words: “So what do you do? What happens to a bird – or to anyone – who has no story for that country?”¹¹⁵ This was perhaps the central concern for Oblivia, too. She could not, after having been taken out of the bowl of a tree by Bella Donna and taken to the swamp, reconcile with the new place for which she had no story. Her invisibility and silence were a consequence of this. When the swan’s feather fell upon her, focusing the swamp people’s attention on her, from Oblivia’s point of view, her lack of a story stood exposed, destabilizing her mind. Oblivia recognized that the swan like her “had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her.”¹¹⁶

Furthermore, Oblivia’s identification with the swans is not self-imposed and one-sided as we might be tempted to think. The black swans in the swamp look for her after she has been taken by Warren Finch to The People’s Palace, a long way from the north where the swamp is located. In spite of the distance, the swans managed to track her down. “The swans flew through the narrow lane outside the window, and upwards into the darkness, after their eyes had found hers. Their search had ended.”¹¹⁷ This introduces the swans as agents that are capable of expressing their will upon the external environment. They are not merely to be acted upon. Once again, after Oblivia leaves the coffin of Warren Finch behind on its journey through Australia, the swans find her or she finds her swans. As described in the text: “They had found each other’s heartbeat, the pulse humming through the land from one to the other, like the sound of distant clap sticks beating through ceremony, connecting together the

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

spirits, people and place of all times into one. These were her swans from the swamp. There was no going back. She would follow them.”¹¹⁸ Thus, throughout the novel, swans, even though non-human, remain influential in steering the course of Oblivia’s life and their association is not that of master/slave but of one spirit to another connected by the country.

Vitality or subjectivity is attributed not only to birds and animals in *The Swan Book*. For example, the junk scattered across the swamp has a life of its own. In the text, ex-Army vessels, abandoned steel, planks of timber, brass lanterns and such, are shown to respond to the call of the Armed Forces involved in a large-scale sweep-up of the ocean’s salty junk. The junk crawled out into the moonlight, to be towed away by a parade of tugs and even though it was headed towards land, it sailed to “the vast lake where the caretakers lived – the Aboriginal people who were responsible for the land.”¹¹⁹ Frightened by the event, the traditional owners left the lake but after roaming homelessly for years, they decided to return to the lake, their rightful place of belonging. “The first thing they saw on their arrival at the lake that no longer belonged to them was the audacity of the floating junk. Even the tugboats had been left there to rot unfettered and untethered. ...”¹²⁰ Here, material objects have been given the status of subjects that have taken over the space of the lake which was occupied by the Aboriginal people, transforming it into a swamp. Jane Bennett in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, has theorized on how “[a]gentic capacity” maybe “seen as differentially distributed across a wide range of ontological types” under the heading of thing-power materialism.¹²¹ The basis and the wider implications of this thought put forth by Bennett will be discussed in the next chapter.

Before we conclude the section on animism in *The Swan Book*, it is necessary to point out that the characters of Bella Donna and Harbour Master serve as crucial examples of how the life of the spirit is given pre-eminence over the material life. Though Bella Donna dies at the end of “Dust Cycle,” she continues to be present in Oblivia’s life in the form of a ghost. Harbour Master, though not dead also has the ability to appear before Oblivia wherever she is and have conversations with the ghost of Bella Donna. Together, they symbolize, not without a tinge of irony, the figure of the ancestors who have the responsibility to guide their

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Duke University Press, 2010. p. 9.

descendants. More importantly, as we have discussed in the beginning of this chapter, ancestors have a special place in indigenous animist realist texts and they have the ability to manifest themselves in different forms such as that of the ghost. Lastly, a major characteristic of indigenous animist realist texts is that they smudge the boundaries between categories. In *The Swan Book*, this is most significantly done by integrating the Aboriginal worldview with the Western. Additionally, Waanyi words are coalesced with English words without causing a break in the rhythm of the text. Scholars have written extensively on this aspect of Wright's writing where "a multiplicity of traditions, cultures, epistemologies, ontologies and voices"¹²² are woven together. My point is that this multiplicity is underwritten by an animist conception of the world because, referring to Garuba once again, animism "opens up a whole new world of poaching possibilities,"¹²³ and to point to the many manifestations of these possibilities, if not all of them, has been my endeavour so far. In the next section of the chapter, *That Deadman Dance* will be analyzed with the view to understand how animism operates in the text.

That Deadman Dance

The author of *That Deadman Dance*, Kim Scott, was born to an Aboriginal father and a white mother in Perth in the year 1957. In the 1960s, his family moved to the coastal town of Albany, Western Australia, "a place known by some historians as the friendly frontier,"¹²⁴ which then, Scott acknowledges, became the inspiration for *That Deadman Dance*. Though light-skinned and predominantly English-speaking, Scott grew up keenly aware of his Aboriginal heritage and the racism that Aboriginal people were subjected to. When he was asked the question 'who are you?' on a radio show shortly before he was awarded the 2011 Miles Franklin Literary Award for *That Deadman Dance*, his answer was that he wasn't acutely conscious of his ancestry until he was seven and was told by his father that he was of Aboriginal descent.¹²⁵ But since then he has directed much of his energy to understand and "articulate in a more adequate sense"¹²⁶ what it means to be indigenous.

¹²²Barras, Arnaud. "Ecopoetic Encounters: Amnesia and Nostalgia in Alexis Wright's Environmental Fiction." *Australian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, vol. 5, 2015. p. 54.

¹²³ Garuba, 2003. p. 171.

¹²⁴ Scott, Kim. *That Deadman Dance*. Picador, 2010. p. 397.

¹²⁵ Scott, Kim. "Who are you? Kim Scott." Interview by Alicia Hanson and Brookie Banister. *Who are you? 720 ABC Perth*. 1 June 2011. <http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2011/06/01/3232852.htm>. Accessed 07 Jan. 2017.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

The majority of Scott's writings, including his first two novels *True Country* (1993) and *Benang: From the Heart* (1999), are based on his own quest to understand his family history and are semi-autobiographical in nature. For instance, while writing *True Country*, he incorporated many factual details he encountered in the remote region of Kimberly in Western Australia where he was teaching English to the school children of an Aboriginal community. For his second novel, *Benang*, which holds the distinction of being the first novel by an indigenous author to have won the Miles Franklin Literary Prize, he used archival material that he had found while researching into his family history. Scott has also written *Kayang and Me* (2005), "a monumental family history of the Wirlomin Noongar people,"¹²⁷ along with Hazel Brown, the senior elder of a large, extended Noongar family.

Being of mixed parentage, Scott has been acutely aware of the troubling position of someone vexed by having to inhabit two worlds at the same time. Scott's response to this has been to restore the relationship with his Aboriginal heritage. This is not simply so he could adopt the position of being one of the natives of Australia but because he thinks that by embracing the Australian indigenous heritage, it would be possible to get out of the binary oppositions of black/white and "make a one world and encompass the different aspects of how we live."¹²⁸ The road to reclamation of this Aboriginal heritage, however, Kim Scott had realized very early on is strewn with extreme hardships and disappointments, with the issue of 'language' being one of the most troubling of concerns. In "Strangers at Home," published in *Translating Lives: Living with Two Languages and Cultures*, Scott confesses how alienating an experience it was at first when he tried to write of Aboriginal heritage in English within the conventions of a social realist literary tradition. The revulsion he felt at his own writing made him look for alternative ways. Speaking of this struggle to write in a mode that represented Aboriginal experience more authentically, Scott notes, "Fortunately, some of my characters spoke in a version of what is termed 'Aboriginal English.' This had not come fluently, and I'd struggled to get something that I'd only heard, but never seen on a page. I wrote it as one would poetry, attending to rhythm and syntax. And in fact it was this voice, this style, that helped me escape the prison I was enclosed in, a prison made by the

¹²⁷ "Kayang & Me: Written by Kim Scott and Hazel Brown." *Freemantle Press*.

<https://www.freemantlepress.com.au/products/kayang-me>. Accessed 10 March 2017.

¹²⁸ Scott, 2011.

conventions of colonial social realism, and even of empiricism.”¹²⁹ This strategy of adopting the language of the colonizer in the writing of his novels, fusing it with Aboriginal English where it suits, says Professor Santosh Sareen, is “a unique mode of resistance.”¹³⁰ Additionally, Kim Scott considers it a priority to revitalize the Noongar language and has been at the centre of the activities of Wirlomin Noongar Language and Stories Project. *That Deadman Dance* has been to some extent informed by such community development projects. Speaking in an interview, Scott admits, “So with *That Deadman Dance* I realized that the language work and the cultural consolidation work was informing the novel, particularly in how it allowed me a protagonist that I wouldn’t have been able to see so easily in the archives and published histories.”¹³¹

That Deadman Dance is Scott’s third novel. It was written with the intent to show that it was not entirely impossible to have an inclusive approach to inter-racial contact as historical accounts prove that in the beginning the Aborigines were willing to have a mutually beneficial or enriching relationship with the whites before the hostility and violence spread. In the novel, Scott returns to the early days of the encounter between the Noongar—indigenous people of the south-west of Australia—and Europeans, offering us a story built not merely on colonial subjugation or victimization of the colonized but quite beautifully features friendship and reciprocity riding on the shoulders of several “Noongar heroes” and “admirable colonists.”¹³² It is in that sense a frontier narrative recreating the days of early contact between the indigenous population and the white colonial settler-expansionists of Australia.

Renowned non-indigenous Australian writers such as Patrick White, David Malouf, and Richard Flanagan have depicted the experience of the early collision between the two races in *Voss* (1957), *Remembering Babylon* (1993), and *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) respectively. But *That Deadman Dance*, as Thomas Keneally has commented gives “a sense of the experience of intrusion not from a descendant of intruders but from a child of the true

¹²⁹ Scott, Kim. “Strangers at Home.” *Translating Lives: Living With Two Languages and Cultures*, edited by Mary Besemers and Anna Wierzbicka. University of Queensland Press, 2007. p. 4.

¹³⁰ Sareen, Santosh K. “Self, Identity and Belonging: An Aboriginal Case.” *Australia and India Interconnections: Identity, Representation, Belonging*, edited by Santosh K. Sareen. Mantra Books, 2006. p. 66.

¹³¹ Scott, Kim. “An Interview with Kim Scott.” *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott*, edited by Belinda Wheeler. Camden House, 2016. p. 167.

¹³² Scott, 2010. p. 399.

possessors.”¹³³ Extending over a decade and a half that has been divided into four time periods (1833-1835, 1826-1830, 1836-1838, 1841-1844), the novel follows the developments at a colonial outpost referred to as King George Town located in the Western Australia largely from the perspective of Bobby Wabalanginy, a Noongar. The novel opens with Bobby writing “Kaya,” meaning hello, “on a thin piece of slate” with “damp chalk, brittle as weak bone.”¹³⁴ This is an important act as it at once refers to the intrusion of the Western technology of reading and writing into the Aboriginal world and posits Bobby as the Aboriginal figure who has appropriated this technology to write an Aboriginal word in English. Already the intermingling of the indigenous and European cosmologies has taken place at various levels.

At the beginning, however, the white settlers led by Dr. Cross were fewer in number, with the indigenous population easily outnumbering the former at the site of the colonial settlement. Dr. Cross understood that he needed the Noongar’s co-operation to survive in what was to the whites an unfamiliar territory and the Noongar their traditional country. To have the Noongar on their side was crucial to the whites also because it made it easier for them to enlist the help and support of indigenous tribes in the surrounding areas. Additionally, Dr. Cross, even with his materialistic ambitions and imperialistic tendencies, was appreciative of the natural talents of the Noongar people and was at the same time conscious of how the white settlement was gradually displacing the Noongar from their land and disrupting the indigenous ways of life. So whenever the Noongar were away on one of their seasonal migrations, Dr. Cross was relieved; their absence not only meant that food resources need not be shared with them but also “with the natives absent, the awkward issue of his own presence was not always bothering his conscience.”¹³⁵ Among the Noongar, Dr. Cross was closest to Wunyeran, an Elder of his tribe. In time, they grew so close that Cross wanted to be buried at the same place as Wunyeran who had succumbed to one of the deadly infectious diseases that colonization had introduced claiming many an indigenous person’s life. At the time of Wunyeran’s death, Dr. Cross was deeply upset. “Cross wept. Cross swore and cursed and sobbed so that his body shook and the sounds came from deep within.”¹³⁶ Bobby was a witness to this scene and the general love and amity that had existed between Wunyeran and Dr. Cross. He was also in

¹³³ Keneally, Thomas. Comment. Inside front cover. Kim Scott, *That Deadman Dance*. Picador, 2010.

¹³⁴ Scott, 2010. p. 1.

¹³⁵ Ibid. p. 122.

¹³⁶ Ibid. p. 138.

close contact with Dr. Cross and learnt to speak English initially under Cross's tutelage. But after Cross's death in 1837, Geordie Chaine took his place as the overseer of the colony. Along with a wife and two children, Christine and Christopher, Chaine had landed from England in King George Town a little before Cross's death, carrying strong intentions to acquire land and make it profitable.

Chaine proved himself to be a thorough colonizer, enterprising and seizing every opportunity to increase his wealth. Besides, unlike Dr. Cross, he was devoid of any deep sentiments for the Noongar. He recognized the value the natives could bring to the expansion of the settlement especially in terms of labour and did not at first antagonize them. But eventually and more acutely after the disappearance of whales, which were a highly-priced commodity to the colonizers, due to the practice of large-scale whaling, the Noongar began to be sidelined. By then, the land was also mostly under the control of the white settlers as the concept of private property and individual ownership took hold of the place. Left with no other choice, the Noongar resorted to thieving from where food and cattle was contained and grown by the white settlers. This also signalled the transformation of Bobby from a trusting, friendly, adaptable child who loved to mediate between the indigenous and the Western world to a man who had been betrayed and his confidence in himself and his beliefs shaken. In the novel, he lives to be an old man unlike the others of his community. Dressed in kangaroo skin and red pants as a tourist attraction, he would tell the tourists the story of this great betrayal:

I am the only Noongar alive today who is mentioned in Dr. Cross's papers, published in your mother country. *Your* mother country, he said to the tourists, not mine because my country is here, and belonged to my father, and his father, and his father before him, too. But to look at me now you wouldn't think that, not with all these people in their fine houses and noses in their rum who got no time to thank me or share what they have ... They don't know me. They look and think they do, but no. But I know them and all those pioneers they love and thank them, too. Knew them. They were my friends.

Me and my people ... My people and I (he winked) are not so good traders as we thought. We thought making friends was the best thing, and never knew that when we took your flour and sugar and tea and blankets that we would lose everything of

ours. We learned your words and songs and stories, and never knew you didn't want to hear ours ... But, yes, of course, you're right, you're right; my life is good, and I am happy to talk to everyone, and welcome you as friends. The same God and the same good King looks over us all, does he not, my fellow subjects?"¹³⁷

This is a poignant reflection on European colonization's devastating impacts on all aspects of the Australian indigenous community. The face of Australia has been refigured by the white settlers to the extent that the status of the Aboriginal people is reduced to that of tourist attraction. Aboriginal history has been conveniently erased from the collective memory of the nation; the generosity and welcoming spirit that some of the indigenous people had shown at the point of first contact is rarely acknowledged. Ironically, Bobby is reminded that 'his life is good,' that he should be 'happy' to have simply survived.

The title of the novel, *That Deadman Dance*, is believed to have been inspired by the "Noongar's observation of the bodily movements in the British soldiers' military drill," which is directly linked to the "accounts that, on first contact, Aboriginal people conceived of white people as people returning from the dead."¹³⁸ To have adapted the British military drill into a form of dance hints at the flexibility and endurance of the Aboriginal worldview. The Aborigines could not have imagined that a system that had braved inhospitable or extreme environments was going to be disrupted by the invasion of the white settlers. The indomitable spirit of the Aborigines shines through perfectly well on the occasion when Bobby tries to make peace through dancing and singing with the white settlers at the end of the novel. Bobby along with Mr and Mrs Chaine, their daughter Christine, Soldier Killam, Convict Skelly, Jak Tar and Binyan, Governor Spender and Hugh – all of whom knew Bobby well and were important members of the settlement – had gathered at Chaine's house at Bobby's request. Bobby had a plan. "Bobby knew that he could sing and dance the spirit of this place, had shown he could sing and dance the spirit of any gathering of people, show them what we gathered together here really are. He reminded them he was a dancer and singer, what Dr Cross called *a gifted artiste*, and by those means and by his spirit he would show them how people must live here, together."¹³⁹ But his confidence or faith was belied when Chaine and the other white settlers refused to co-operate. This is also the zone of intercultural conflict

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 106.

¹³⁸ Brewster, Anne. "Whiteness and Indigenous Sovereignty in Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance*." *Journal of the European Association of Studies on Australia*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2001. p. 61.

¹³⁹ Scott, 2010. p. 390.

marked by a clash of the worldly semiotics of each cultural group. The white settlers could not fathom the layers of meaning that that Aborigine saw in his act of dancing and singing just as the Aborigine could not conceive of land as partitioned bits of private property.

Most scholarly responses to the text have focused on the dynamics of this inter-racial contact between the Noongar and the white settlers and its fallouts from a postcolonial perspective. For example, Anne Brewster, in her article “Whiteness and Indigenous sovereignty in Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*,” has explored “the nature of cross-racial relationality in the early days of settler/Noongar contact.”¹⁴⁰ Her main argument emerges to be that despite the melancholic note in which it ends “the novel constitutes a powerful expression of indigenous vitality. While it attests – in its bleak thematics, character development and narrative dénouement – to the structuring violence of the settler state, the novel asserts a competing claim to place and collectivity in its depiction of Noongar bodies, language, storytelling, everyday life, cosmology, kinship ties and determinative relationality to country.”¹⁴¹ In short, Brewster concerns herself largely with the articulation of indigenous sovereignty that the novel enables in the face of relentless and brutalizing colonizing powers. In another critique, Alison Ravenscroft has acknowledged how Scott’s writing not only attempts to fill the gaps in Australian colonial history by drawing on the real stories of Aboriginal people but also “the gaps that remain between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledges,”¹⁴² calling readers to look beyond Western cognitive and linguistic registers.

Some of the more fascinating readings of the text include that of Tony Hughes-d’Aeth, Philip Mead, and Rosanne Kennedy. The central argument of Tony Hughes-d’Aeth is that *That Deadman Dance* “exemplifies the pattern of deferred action that characterizes the postcolonial treatment of the scene of contact.”¹⁴³ That is, in postcolonial novels fixated on the point of first contact between the indigenous and the non-indigenous people, the temporal formula used for the enactment of the plot is ‘deferred action,’ or what Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*. Philip Mead’s reading of *That Deadman Dance* is similarly distinctive from the general spread in that it is in the context of “literature, community and reading” that the

¹⁴⁰ Brewster, 2001. p. 60.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 67.

¹⁴² Ravenscroft, Alison. “The Strangeness of the Dance: Kate Grenville, Rohan Wilson, Inga Clendinnen and Kim Scott.” *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2013. <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/the-strangeness-of-the-dance-kate-grenville-rohan-wilson-inga-clendinnen-and-kim-scott/>. Accessed 03 March 2017.

¹⁴³ Hughes-d’Aeth, Tony. “For a long time nothing happened: Settler colonialism, deferred action and the scene of colonization in Kim Scott’s *That Deadman Dance*.” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 2014. p. 2.

text has been examined. Mead's verdict seems to be that "All Scott's work – its literary imaginative core, as well as its other professional and cultural aspects – is an ongoing, fragmentary, individual, geographically specific and inter-personal project in articulating a self in relation to place and community, a project that deploys (just as it resists) the formal, narrative possibilities of the novel to articulate that project to history, but not to any incipient or hegemonic narrative of nation."¹⁴⁴

Another compelling reading of *That Deadman Dance* focuses on cultural memory. In "Orbits, Mobilities, Scales," Rosanne Kennedy discusses how *That Deadman Dance* contributes to "the transcultural memory of contact on the maritime frontier,"¹⁴⁵ predominantly through the figure of the ship, including whale-ship, circulating cultural products such as books and bringing together people of different colour and culture who are engaged in trade and commerce. According to Kennedy, the novel also "challenges the presumed dichotomy between indigeneity and diaspora, in which indigeneity is associated with rootedness to place and diaspora with migratory routes and transnational mobility. The novel imaginatively figures an Indigenous metaphor of mobility—'orbiting'—in which return to country is a crucial feature of travel. It thereby claims both deep ties to country (roots) and mobility (routes) as forces shaping a cosmopolitan Noongar identity in an era of early contact."¹⁴⁶ Along similar lines, I have in a book chapter titled "On Narratology and Politics of Cultural Memory in *That Deadman Dance*" looked at how cultural memory operates in the text.¹⁴⁷ That is, I have tried to examine the symbolic elements embodying the cultural memory of the Noongar people in *That Deadman Dance*, thus casting fresh light on Aboriginal cosmology and self-identity. For this dissertation, however, as I have already discussed I am undertaking an ecocritical exploration of the novel with animism as my point of entry. *That Deadman Dance* proves to be an interesting case study in this regard especially because by colliding Aboriginal and European cosmologies it has thrown the animist nature of the indigenous cosmology into a sharp relief against the non-animism of the Western world.

¹⁴⁴ Mead, Philip. "Connectivity, Community and the Question of Literary Universality: Reading Kim Scott's Chronotope and John Kinsella's Commedia." *Republics of Letters: Literary communities in Australia*, edited by Peter Kirkpatrick and Robert Dixon. Sydney University Press, 2012. p. 150.

¹⁴⁵ Kennedy, Rosanne. "Orbits, Mobilities, Scales: Kim Scott's *That Deadman Dance* as Transcultural Remembrance." *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 59, 2016. p. 115.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 118.

¹⁴⁷ Shivadas, Priyanka. "On Narratology and Politics of Cultural Memory in *That Deadman Dance*." *Narratives of Estrangement and Belonging: Indo-Australian Perspective*, edited by Neelima Kanwar. Authorspress, 2016.

To recap, animist realists texts in the foremost place assume a radically plural, larger-than-human social cosmos marked by a close association between human and non-human beings. In *That Deadman Dance*, on the very opening page, we find that Bobby could connect intimately with whales. “He was not much more than a baby when he first saw whales rolling between him and the islands: a very close island, a big family of whales breathing easily, spouts sparkling in the sunlight ... Bobby wanted to enter the water and swim out to them, but swaddled against his mother’s body, his spirit could only call. Unlike that Bible man, Jonah, Bobby wasn’t frightened because he carried a story deep inside himself, a story Menak gave him wrapped around the memory of a fiery, pulsing whale heart.”¹⁴⁸ Here, we notice that Bobby’s earliest extant memory of seeing whales goes back to a time when he wasn’t bigger than a baby. Still, the memory is firmly imprinted on Bobby’s mind, indicating the level of impact it had on him, and even though, he couldn’t physically reach out to the whales, he tried to establish a spiritual connection with them. This is immediately followed by a reference to Jonah, a Christian prophet, a very important figure from the Bible, the text that most deeply and decisively shaped all of Western thought and actions. Scott wants to direct our attention to the different reactions to whales—Jonah was scared, Bobby wasn’t. Bobby wasn’t scared because Menak, his uncle, had given him a story about the whales that he always carried within himself right from his birth.

These stories, we can safely surmise, are the Dreaming stories passed on from one generation to the next about ancestral spirits that moved through the Aboriginal country creating everything else before metamorphosing into trees, rocks, animals, or other spiritual emblems. The spiritual emblem or the totem has a special mystical relationship with a given community and every individual of that community. It has been noted that “Aboriginal people along the Australian coast have a long association with whales. ... The whale is an important totem for numerous Aboriginal groups.”¹⁴⁹ Wunyeran, who shared a special friendship with Dr. Cross, too, spoke of the “sky stories of how things became the truths they are.”¹⁵⁰ And to Bobby, these old stories held the truth of his being, for he did feel he was deeply connected to the land, the ocean, and the whales. He could summon the whales, sense their presence and hear their rhythmic breathing. He even knew the path the whales followed year after year. “A

¹⁴⁸ Scott, 2010. p. 2.

¹⁴⁹ “Aboriginal People and Whales.” *Wild About Whales*. <https://www.wildaboutwhales.com.au/whale-facts/whales-in-australia/aboriginal-people-and-whales>. Accessed 17 April 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Scott, 2010. p. 130.

watery path that was hard to follow yet was that of their ancestors and his own, too, since he came from ocean and whales.”¹⁵¹

Rosanne Kennedy has commented on how in *That Deadman Dance* “the relationship between Noongar and whale is represented not simply as a matter of spatial proximity but also of kinship bonds.”¹⁵² As explained by Wunyeran to Dr. Cross in “English interspersed with his own language and again with song, he expressed something of his elder brothers the kangaroos, and that trees or whales or fish might also be family. Or so Cross understood. The sun was their mother... Cross’s face showed he did not understand.”¹⁵³ The non-comprehension of Cross is revealing because it throws open the simple non-availability in Western belief systems of ways to process kinship with non-humans. But almost every Aboriginal character prepossesses this knowledge. Bobby and the whales are referred to as brothers. As Cross repeats to Geordie Chaine, “Almost everyone seems related, in one way or another. Even birds and animals, and plants and things in the sea.”¹⁵⁴ And Bobby has “so much family out there in the sea ... Dolphins wave to him as they journey by, show themselves racing the waves, leaping and twisting in the air. Air suddenly all around you as you hurtle from the back of a wave, the fear and thrill of that, and then the crash, bubbles, the world pulling itself close again and hearts beating and the calls of brothers and sisters moving through water thicker than air. Outside and inside, ocean and blood; almost the same salty fluid.”¹⁵⁵

This human–non-human kinship metaphor is stretched to an almost mystical state with the whale-song/story that has a Noongar going into a whale and coming out of it alive. Bobby “sings to himself, that song with one man on a rock next to deep ocean, and a whale scraping its barnacles on the rock. ... He steps onto [the whale’s] back and into the spout; he slides down into the cave which must be inside each and every whale. ... The whale comes up to breathe and the man looks out through its eye and sees only the ocean, and birds in the sky. No sign of land. But he trusts the song his father gave him, and he makes the whale dive again, and again, and makes the whale take him deep and far.”¹⁵⁶ Kennedy reminds us that

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p. 34.

¹⁵² Kennedy, 2016. p. 124.

¹⁵³ Scott, 2010. p. 130.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p. 39.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. pp. 293-294.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. p. 295.

this story of a Noongar going into a whale was relayed to Scott by his Aunty Hazel.¹⁵⁷ In *Kayang & Me*, Aunty Hazel tells Scott:

And whales, there's songs for them too. Grandfather, old fellas, used to sign 'em. I never seen 'em do it, but they told me. And I heard 'em sing.

Whales. *Mamang*.

Whales come in close sometimes, you seen that, unna? Right next to the rocks. Like at Albany now, and Point Anne too. Well one old Noongar, he jumped onto one, and went like inside it. Slipped inside it like Jonah, unna? Like Jonah in the Bible musta done.

But the Noongar knew what he was doing, he *wanted* to be there, see. It wasn't an accident. Like he sung it to him and, well, not grabbed—can't say he grabbed—but he controlled it, you know, he controlled the whale.

They dived, deep, deep; musta been sorta quiet and dark, and the Noongar singing, singing this song to the whale and listening to its blood, its heart. They used to sing it, old fellas, not really to us, but for themselves. ...

Anyway, Noongar wanted it to take him, carry him Albany down there somewhere, l-o-o-ong way from where he was. When it come up, like every now and then it'd come up to the surface, and ... he was inside the whale, looking out when it come to the surface, you know. Like he was the whale ... see ocean everywhere, sun, birds, maybe, and bubbles when they dived again.¹⁵⁸

This story highlights not just the connection between human beings and whales but merges them quite literally in a song. Also note that the control that the Noongar man establishes on the whale is achieved not through violent force or indifference but by relating to it at a spiritual level. This signals perhaps the most important difference between the indigenous and Western approach toward the non-human. Human beings, indigenous or not, have always needed non-human beings for their sustenance, whether as food, mode of travel or as energy resource but Australian indigenous communities recognize that what sustains them is also alive, demands as much respect and attention as another human being, and exists independent

¹⁵⁷ Kennedy, 2016. p. 124.

¹⁵⁸ Scott, Kim and Hazel Brown. *Kayang & Me*. Freemantle Arts Press, 2005. p. 31.

of human needs and wants and must be dealt with accordingly. Consequently, the non-human is in constant interaction with the human. It is a reciprocal relationship. In another episode in the novel, Menak who had walked to the ocean, finds a whale touching the rock he was standing on, “rolled to one side with its eye upon him. Menak heard its voice, its moist exhalation. Had he lured this? Crab and shell mean nothing to this one; this whale wants the company of people, wants to be ashore. ... He called for a fire to be built on the beach around near the estuary, not far from the corner of the bay. Firelight reflected in a whale’s eye; himself dissolving there. Be the whale.”¹⁵⁹ Here, Menak *becomes* the whale in an instance of complete erasure of self-identification with one’s bodily limits.

If the indigenous human world in *That Deadman Dance* responds to the non-human world, the latter, too, is in a process of constant negotiation with the former. This is true not just for the whale which has sought out Menak in this case but for all creatures. For example, during the expedition that Chaine conducted with the help of Killam, Skelly, Bobby, and Wooral, “an eagle in a large tree beside one pool, its nest surprisingly close to the ground, returned their gaze,”¹⁶⁰ while they were passing by. The gaze metaphor is repeated in other places: “Despite the undulating swell, the surface of the water was smooth, and Bobby bowed again and again to what seemed a great fathomless eye, holding him in its gaze.”¹⁶¹ It is my understanding that Scott has used the ‘eye/gaze’ metaphor to underscore how the non-human can and does recognize the presence of the human (recognizing is seeing) because both are permeated by life and one form of life inevitably recognizes another. Moreover, non-human beings can relay critical information to human beings. “Frogs call out from where they’re buried, sensing rain, saying move inland move inland move away from the sea.”¹⁶² The frogs in this case are tellers; we have already been introduced in the second chapter through Rose’s essay on philosophical animism to the concept of ‘tellers’ who offer important information about the natural world.

Jane Gleeson-White in her ecocritical examination of *That Deadman Dance* has chosen to remark on the language of the text that does not distinguish between living and nonliving matter. She notes, “The telling fuses the animate and inanimate worlds, all is alive, fluid: there is ‘a long *arm* of rock’; the water ‘bulges’ as if giving birth and gives forth a whale; the

¹⁵⁹ Scott, 2010. p. 245.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 53.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. p. 19.

¹⁶² Ibid. p. 290.

whale is ‘barnacled’ like a rock, barnacles ‘stud’ its smooth dark skin and ‘crabs scurry across it’, as across a rock; until the whale and shore (the arm of rock) are conflated: ‘That black back must be slippery, treacherous like rock. ... This is a coast of rock and an ocean of whales, continuous, rock becoming whale, whale rock.’¹⁶³ This blurring of boundaries between categories, as we have discussed, is a feature of animist realist texts. In this case, it also highlights how the Aboriginal country, inclusive of all beings, is alive. It encompasses everything including the spirits of the ancestors.

Alison Ravenscroft has pointed to how Scott, speaking for indigenous beliefs, represents the country in a manner that is alive and imbued with a deeper meaning that may seem unfamiliar or outrageous to non-indigenous people. She quotes from the text: “In *That Deadman Dance* we are told of the mountain that sheltered Wabalanginy: ‘like an insect among the fallen bodies of ancestors, he huddled in the eye sockets of a mountainous skull and became part of its vision, was one of its thoughts.’ Rocks *are* fallen ancestors, country *is* a body, to travel is to journey beside animated ancestors.”¹⁶⁴ And sometimes the voices of the ancestors and spirit beings who dwell in and shape the country can be heard coming from the very landscape. Manek could hear these “old voices still echoing in the gorge” close to where his camp was.¹⁶⁵ In fact, the Dreaming involves being in constant contact and surrounded by ancestral spirit beings.

In *A World of Relationships*, an exceptional ethnographical study of the uses of Dreaming among the Aboriginal groups of the Australian Western Desert, anthropologist Sylvie Poirier has tried to explain the significance of ‘ancestral beings’ in the Aborigine’s experience of the self and the world:

Ancestral beings are pivotal expressions and manifestations of *Tjukurrpa* [or the Dreaming]. For the Kukatja [one of main Aboriginal linguistic groups in the Western Desert], the universe became as it is through the creative actions and performances of these powerful beings. As they travelled the land, they created and named the landscape as one sees it and experiences it today. ... Each form of existence, human

¹⁶³ Gleeson-White, Jane. “Capitalism versus the agency of place: An ecocritical reading of *That Deadman Dance* and *Carpentaria*.” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature – The Colonies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol.13, no.2, 2013. p. 7.

¹⁶⁴ Ravenscroft, 2013.

¹⁶⁵ Scott, 2010. p. 243.

and non-human is an incarnation and expression of *Tjukurrpa* as primary essence. The ancestral beings are therefore the ancestors not only of humans but also of the animals, plants, and natural elements. All forms are therefore consubstantial. ...

At the conclusion of their epic adventures, some of these ancestral beings are said to have returned underground, whence they are often said to have originated. While some have risen to the heavens to be transformed into constellations and unflaggingly continue their travels, others have infused water points and become the inexhaustible sources of the spirit-children (*kuruwarri*), while others have metamorphosed into permanent features of the landscape. Whatever the case, they have never ceased to exist. On the basis of their embodiment in the landscape and their ongoing presence, the ancestors are not only everywhere but also 'everywhen.' Although they are very rarely seen, the ancestral beings are able to make their presence known by a variety of means and to manifest themselves in a range of different forms. For example, they can send messages through the wind, or assume the form of clouds, or slap someone on the shoulder. A person may also just 'feel' their presence.¹⁶⁶

I have quoted at length from an ethnographical study to prove how much of Scott's fictional writing takes from the real experiences and beliefs of Aboriginal people. In the Noongar tradition, the country is one spiritual being and all beings are manifestations of it. Bobby never believed otherwise and that's probably why he wasn't afraid of anyone including the white settlers. If all beings were part of one great spirit and if this spirit was immortal, then why would one try to deprive another without provocation. This thought is put into words quite beautifully by Scott: "No laughing and loved Bobby Wabalanginy never learned fear, least not until he was pretty well a grown man. He never really had no sense of a single self, because ... He was born, reborn, took on new shapes around the one spirit that need never fear an ending."¹⁶⁷ At the end of the novel, Bobby tries very hard to explain to the white settlers that there could be no true harmony by decimating others: "Because you need to be inside the sound and the spirit of it, to live here properly. And how can that be, without we people who have been here for all time?"¹⁶⁸ His plea to the settlers was precisely that they recognize the

¹⁶⁶ Poirier, Sylvie. *A World of Relationships: Itineraries, Dreams and Events in the Australian Western Desert*. University of Toronto Press, 2005. pp. 60-61.

¹⁶⁷ Scott, 2010. p. 158.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 394.

spiritual, animate quality of the country and therefore, its indivisibility, instead of treating it as a material resource that can only be had by some and not everyone.

In the next chapter, I would proceed to explore through *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* how an animist conception of the world not only dissolves the strict division between nature/culture—an absolutely necessary step towards a greener future—but also highlights the unique role indigenous people have to play vis-à-vis climate action and environmental sustainability.

Chapter Four

Re-enchanting the Environmental Discourse

In this chapter, I will begin by offering a brief glimpse into the historical origin of the hyperseparation between nature/culture leading to my argument through *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* on how animism suggests a way out of this dualism.

Nature/Culture Divide

The relationship between nature and culture, when looked at in its historical depth, has been shaped by a variety of fundamental intellectual and psychological shifts that began in the West and took hold of the global setting. This was effectively pointed out to us by Lynn White Jr.'s address in 1966 called "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." A prominent medieval historian, White locates the origin of the striking anti-environmental tendencies of the modern times in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, where God announces his decision to create the humankind in his image so he may rule the earth. Quoting from the Bible, "And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.'"¹⁶⁹ White agrees that while Christianity has a complex religious history and there maybe notable figures of exception within the faith such as the Saint Francis of Assisi, the directive to take charge of the whole earth was by and large thoroughly absorbed into the matrix of the Christian and post-Christian society. Even modern science and technology, which is fashioned particularly by the West, has at its heart the "Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature."¹⁷⁰

More recently, Val Plumwood has written on the reasons for the nature/culture conflict which she recalls to be rationalism, mechanism, and humanism. In her words, "If early rationalism construes the genuine human self, in polarised and oppositional terms, as without the qualities of the animal and natural spheres, later mechanism construes nature as bereft of qualities appropriated to the human. The development of human/nature dualism thus destroys

¹⁶⁹ Genesis 1:26. *The Bible*. King James Version, *Bible Hub*. <http://biblehub.com/genesis/1-26.htm>. Accessed 18 April 2017.

¹⁷⁰ White Jr., Lynn. "The Historical Roots of Our ecological Crisis." *Science*, New Series, vol. 155, no. 3767, 1967. p. 1206.

bridging characteristics from both ends, as it were, and writes out continuity.”¹⁷¹ The contrast between nature and culture becomes deeper when humanism, building on rationalism, attaches a special inherent value to all of humanity, over and above the rest, which earlier rationalists like Aristotle and Plato had associated only with the highest and the best of human beings whose minds were always occupied by reason. Plato, in particular, had a marked contempt for poets who appealed to the emotional side of humans and spearheaded a “major epistemological revolution that changed the very texture, tone, color of human consciousness: from the sensuous, emotive, empathic *participatory mind or consciousness* to the conceptual, abstract, and analytic rational mind or discursive consciousness.”¹⁷²

René Descartes, the founder of modern philosophy and science, is another important figure who had a huge role to play in the perpetuation of nature/culture dualism. His contributions to mathematics and logic are well known but he was also the one to propose that the nature of the mind and the body are unlike each other and therefore they must be different. This was quickly followed by other related dualisms; the split between subject/object being one of them. In this scheme of things, nature is the object since human beings with their ability to think and communicate in an ordered and coherent system of languages discernible to other human beings are given the status of the subject. Everything that human beings are not – mindless, mechanical, inert, passive, automated, non-agential – became the defining traits of nature (inclusive of non-human beings). The realm of the human, set apart from the natural, became the cultural, hence erasing continuity or common ground between the two. When nature is thus conceived, any social or moral restrictions on its instrumentalization will fall by the wayside. As Plumwood puts it, in a mechanistic world, “[nature] represents a teleological vacuum, into which human ends must enter.”¹⁷³ She adds that with the rise of more sophisticated technology, the confidence of the humankind grew not only in their self-assumed superiority but also in their capacity to conquer nature. Coupled with the ideology of capitalism, technology has easily turned nature into a supplier of raw materials and resources to be utilized for the fulfilment of all human wants.

¹⁷¹ Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993. p. 104.

¹⁷² Bai, Heesoon. “Reanimating the Universe: Environmental Education and Philosophical Animism.” *Fields of Green: Restorying Culture, Environment, and Education*, edited by Maria McKenzie and et al. Hampton Press, 2009. p. 139.

¹⁷³ Plumwood, 1993. p.110.

Surely, there is a compelling need to dissolve this divide that is corrosive to any form of environmentalism. Certain critical thinkers have thought of ways to do so. O. Jones in the *International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography* offers a summary of such ways which he classifies as one-way and two-way approaches. The one-way approaches include considering everything as nature or alternatively as culture. That is, to bridge the gap between nature and culture, one can argue that humans, non-humans, and even that which has been manmade such as a tall building is composed of natural elements and are therefore extensions of nature. On the other hand, one can argue that “the very idea of nature, our knowledges of biology, chemistry, physics and so on are all productions of human mind, thought and language”¹⁷⁴ or simply put, sociocultural constructions of human beings. Both the approaches, however, run the risk of being reductive. As Jones indicates there are two-way approaches such as the Actor Network Theory (ANT), hybridity, new dialectics, new ecologies, dwelling, animal geographies, and new ideas of place for relating nature and culture which are more promising and symmetrical.¹⁷⁵

To begin with, Actor Network Theory, often credited to Bruno Latour, sees “any and all worldly formations as produced by integrated networks of differing actors, or rather actants, which include humans and non-humans. It makes no ontological distinction between nature, humans and technology.”¹⁷⁶ This theory has, however, been criticized on counts that it fails to acknowledge the differences between different types of actants and that the play of unequal power relations between the actants of the network is not emphasized enough. The next approach which is that of hybridity is, as Jones notes, conceptually close to ANT, except that it stresses on more open, spontaneous, hybrid forms of networks. Critiques of ANT and hybridity detect that eventually these approaches create divisions even if along new lines.

New dialectics is essentially a Marxist take on nature-culture relationship and as an approach it urges us to examine the connections between economy and ecology to see that nature and culture may not be separate realms at all but they are, in fact, constantly transforming one another. “Noel Castree offers fish farming as an example of this kind of dynamic between

¹⁷⁴ Jones, O. “Nature-culture.” *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography*, vol. 7, edited by Kitchen, R. and Thrift, N. Elsevier, 2009. p. 10.

[http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/12402/2/Nature%E2%80%93cultureHUGYFinal_\(2\).pdf](http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/12402/2/Nature%E2%80%93cultureHUGYFinal_(2).pdf). Accessed 29 April 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. p. 2.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. p. 3.

economy and nature.”¹⁷⁷ But he also feels that the divide between nature and culture is never completely gone in this type of dialectical reasoning. Moreover, the relations and interactions examined in this approach more often do not add up to “positive sum relationships.”¹⁷⁸ In the next approach—new ecologies—the emphasis is on considering ecology as such as a network of habitats “which maybe open or closed, stable or volatile, certain or uncertain, fleeting or enduring, spatially focused or [sic] diffused, and in which a whole host of agents are interacting, including humans.”¹⁷⁹ This network of habitats could be located in an urban settlement and still prove to be ecologically diverse and rich; the emphasis is on ecosystem’s changing character. The problem with this approach is that it may not be enough to see humans as agents within a changing ecosystem to foster healthier relationships, when within such an ecosystem, human beings more than any other type of agent and the choices they make cumulatively result in a scale of change that may in fact be harmful for the entire ecosystem.

Human beings must learn to engage with the environment in a more meaningful, if I might say, soulful fashion. The idea of ‘dwelling’ inspired by the later work of Martin Heidegger offers such an engagement. “It is about living-body-in-environment (space and place) which is sensing, responding, engaging, exchanging, remembering, knowing and doing.”¹⁸⁰ However, the approach of dwelling has also been criticized for giving the impression that to have an authentic experience of the place there must be a gradual unfolding, a revealing of that place which in turn might fail to notice momentary engagements with places. What it did bring to our attention largely through the work of Tim Ingold was the place of animals in it. Animal geographies are about involving animals to understand how they are specifically implicated in the interaction between nature and culture. David Matless and his colleagues have used the example of hunting which is a specific, intense form of animal-human interaction to further their examination in this area. The last of the approaches that O. Jones discusses is that of ‘places as entanglements.’ Here, place is viewed as a process in which all manner of actants, ranging from technology to humans to non-humans, contribute to make what stands at least for the time being as “one key outcome emerging from eddies or

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 19.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 20.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 22.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. p. 22.

entanglements in trillions of intermeshing flows patterning space-time.”¹⁸¹

In my understanding, while all of the aforesaid approaches do signal a move away from Cartesian philosophy, they fall short in terms of their breadth of vision and secondly, seem more like piecemeal measures developed largely within the confines of academia with very few instances of recognition and identification by a larger mass of people. In some cases, as we have seen they even reinstate dualisms of different kinds. However, it is necessary to appreciate these alternative models most of all because they indicate that scholars from various branches of knowledge in both social and natural sciences have increasingly come to question the viability of the nature/culture divide. Our understandings of nature-culture relationships are evolving. In this regard, it is my contention that animism may prove highly insightful in our continuing endeavour to re-imagine the nature-culture complexes. This is so because animism as a specific system of relating between different categories of beings that make up the world not only questions the very foundation of the nature/culture dualism but also the epistemological privilege granted to the Western culture against which all others are measured.

Philippe Descola, a French anthropologist and also a student of Claude Levi-Strauss, in *Nature and Society* and later in his masterpiece *Beyond Nature and Culture* identified different ontological schemes that characterize different conceptualisations of nature, namely animism, totemism, analogism, naturalism.¹⁸² Descola assigns naturalism, which he defines as “the belief that nature does exist, that certain things owe their existence and development to a principle extraneous both to chance and to the effects of human will,”¹⁸³ to be the ontological domain of the West. The effect of naturalism, he says, is that it “constantly

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p. 26.

¹⁸² Firstly, when one reads Philippe Descola, one can find that his organization of ontologies into animism, totemism, analogism, and naturalism cannot be strict divisions because in any society different ontologies can coexist. Also, see Sahlins, Marshall. “On the ontological scheme of *Beyond nature and culture*,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2014. pp. 281-290. for arguments on how animism, totemism, and analogism are but three forms of animism, namely communal, segmentary, and hierarchical and therefore shared by many communities of indigenous people. Secondly, when read against a scholar like Val Plumwood or Deborah Bird Rose, one can feel that Descola’s discussion has more of an anthropological thrust than philosophical. In other words, Descola’s account of animism of indigenous peoples is not necessarily done with the intent to offer a way out of the crisis of modernity, whether it is related to epistemology or the environment, but primarily to classify the modes in which varying cultures process the reality around them.

¹⁸³ Descola, Philippe and Gísli Pálsson. *Nature and Society: Anthropological Perspectives*, Routledge, 1996.p. 88.

produces actual hybrids of nature and culture which it cannot conceptualise as such;” in contrast, animism establishes a form of continuity between the realm of humans and non-humans.¹⁸⁴ Val Plumwood, too, has stressed on this aspect of animism. For her, animism could show the way to a deeper resolution of the nature/culture dualism. First of all, it removes “man’s effective monopoly on the spirit in this world” which was put in place by Christianity with its cult of saints.¹⁸⁵ This will in turn challenge anthropocentrism and its associated beliefs. With a ‘respiritualization’ of the world, concepts of agency, autonomy, creativity, intentionality will be reintroduced to the non-human world, ultimately challenging the Cartesian mind/body, subject/object dualism.¹⁸⁶ Thus, we can see how animism can have a snowball effect on the human conception of the world. Ecologically, too, it becomes impossible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference.

It is self-evident that in our search to avert an ecological crisis, science and technology alone cannot provide us with a permanent solution, even if it pacifies the situation for a while, but in the long run a new sensitivity toward the entire world must be developed. In other words, animism must be recovered for an ecological renewal. Outside of the context of indigenous belief system, theologian and philosopher Raimon Panikkar has described animism to be “the experience of life as coextensive with nature.”¹⁸⁷ He adds that there are two essential features of animism. Firstly, it stands for an “overcoming of all mechanistic and rationalistic worldviews” and secondly, for “the relatedness of all reality according to one principle which is itself all relatedness and not univocal.”¹⁸⁸ Additionally, animism has a special role to play in inverting the pervasive condition of modernity called the ‘disenchantment of the world,’ which has made the planet seem increasingly tameable and impersonal at the same time, by reintroducing enchantment.

In “Enchantment and Modernity,” Patrick Curry has discussed how enchantment as a subject of scholarly interest has been more or less overlooked because of the strong prevalence of the principle of rationality in academia and also because as an experience the nature of enchantment is difficult to articulate. Some scholars like Richard Jenkins, has talked about

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 89.

¹⁸⁵ White Jr., 1967. p. 1205.

¹⁸⁶ Plumwood, 1993. p. 136.

¹⁸⁷ Panikkar, Raimon. “A Nonary of Priorities.” *Revisioning Philosophy*, edited by J. Ogilvy. State University of New York Press, 1992. p. 243.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

(re)enchantment in terms of being a response to disenchantment. Jenkins' main argument is that the disenchantment that Weber attributed to the modern world mainly as a consequence of secularization and bureaucratization has not taken over everyone evenly and equally as tendencies of (re)enchantment in the form of traditional spiritual beliefs or modern cultural phenomenon like Disneyland exists.¹⁸⁹ Patrick Curry's article can be considered an intervention in Jenkins' argument because it takes a look at enchantment in a way that Jenkins could not which is to view it as more than the opposite of disenchantment. Curry clarifies that the primary quality of true enchantment is that it evokes wonder which comes unbidden and is more importantly, a non-modern experience. Curry uses the theoretical framework of J.R.R. Tolkien who to begin with makes a distinction between *Faërie* (enchantment) and magic. Magic, as per Tolkien, "produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World. ... It is not an art but a technique; its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and wills.' The 'primal desire at the heart of *Faërie*', in contrast, is 'the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder.'¹⁹⁰ In addition to this, Curry stresses that modernity as such was never devoid of magic but "borrowed heavily from its ideology (an anthropocentric exercise of power), imagery (the powerful male magus), and techniques (alchemy and natural astrology)."¹⁹¹ What it couldn't appropriate was the intangible and non-calculable – the unique sensation of enchantment. Enchantment is also, Curry explains, embodied and animated. When set against disenchantment, the most crucial difference between the two is in how it deals with the non-human. In an enchanted world, the boundaries between subject/object, human/non-human and spiritual/material are continually transgressed. Such a world as we can recognize is animistic.

For Val Plumwood, animism is the alternative to the mode of disenchantment which has made possible the objectification, demystification, and exploitation of non-humans or whom she refers to as the 'earth others' in her book *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (2002). In the mode of disenchantment, we follow a mechanistic, reductive model that strips the agency and intentionality of the earth others. As Plumwood puts it, "The rich intentionality the reductive stance would deny to the world is the ground of the enchantment it retains in many indigenous cultures and in some of the past of our own, the butterfly wing-

¹⁸⁹ Jenkins, Richard. "Disenchantment, Enchantment and re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium." *Max Weber Studies*, vol. 1, 2000.

¹⁹⁰ Curry, Patrick. "Enchantment and Modernity." *PAN: Philosophy, Activism, Nature*, no. 9, 2012. p. 77.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

dust of wonder that modernity stole from us and replaced with the drive for power. Being able to conceive others in intentional terms is important to being open to them as possible communicative, narrative and ethical subjects.”¹⁹² Animism extends the potential of intentionality to the non-humans and widens the human range of sensitivity, helping us regain some of the sense of wonder that is so crucial to the experience of enchantment and the replacement of modern disenchantment.

Once we have clearly established the value in an animist conception of the world, the crucial question becomes that of how do we recover animism? This is indeed an extremely difficult and complex thing to do but as the principle of Occam’s razor seems to suggest often the simplest answer is the correct one. In this case, the simplest answer is that we need to have more animist realist environmental narratives. That is to say, in the face of an escalating environmental crisis, we need narratives and stories that can help us see the animating force that binds places, things, and people into one lively world so our views on how we should and why we should strive for environmental sustainability undergoes an extensive revision. But as we already know, to make any impact these narratives must result in an overall shift in how we frame the environment. George Lakoff has explained in his insightful essay “Why It Matters How We Frame the Environment,”¹⁹³ that we all think in terms of “unconscious structures called frames” and that “there are limited possibilities for changing frames. Introducing new language is not always possible. The new language must make sense in terms of the existing system of frames. It must work emotionally.”¹⁹⁴ Here is where I think the potency and imaginativeness of *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* become evident. Even though they may be limited in terms of their reach, the texts, in my view, set very strong models for future animist realist environmental narratives. They have, in other words, brought in a new language with a deep awareness of animism that can resolve the nature/culture dualism and facilitate a change for the better in how we frame the environment and the crisis related to it. The following sections of this chapter will illustrate how this is so.

¹⁹² Plumwood, Val. *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*. Routledge, 2002. p. 177.

¹⁹³ In his essay, George Lakoff starts with the example of how Frank Luntz, the language advisory to the Bush administration, pushed for the substitution of the term “global warming” with “climate change” which has a much less frightening connotation. Moreover, if there is no indication that the change is directly linked to human beings, it would substantially reduce the responsibility of governments to fix it. This example illustrates how the use of language plays a key role in how we frame an issue and what we would do about it.

¹⁹⁴ Lakoff, George. “Why it Matters How We Frame the Environment.” *Environmental Communication*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2010. p. 72.

The Swan Book and That Deadman Dance: Re-framing the Environmental Narrative

The Swan Book

The Swan Book, as we have discussed, is a novel primarily about climate change and firmly belongs to the current epoch of geological time that is the Anthropocene. Anthropocene is a term popularized by the Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen to underscore the overwhelming role of humanity in causing the environmental changes that are taking place on a planetary scale. Crutzen thought, “Because human activities have also grown to become significant geological forces, for instance through land use changes, deforestation and fossil fuel burning, it is justified to assign the term ‘anthropocene’ to the current geological epoch.”¹⁹⁵ The idea of the Anthropocene since has captured the public imagination and thrown up some difficult issues to wrestle with. In the discipline of Humanities, artists and writers are experiencing drastic new challenges trying to conceive of ways to represent the enormity and abnormality of the concept of the Anthropocene in its full depth. The Anthropocene poses a massive challenge to our imaginative capability with its huge scales of time and space. Take the case of climate change in the era of the Anthropocene, both scientists and humanists are struggling to model, map, and convey its reality. There is nothing in the planet that climate change does not or would not affect. How does one represent such a phenomenon?

Elizabeth DeLoughrey, writing in *Global Ecologies and the Environmental Humanities: Postcolonial Approaches*, is of the opinion that at present most narratives of the Anthropocene position the human subject at the centre of the discourse and as exceptional to non-human species, perpetuating and furthering the ontological split between humans and nature. Emily Potter in “Climate Change and the Problem of Representation” considers this to be the inheritance of Western thought that operates in binaries. “Within these binaries, power is allocated unevenly, with the capacity to do, to have creative impact, and to author, invested in the human. Where the non-human environment ‘acts’—for instance, in the case of a ‘natural disaster—it is interpreted with the human at the centre of concern: what does the occurrence mean for human?”¹⁹⁶ It is, therefore, important that we turn to alternative modes

¹⁹⁵ Crutzen, Paul J. “The Anthropocene.” *Earth System Science in the Anthropocene*, edited by Eckart Ehlers and Thomas Krafft. Springer, 2006. p.13.

¹⁹⁶ Potter, Emily. “Climate Change and the Problem of Representation.” *Australian Humanities Review*, no. 46, 2009. p. 70.

of narrative that do not sideline the non-human others or superiorise human subjectivity in their depiction of the Anthropocene if we are to overcome the overpowering influence of the nature/culture dualism. *The Swan Book* being an animist realist environmental narrative offers such an alternative. Wright's subjects in the novel are both human and non-human. The Aboriginal country, as we have seen in the last chapter, inclusive of all beings is itself sentient and collapses our conventional understanding of the terms life and non-life.

In *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason*, where Val Plumwood argues that the logical structure of eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, and androcentrism is the same, she lists the tendency to "homogenize" the other as one of the chief features of such structures. For example, women are not only considered to be unlike men but all women are bunched together under the same homogenous category, obliterating any internal differences among them. The same applies to colonized populations as Edward Said has powerfully illustrated to us in his *Orientalism* (1978). The ideological suppositions, fantasies, and images about the Orient of the Occident are more often simplified, stereotypical, crude, and homogenized. In the case of nature/culture divide, the other-than-human entities are conceptualized as interchangeable, replaceable units located under broad categories, whether they are trees, flowers, or animals. As Val Plumwood puts it, "An Anthropocentric culture rarely sees animals and plants as individual centres of striving and need, doing their best for themselves and their children in their condition of life."¹⁹⁷ This type of culture as Plumwood explains promotes human insensitivity toward non-humans, an underestimation of the complexity of nature and a mechanistic culture – all of which predictably polarises nature from culture.

"To counter polarisation it is necessary to acknowledge and reclaim continuity and overlap between the polarized groups as well as internal diversity within them."¹⁹⁸ Wright has throughout *The Swan Book* consciously tried to decentre the human/nature contrast by attending to both the factors of continuity and diversity. In recognition of nature's amazing diversity, Wright has featured in the novel broilgas, owls, monkeys, myna birds, crows, dogs and other hybrid figures such as that of the ghost, genie and the Chinese dragon. Also, during the writing of the novel, Wright gathered as much information as she could on different swan species from across the world, including the legends and poetry associated with swans in

¹⁹⁷ Plumwood, 2002. pp. 107-108.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p. 103.

different cultures. The section “A Note on Sources” at the end of the text indicates the diversity of her research on swans.

More prominently, Wright recognizes the continuity and convergence between all life forms, with Oblivia’s relationship with the swans being emblematic of this continuity. Wright stresses on the indestructible nature of this relationship by passing it through gruelling trials in extreme environments. For example, when the swans reach the city in their search for Oblivia, the episode has been described as follows:

Late night gangs of street children heard the swans singing and followed them into the lane. Their world was the deep night while the city was in blackout to conserve energy. The swans were driven by nervousness, but their bond with the girl was greater than fear and held them to the lane. Hundreds of swans circled the building every night, flying in lines, sometimes coming so close their wings clipped the buildings and triggered a chain reaction of downward spiralling. Again and again they returned, and flew through the narrow corridor with even greater compositions of desperation than the previous night.

These aerobatics were how the swans communicated. With all of the nervousness generated at night, the swans kept away from the busy city during the day. Instead, they waited in the polluted waters of the bay, and in ponds in the ruined botanical gardens of the city, and any other abandoned flatlands with a sprinkling of water.

They returned in the quietness of the night and flew continuously through the lane, the closest they could get to the girl staring at them from her window. It was the flight of the obsessed.¹⁹⁹

The above passage presents an admixture of premeditated activities: the hustle of the street children, the frenetic flight of the swans, and the stare of Oblivia fixed on the swans. The actions of each of the three together form an active network and influence one another. The children have followed the swans into the lane and the swans have gathered around the building because Oblivia is in the building, standing at the window with her gaze directed

¹⁹⁹ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

toward the swans. In Wright's portrayal, there is no boundary line jamming the exchange between human forms of life and non-human forms of life. Moreover, the swans *feel* emotions like fear and nervousness in the alien territory of the cityscape with the street children chasing after them. But almost as in the genre of epics where the brave knight overcomes his fear to reach the princess who has been held captive, the swans overcome their fear and risk their lives because they are irrevocably bound to Oblivia first through their common story of displacement and exile and fundamentally through the spirit of the Aboriginal country. This is a bond, in that sense, even though of a different nature no less significant or spiritual than the relationship between "obsessed" lovers that has been much-romanticized and written about in the literature of the West.

Also, kindly note that the "aerobatics" of the swans is a form of communication. In *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World*, David Abram has talked about how hunter-gatherers of pre-modern societies could read into the language of the non-human beings. He explains, "WRITING, LIKE HUMAN LANGUAGE, IS ENGENDERED NOT ONLY within the human community but between the human community and the animate landscape, born of the interplay and contact between the human and the more-than-human world. The earthly terrain in which we find ourselves, and upon which we depend for all our nourishment, is shot through with suggestive scrawls and traces, from the sinuous calligraphy of rivers winding across the land, inscribing arroyos and canyons into the parched earth of the desert, to the black slash burned by lightning into the trunk of an old elm. The swooping flight of birds is a kind of cursive script written on the wind; it is this script that was studied by the ancient "augurs," who could read therein the course of the future."²⁰⁰ These signs of the other-than-human as brilliantly described by Abram were gradually excluded from the larger structure of semiotics with the invention of the alphabet or the phonetic writing system, ultimately rendering nature as non-referential, mute, and meaningless.

Indigenous oral communities who have held onto their wisdom and ways of being-in-the world, however, still draw messages from nature. The Aboriginals of Australia maintain an intimate relation with the country that is rendered into their Dreaming stories and songs. They make sense of their immediate surroundings through related ancestral songs and stories which

²⁰⁰ Abram, David. *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-human World*. Vintage Books, 1997. p. 64.

are as much about the topographical features embedded in the surrounding land as how to navigate those surroundings. And when an Aboriginal person says he or she has been spoken to by a non-human entity, it is to be taken literally and not metaphorically. As David Abram reminds us this is no different from how modern people make sense of the written words. That is, what the word is to written cultures, the non-human entity like rocks, trees, or birds is to oral cultures. It is possible for the indigenous communities to have a dialogue with non-human entities because their animate quality is acknowledged and correspondence with them is considered inevitable to the daily existence of these communities. Moreover, this dialogue cannot be considered the product of hallucination, child-like thinking or projections of the human mind. As Abram explains, “Far from presenting a distortion of their factual relation to the world, the animistic discourse of indigenous, oral peoples is an inevitable counterpart of their immediate, synaesthetic engagement with the land that they inhabit.”²⁰¹ Wright has presented to her readers such a direct, perceptual, sensual engagement with the non-human that has been largely lost to the modern culture such that we are forced to confront the frenzy and fear of the swans, their agential quality, and also their connection with Oblivia.

Throughout the text, there are such instances of cross-species contact. The ancestral tree in whose bowel Oblivia lay asleep for almost a decade shared a divine relationship with the Aboriginal people of the swamp. “Old people said that tree was like all of the holiest places in the world rolled into one for us, *no wonder [Oblivia] went straight to it. ... The tree watching everything, calling out to her when it saw some people had broken the Law. ... This ancestor was our oldest living relative for looking after the memories, so it had to take her.*”²⁰² In this instance, Wright makes the sacred ancestral tree the only witness to Oblivia’s rape which as a protective, generous guardian takes her in and offers her shelter. What is more important here is the recognition of rape as a gruesome act of violation of justice and the Aboriginal Law by the ancestral tree. Here, Wright is pointing not only to the profound failure of the constitutional law of Australia instituted by the white-settlers to protect the Aboriginal population but at the same time showing the durability of the Aboriginal Law while restoring its relevance to the Aboriginal people. After the girl was found by Bella Donna years later, the tree was blown up by the Army precisely because it represented the belief system of the Aboriginal people who thought of themselves to be the “kinspeople” of

²⁰¹ Ibid. p. 82.

²⁰² Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

the tree. When the tree was destroyed, the Aboriginal people of the swamp “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.”²⁰³ Wright here offers a powerful image of human–non-human continuity that is to the indigenous communities as real and true as the physical existence of their own bodies.

It is necessary to bring in the concept of “deep listening” at this point because treating nature as alive and interactive may not be sufficient if we don’t invite human beings to be attentive observers and listeners. In fact, Val Plumwood considers “listening and attentiveness to the other” to be one of the most important of the counter-hegemonic virtues that resist the instrumentalization and othering of nature.²⁰⁴ It is understood why this is so because it is only by paying attention and having an open stance can the relationship between the human and the non-human move from being monological to dialogical. During my research, I found that there is, in fact, a term in the Aboriginal language, even though not mentioned by Plumwood, for the quality of listening and attentiveness that helps one receive the disclosures of nature. It is called *dadirri*. Indigenous Elder Mirriam Ungunameer describes it as “inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.”²⁰⁵ This special quality, Ungunameer, attributes to the years of practice of listening to stories passed on by the ancestors, the cumulative result of which is that Aboriginal people become skilled listeners. She explains: “In our Aboriginal way, we learnt to listen from our earliest days. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. This was the normal way for us to learn – not by asking questions.”²⁰⁶ This kind of attentive listening as practised by the Australian Aboriginal people can be developed only by having the patience to stay still, by being truly comfortable with silence, and by exercising mindfulness.

In *The Swan Book*, it has been described that “[in the] world of swamp, people had good ears for picking up every word that went skimming across the surface of the water, and vice versa, ... You could almost reach out and grab each word with your hand.”²⁰⁷ Here, we notice that words have been attributed tangibility/materiality as a sign of their power and agency.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Plumwood, 2002. p. 194.

²⁰⁵ “Dadirri: Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness.” *Miriam Rose Foundation*.

<http://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/about-us/about-dadirri>. Accessed 05 May 2017.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

Additionally, the Harbour Master is most often described as “listening” from the top of the sand hill overseeing the swamp. Listening, here, encompasses a deep contemplative activity in addition to the act of receiving words. Oblivia is especially sensitive to the sounds of the swans. She could always tell when they were approaching by the sound of their flapping wings coming from a distance. In my reading of the text, the speechlessness of Oblivia, even if symbolic of the disabling power of trauma, also amplifies the importance of listening in the communication between human and non-human beings. That is to say, Oblivia could only listen but it was perhaps why she could so closely connect with the other-than-human beings. Her muteness was not a barrier in this regard. On the contrary, Bella Donna was always talking and wanting to gather listeners. She “told her stories of exile endlessly, but who listened? The swamp people were not interested in being conquered by other peoples’ stories. Aunty Bella Donna of the Champions knew times when no one listened to the inconsequential stories she sung to herself; ... The girl replaced any dream of a big audience. But Oblivia stared into space, not listening.”²⁰⁸ Bella Donna’s insistence on talking is a reflection of how she wanted to assert her own stories from a foreign land over that of the Aboriginal people. By privileging the act of speech over the act of listening she was forcing her ideas upon Oblivia who could not talk back.²⁰⁹ But the Aboriginal people, least of all Oblivia, could not care to listen to her beyond a point. I think this is important because it shows the resistance of the Aboriginal people in being told stories that do not belong to their land or their ancestors. Wright is perhaps trying to complicate the ideal of the Aborigine who listens so deeply that he/she can communicate with the non-human by offering the other side of it where Aboriginal people have had just enough of being spoken to by foreigners. So as readers, we must also be aware that *The Swan Book* is a deeply political text and is aimed at long-term changes in the real political ecology of Australia.

The political nature of Wright’s writing is also evident in her attribution of vitality to the floating junk in the swamp. In the last chapter we brought this up, linking it with Jane Bennett’s thing-power materialism by which she meant a kind of vital materiality that is non-specific to humans. In her *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* she has expanded upon it. Essentially, her theory refuses to consider human beings as the only repository of agency and intentionality by extending the same to non-human beings and more importantly,

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ This is not the same as what Derrida meant by ‘phonocentrism’ where in Western philosophy, from Plato to Husserl and other philosophers have privileged the medium of speech over writing.

to things like the trash we come across daily. Her study has been influenced by a number of scholars such as the Roman poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus, the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, the American poet Henry David Thoreau, the German philosopher Theodore W. Adorno, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and the French sociologist Bruno Latour. I find that because of the high diversity of thoughts Bennett has drawn from to inform her own theory, the book on the whole seems like an assemblage tapering off in terms of the richness of its argument. However, the very concept of thing-power materialism has been a turning point in the study of materiality and can also prove beneficial to this study.

The ultimate goal of Bennett's project is to promote a more intelligent approach toward ecology. As she explains, thing-power materialism poses "things as being more than mere objects, emphasizing their powers of life, resistance, and even a kind of will; these are powers that, in a tightly knit world, we ignore at our peril."²¹⁰ And this idea, Bennett hopes, at best will move global consumptive practices in a more environment friendly direction with virtues like frugality and zero-wastage catching up among people. I would like to, in the context of *The Swan Book*, put Bennett's thing-power materialism together with Lawrence Buell's toxic discourse, the term that he uses to describe a mode of writing that focuses on toxified, polluted spaces, places, and bodies. In my opinion, when we put the two together as Wright does, we are raising a number of critical issues at the same time. The first major issue is that of eco-inequality. In *The Swan Book*, the floating junk invades the vast lake where the local Aboriginal people live, scaring them into leaving the lake. When they return after years, the first thing to capture their attention is the rotting junk clinging to its secrets. The Aboriginal people had no other choice but to live with it. They did not even understand fully what they were staring at or why the junk stared back at them.

As described in the text: "They wished and dreamed for this emotional eyesore to be removed and gone from their lands forever. It was foreign history sinking there that could not be allowed to rot into the sacredness of the ground. Their conscience flatly refused to have junk buried among the ancestral spirits. These were really stubborn people sticking to the earth of the ancestors, even though they knew well enough that the contaminated lake caused bellyaches, having to eye each cup of tainted water they drank from the lake, but drinking it

²¹⁰ Bennett, Jane. "The Force of Things: Steps toward and Ecology of Matter." *Political Theory*, vol. 32, no. 3, 2004. p. 360.

anyway.”²¹¹ This episode is a potent reflection of real world affairs where affluent, politically powerful countries export their waste to poor countries. Buell has mentioned the “garbage flotillas” that make their way from all over the world to Africa.²¹² There are many other cases of illegal dumping. For example, Mexico has served as a dumping ground for hazardous waste from the United States. These days an alarming amount of e-waste is being generated that end up in poor countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Indonesia who are far from equipped to handle such waste. In the absence of technology to effectively process the waste, they end up in landfills. As we already know the quality of most kinds of waste that is the end result of industrial production is that they literally do not die. Some plastic, for example, never completely break down.

In Wright’s writing, the floating junk of the swamp attains a vitality that is Bennett’s thing-power. What is otherwise artificial assumes agential powers. The junk commands attention and inspires acute uneasiness among the Aboriginal people who could neither wish it away nor ignore it. Bennett claims that in our everyday lives we have become immune to the materiality of things. As she explains, “A ‘materialistic way of life—insofar as it requires buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles—thus displays an *anti*-materiality bias. In other words, the sheer volume of products, and the necessity of junking them to make room for new ones, devalues thing. It disables and obscures thing-power.”²¹³ So we need a cultural framework in which the animate, agentic quality of things is recognized without the blinkers of materialism. Wright is working toward such a cultural framework. In my reading of the text, the real brilliance of Wright comes through when she juxtaposes rotting junk alongside ancestral spirits. In the last chapter, the significance of ancestral beings in the Aborigine’s experience of the self and the world was explained in detail with the help of anthropologist Sylvie Poirier’s ethnographical study on Australian Aboriginal people. In an Australia that has been altered by climate change, as in *The Swan Book*, the ancestral spirits which are pivotal expressions of the Aboriginal culture have been forced to co-exist with man-made rubbish. To put it bluntly, it is my proposition that man-made waste has seeped into the common heritage of humanity. Human beings are no more disconnected from their material productions that gradually turn into waste than they are from their ancestors. Moreover, material products have the power to modify planetary futures and

²¹¹ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

²¹² Buell, Lawrence. “Toxic Discourse.” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1998. p. 644.

²¹³ Bennett, 2004. p. 351.

alter the very fabric of ecological systems. More and more scientists have attested to this fact. In the Pacific Ocean alone there is a vast expanse of debris that is twice the size of North America called the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Interestingly, “Curtis Ebbesmeyer, an oceanographer and leading authority on flotsam, [who] has tracked the build-up of plastics in the seas for more than 15 years, [compares] the trash vortex to a living entity: ‘It moves around like a big animal without a leash.’ When that animal comes close to land, as it does at the Hawaiian archipelago, the results are dramatic. ‘The garbage patch barfs, and you get a beach covered with this confetti of plastic,’ he added.”²¹⁴ This comparison has to be taken literally to comprehend the massive destructive power of industrial production and man-made waste. And more often than not, the destruction reaches the shores of the socially marginalized groups such as the indigenous Australians first. With her shocking description of the level of pollution in the swamp, Wright emphasises the vulnerability of the socially marginalized:

It was easy, and eerie, to see bleeding-heart, rust-staining yellow water. It gave you the shivers. If you looked closely at the flotilla for long enough you saw people at war. Saw military parades. Dead men marching up and down on the decks and in your sleep you dreamt of people screaming and running for their lives from the explosions.

... The water gleamed with blue and purple oxidising colours, and if you were to look long enough at the sun hitting the swamp from 1400 to 1600 hours in the winter months, this polluted glare became even more dazzling – where the water was broken into trails of rainbows made by the movement of swimming swans.

Swamp people regarded this particular sight as something evil, created by devils, easy, easy now, and in this respect the swans coming to the swamp with no story for themselves generated a lot of talk. They were suspected of being contaminated with radioactivity leaking from some of the hulls. Of course, it was mentioned, considered, nurtured by the swamp-dwellers’ constituency, now permanently submerged and half-drowning in open wounds, by asking forlornly any question that would not be answered such as, *Was this the silent killer then, the Army’s final weapon of mass destruction?*²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Asia-Pacific Correspondent and et al. “The World’s rubbish dump: a tip that stretches from Hawaii to Japan.” *Independent*. 5 Feb 2008. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/green-living/the-worlds-rubbish-dump-a-tip-that-stretches-from-hawaii-to-japan-778016.html>. Accessed 10 May 2017.

²¹⁵ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

As we can see, Wright follows the trail of contamination from the water, which is the source of life, all the way to the minds and bodies of the swamp-dwellers. In the absence of ways to shield themselves from the ghastly sight and effects of dangerous levels of environmental pollution in the swamp, contaminated water has contaminated the Aboriginal people, hinting at the illusion that is mankind's ability to insulate itself from environmental changes, thereby surpassing nature. The truth is without the temporary forms of protection and comfort offered by modernity, the slightest change in the natural ecosystem severely affects humanity. Furthermore, note that never having been fully oriented to modernity with its ideology of unremitting scientific progress, industrialism and militarization, the Aboriginal people think of pollution as a creation of devils and suspect if the swans are weapons of mass destruction sent by the Army. I think this is an especially insightful, albeit disturbing, moment in the text, as on the one hand, it points to the process by which the minds of the colonized and the oppressed, who have never been able or wanted to catch up with Western modernity try to make sense of its repercussions with personalist rationales.²¹⁶ On the other hand, it exposes how intergenerational trauma causes widespread paranoia and fear.

Here, I would like to deviate from thing-power materialism and toxic discourse to speak briefly about the effects of transgenerational trauma of the Aboriginal people through the character of Oblivia. In my reading of the text, the crazy snake virus which is described to be living in a doll house in Oblivia's brain is symptomatic of the paranoia induced by a traumatic past. Oblivia feels: "Inside the doll's house the virus manufactures really dangerous ideas as arsenal, and if it sees a white flag unfurling, it fires missiles from a bazooka through the window into the flat, space, field or whatever else you want to call life. The really worrying thing about missile-launching fenestrae is what will be left standing in the end, and which splattering of truths running around in my head about a story about a swan with a bone will last on this ground."²¹⁷ Clearly, Oblivia has internalized the abuse and oppression that is a cumulative result of centuries of colonial and neo-colonial policies and practices aimed at her community, resulting in chronic anxiety, hypervigilance, sense of self-blame, isolation, withdrawal, and a regressive behaviour. Moreover, her constant desire to go back to the ancestral tree in which Bella Donna had found her reflects how she is always searching for a rescuer. Wright makes the psychological trauma of Oblivia palpable with the virus metaphor

²¹⁶ In the last chapter, it was mentioned how in indigenous animist realist texts personalist rationales are accommodated, disposing of the universalizing tendency of logical positivism.

²¹⁷ Wright, Alexis. *The Swan Book*. Giramondo, 2013. Kindle edition.

and I think it is an extremely clever choice because it once again conjoins the human and the non-human while stressing on the agential quality of the latter.

To return to thing-power materialism and toxic discourse, when we combine the two, apart from eco-inequality, we also see more clearly the closeness of nature-culture connection from the way in which each intensely affects the other. As both Bennett and Buell dictates and Wright shows we can no longer maintain a strong distinction between the two but they intermingle to form a single, unified polity.²¹⁸ Consequently, we must re-envision the non-human as a source of action, agency, and intentionality for the sake of the health of the entire planet. The task that remains is to develop human sensitivity toward the non-human. A good starting point is to encourage, as simple as it may sound, the practise of walking. We must remember that most indigenous communities, like the Aboriginal people of Australia were foragers and did not lead stationary lives. They had to move around not only to locate food but according to Aboriginal traditions, tribesmen were responsible for recreating the Dreaming by walking in the footsteps of the ancestors through the country where every topographical feature is already part of the songlines that have been passed onto them by the ancestors. In my reading of *The Swan Book* Oblivia's never-ending journey through the Aboriginal country is symbolic of such a recreation, except that it is no longer a joyous event but one haunted by the terrible devastation wrought by anthropogenic climate change.

That Deadman Dance

In the last chapter, we discussed *That Deadman Dance* in the framework of animist realism. We showcased the larger-than-human social cosmos of the narrative of the text symbolized in particular by the spiritual bond between Bobby Wabalanginy and the whales. Additionally, we established with the help of examples from the text how in the indigenous animist cosmology the non-human is an intentional and communicative being and how the whole

²¹⁸ In this regard, Bennett addresses a critical objection that has been raised by those who fear that failure to keep up the division between the human subject and non-human object will lead to human objectification and human-on-human exploitation. Her response is that even though the allocation of subjectivity uniquely to human beings has ameliorated human suffering to some extent, “the instrumentalization of the non-human can itself be unethical and can itself undermine long-term human interest. ... [Also] the Kantian imperative to treat humanity always as an end-in-itself and never merely as a means does not have a stellar record of success in preventing human suffering or promoting human well-being: it is important to raise the question of its actual, historical efficacy in order to open up space for forms of ethical practice that do not rely upon the image of an intrinsically hierarchical order of things.” See Bennett, 2010. p. 12.

Aboriginal country which encompasses the spirits of the ancestors is sentient. Like *The Swan Book*, *That Deadman Dance* as an animist realist narrative demonstrates the continuity between the human and the non-human, redistributes subjectivity among non-humans, and destabilizes the human/nature divide to promote a more inclusive, ethical relationship between the two. In this chapter, I intend to expand on the argument by focusing on the figure of the whale. The objective is to show that while law-enforced conservation and sustainability efforts foster healthier attitudes towards the environment and are therefore important, animism reorders worldviews and unsettles longstanding sociocultural and cognitive structures whether it is racism, anthropocentrism, or human/non-human dualism.

To begin with, whales, like many other large creatures, have received the continued attention and interest of human beings. According to Jonathan Steinwand: “Breathing air, yet at home in the water rather than on land, whales and dolphins have fascinated human beings all over the world for quite some time. So much like us in some ways and yet ‘uncannily other,’ cetaceans have come to represent both the human animal and a mysteriously ‘fascinating alterity’ beyond terrestrial knowledge.”²¹⁹ Lawrence Buell in *Writing for an Endangered World* has commented on the human-like traits of the cetaceans which include “individuality as well as intelligence, including powers of adaptation, mimicry of human sounds, and even the capacity to transmit ‘collective wisdom from one generation to the next.’ ... Perhaps most intriguingly of all from an anthropocentric standpoint, cetaceans seem to enjoy socializing with humans under certain conditions: to play, to race and follow boats, to listen and respond to flute music, and so on. Such interspecies behaviour has been reported at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century, not counting such legends as Arion and the dolphin. Whales anciently seemed to partake of ocean’s mysterious, radical ambiguous otherness: to symbolize divine power, whether benign or threatening.”²²⁰

Besides their cultural importance as figures of liminality, ambiguity, and mythological wisdom, their historical significance as a commodity of economic value can be hardly overlooked. Whaling has carried on for centuries with some tracing the history as far back as

²¹⁹ Steinwand, Jonathan. “What the Whales Would Tell us.” *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, edited by Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley. Oxford University Press, 2011. p. 182.

²²⁰ Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2001. p. 203.

3000 B.C.²²¹ For their meat, oil, and bone (used in making women's corsets), some whale species were hunted right down to the point of extinction like the eastern Atlantic Right Whales. "After World War II, the IWC [International Whaling Commission] was established under the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling to 'provide for the conservation, development, and optimum utilization of the whale resources.'"²²² It is however evident from the early history of the organization that it was far from effective in controlling whaling. In the first place, the quotas the IWC set to restrict the number of whales being killed were not enough to sustain, let alone revive the whale population. Additionally, many nations manipulated or openly flouted the rules of the IWC. When it became clear that catch limits was not the way forward if there had to be any whales left in the ocean, in 1982 the IWC installed the commercial whaling moratorium, banning whaling irrespective of its population size and species, effective from the 1985/86 season. This ban is in place to date and is adhered to by most whaling nations with exceptions such as Norway, Japan, and Iceland.²²³

Here, what we have seen is an example of intergovernmental policies on anti-whaling as well as public concern toward the conservation and protection of whales bringing commercial whaling to closure. While as tremendous an achievement it is, it is as important to note that this closure is neither permanent nor complete. Illegal whaling continues and then there are those who exploit legal ambiguity. "Norwegian whalers hunt minke whales for commercial purposes, exploiting a loophole around the Norway's 'objection' to the International Whaling Commission's (IWC) global ban on commercial whaling and over the past decade, have killed between 464 – 736 minke whales each year."²²⁴ In the future, it won't be a surprise if any of the member nations of the IWC lifts their ban in the wake of an economic meltdown or worse, a sudden scientific discovery in the hitherto hidden potential of cetacean resources. Bearing in mind the unpredictable political and perceptual shifts that the world has seen lately, any change, however regressive, would not come as a surprise. We can see that almost

²²¹ "History of Whaling." *Whale Facts*. <http://www.whalefacts.org/history-of-whaling/>. Accessed 10 May 2017.

²²² "Whaling." *GreenEcoPeace*. <http://greenecopeace.org/whaling-history.html>. Accessed 10 May 2017.

²²³ Certain aboriginal peoples are exempted from the ban under 'aboriginal subsistence whaling.' They are not subjected to the moratorium by the IWC because it recognizes the non-commercial aspect of aboriginal subsistence whaling. For more information, see "Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling." *International Whaling Commission*. <https://iwc.int/aboriginal>. Accessed 10 May 2017.

²²⁴ "Really, Norway, You Want to Kill Even More Whales Though No One Wants to Eat Them?" *WDC*. 6 February 2017. <http://uk.whales.org/blog/2017/02/really-norway-you-want-to-kill-even-more-whales-though-no-one-wants-to-eat-them>. Accessed 10 May 2017.

all mammoth, international organizations like the IWC are run with an inherent anthropocentric value system. This could not become any clearer than by considering the very rationale that was used to promote anti-whaling policies.

To convince the international community as to why they should save the whales, the key argument put forth by many was that the whales were very much like human beings. As the American magazine *Wired* put it, “Not human people, but as occupying a similar range on the spectrum as the great apes, for whom the idea of personhood has moved from preposterous to possible. Chimpanzees, gorillas and bonobos possess self-awareness, feelings, and high-level cognitive powers. According to a steadily gathering body of research, so do the whales and dolphins. ... The idea of whale personhood makes all the more haunting the prospect that Earth’s cetaceans, many of whom were hunted to the brink of extinction in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, are still threatened.”²²⁵ In other words, the whales are worth saving because they possess certain characteristics like that of human beings. But isn’t recognizing personhood in the non-human animism? I would like to argue in the case of recognizing the closeness of whales to human beings in order to save the former, we are once again reinforcing human uniqueness by declaring that the lives of certain creatures matter by virtue of having evolutionary traits in common with man. Animism, on the other hand, does not operate on a scale with human beings as the gold standard against which other beings are evaluated. It is, as we have seen, a relational epistemology and its relevance extends beyond any one species. We can see that *That Deadman Dance*’s indigenous view of interspecies kinship does not speak the language of conservation and protection of endangered species that is firmly located within a Western legal and political framework. It suggests that we keep up our compassion, respect, attentive stance, solidarity, and obligation towards one another *everyday* and not just in moments of crisis. Scott is, however, equally invested in showing us the incursion of commercial whaling, spearheaded by the white settlers, into the indigenous world. It is not a black-and-white situation as we know that Aboriginal people like Bobby Wabalanginy is tacitly involved in colonial whaling. In my reading of the text, even as we cannot ignore Bobby’s complicity in whaling, if we juxtapose the Aboriginal and Western approaches to whaling, we will see that they are not the same just like an animist conception of the world is not the same as nature conservation and management. I will substantiate my position with the help of the following scenes from the text:

²²⁵ Keim, Brandon. “Whales Might Be As Much Like People As Apes Are.” *Wired*. 25 June 2009. <https://www.wired.com/2009/06/whalepeople/>. Accessed 11 May, 2017.

The first scene, I consider, is that of Bobby witnessing a mother whale and her calf being attacked and killed while he is aboard a whale-ship:

Scene #1

Bobby was shoved awake to voices and rushing footsteps; boats being lowered, dark hummocks rolling in the dawn light, mist rising from the sea. The bay full of whales! Boats raced away from the ship, each with a man standing at the stern, and six sick men rowing. Each playful whale sank from sight immediately its would-be harpooner rose from oar to grasp his great dart, and each boat, rather than waiting for the whale to rise again, rushed for the next whale in its path that was just there, there, but always out of reach. ... A harpoon struck a trailing calf, and immediately all oars in that boat rose from the water and pointed at the sky as the boat swung away. Bobby saw a whale detach itself from the pod, and come back to the already slowing boat and the small whale it had struck, now rising. A second boat's harpoon hit the mother as she reached her stricken calf. The mother went underwater, ... Dart's out! said a voice near Bobby. A group of whales turned back to the bay; a third whaleboat rowed to meet them. Inside the bay, a man at the bow thrust his lance into the wounded calf. The calf's tail rose and fell, the boat went back and forth to avoid its flailing, to drive the steel in again. The water frothed with blood; the mother whale returned, put itself between calf and boat. A second boat, another man, another harpoon. ... Harpooned, dragging a great weight of pain, the mother was returning to her calf. The silver spear at the bow of the boat stabbed again and again. ... The boat's lifted oars were a row of spikes, and the man at the bow drove and twisted his steel spear into the whale. Bobby groaned, thinking he heard a whale groan, too, and thick hot blood rained upon the boat and upon the men, and in the water a red stain grew larger. .. Sick men seemed well again, come alive with blood. ... Smoke billowed from a fire on the beach. A group of Noongar people stood between it and a whale stranded there. Even at this distance, Bobby recognized Menak. Further around the beach waves broke against the pale and murky carcass of yesterday's whale kill. Not yet officially on lookout, Bobby turned from one sight to another.²²⁶

The second scene is of Menak watching a whale washed-up on the shore die of wounds from

²²⁶ Scott, 2010. pp. 250-251.

an attack inflicted on it by the whalers:

Scene #2

Manek stood waist deep in water, close up beside the whale and confident no shark would bother him. The whale's eye dimmed, and yet still it reflected the campfire on the beach, the sky's pale dome, and Menak, too, along with Manit and the young girl. Waiting. Only in the old stories had Menak ever known of so many whales in the bay. There were old whale bones in the dunes, and sometimes you could walk from one to the other without touching the sand. He was deep in the whale story of this place right now, resonating with it, but there was some new element, some improvisation and embellishment of its well-known rhythm that distracted him, caught at his attention and kept bringing him back to himself, this specific now. Further around the beach something was being savaged by sharks and seagulls. A whale carcass, the inner part of a whale, but still fresh and with the head and thick skin stripped away. What had the ship done to it? And here was young Wabalanginy, rowing from that ship to shore along with the horizon men. Menak knew Noongars would be arriving over the next few days, but he hadn't expected one from the sea. This boy coming to be a man, and bringing strangers with him. He made an incision in the whale to release its spirit. It was something he had done with Wabalanginy's father. But what man stood beside him now?²²⁷

The third scene shows Geordie Chaine trying to build relations with the captain of an American whale-ship:

Scene #3

Geordie Chaine had set his camp apart from the others, and made a shelter of oiled canvas draped over a whale jaw bone he'd had the men drag from further in the dunes ... I'm new to this game, he told Brother Jonathan, thinking the man young to be a whaling captain. You are younger than I, he went on, but I must learn from you. The man frowned, smiled. Even young Bobby knew sweet-talking Chaine was flattering the captain. You're one boat short, you need men ... And so the two men toasted their agreement with rum and the whale jaw bone, arching against the stars, gleamed with

²²⁷ Ibid. pp. 254-255.

firelight. A few more whales and Captain Brother Jonathan would have all the oil he could carry. That wouldn't take long, not with three boats working between ship and shore. Chaine could have all the bone; there was still a market for the fine structures from their mouths, stays and bustles for the fashionable ladies. Captain Jonathan accepted Chaine's assurances that the natives told him countless whales entered the bay this time of year. Once he was ready to head for home Captain Jonathan would offer Chaine equipment he no longer required. All the more room on board ship for oil then. Chaine had a list of what he wanted: try-pot, whaleboat, harpoons, lances, line...²²⁸

The fourth scene describes Bobby's thoughts on whales during his lookout:

Scene #4

And if [Geordie Chaine] wants whales then Bobby knows this is the place where they come close to shore, close enough for him and the other men to leap into a boat, row quickly to them with spears. Madness. Bobby was excited just thinking about it! All the life and spirit under the sea's skin and out past the horizon, and Bobby gunna bring it back, give it air, haul it onto the sandy shore. Every time Bobby walked though the whale jaws he still thought of Jonah, from the Bible story, and that old people's song. Grab the whale's heart, squeeze it, use its eyes and power to take you where you wanna be. ... In that story the man returns home, his children with him and their two mothers, pregnant again the both of them. ... Jonah would have been alright if he was a Noongar man. Come back home rich and your people gunna love you.²²⁹

The fifth scene is that of Bobby's whale song and what's not in it:

Scene #5

By season's end Bobby had a song of the whale hunt, and his voice offered it as the ship left Close-by-island bound for King George Town. ... The song was a search for whales as the sun our mother rose but even before that the sky was upward drawing the light from deep blue water and oh look here come the whales ... Bobby's song had little of cutting up the whale. It did not say the whale's blubber was peeled and sliced

²²⁸ Ibid. pp.271-272.

²²⁹ Ibid. pp. 294-295.

into long strips. It did not detail the ‘blankets’, or ‘leaves’ or ‘book-pieces’ into which the blubber was further cut. Only the verse about Wooral referred to the clanking of the windlass hauling the whale from the water and onto the granite slope. There was little of the thick blood that ran in rivulets, the driving wind and rain, the pink and gory water, the black gritty smoke of the try-pots, the stench and the sorry shapeless whale carcasses floating in the bay. These things were not in Bobby’s song. Bobby had no part in these things. He could find whales, and could chase and run with them. But his hands could not kill a whale. He was only steerer. And when it was time for cutting and boiling and for stepping through bloody gore and smoke he often went to where his people and their friends were feasting on the whale carcass on the sandy beach. He sought out Menak, wondering why he kept so distant, but that man was getting too old and grumpy, too set in his ways and angry about how things had changed from the years of his youth.²³⁰

The sixth scene is that of the disappearance of whales and the revealing of Chainé’s mean-spiritedness and avarice:

Scene #6

Weeks passed: a succession of cold fronts, with barely a day between them. Rain, winds strong and always cold, the sea ragged and torn. The try-pots were ready, the lookout tower manned. The men slept and played cards. Empty barrels awaited their whale oil, and the boats sat on the sand without the weight of men or feel of the sea. No ships came. Occasionally a lone whale was seen far out to sea, and the whaleboats gave chase but never got close enough to use a harpoon. ... On a still day Bobby heard whalebones tock-tock, moving with the waves. Skeletons of the carcasses that had been towed away from the headland these few seasons were scattered over the floor of the bay, and each storm washed more bones up onto the beach and among the rocks. ... Menak’s dog, Jock, swaggered right into the rough bough shed where the whalers waited. Bobby called the animal, but it ignored him and a little later Menak appeared. He looked very old and, standing almost naked before the men, began speaking passionately of something they could not follow. ... Bobby tried to translate: My people need their share of these sheep, too. We share the whales, you camp on our

²³⁰ Ibid. p. 319.

land and kill our kangaroos and tear up our trees and dirty our water and we forgive, but now you will not share your sheep and my people are hungry and wait here because of you ... Chaine suddenly appeared. Chaine was prepared to brook no opposition from his men. I'm breaking up camp, there's nothing to ... He had barely registered Menak, who stepped toward with boomerang raised and Chaine, hardly faltering, grabbed and twisted the old man's arm. The boomerang dropped to the ground and Menak fell back into Bobby's arms. The little dog snarled and leapt, but Chaine's boot sent it rolling among some empty barrels and, cringing, whimpering, it limped back to Menak's side. It was the three of them and a wounded dog against the others; Skelly had a lance in his hand, Killam a hatchet. One whaler had a musket. The others had also risen to their feet, excited. Bobby was glad Jak Tar was not among them. Chaine flung the boomerang away contemptuously, and it flew a surprising distance ... The boomerang fell with hardly a sound; cushioned, suspended by the mallee, it was gently lowered to the soil twig by twig. The men looked at one another, looked around. What? And they began to pack up their things, moved to another game of card, another tot of rum on Chaine, who said, See me in the morning. I always have need of good workers elsewhere.²³¹

We can see that from Scene #1 to #6, there is a drastic dip in the size of the whale population as they are being rampantly killed for their resources. Scene #1 presents the bloody violence involved in a whale-hunt as well as the suffering that is inflicted on the whales during such a pursuit. If we thought Scott was trying to romanticize or even anthropomorphize the scene by imposing on it the pain of separation of the mother whale and its calf, we might be wrong as studies have shown that whales travel in family units and “have the ability to experience love and also deep-rooted emotional suffering.”²³² But the whalers show absolutely no sympathy, let alone empathy, for the majestic sea creatures. In fact, Scott's writing brings out the cold, calculative, mechanical nature of the process that is whaling. Also note the sick men on the whaleboat reviving their strength from the blood of the whale as it pours down on them, signifying an extractive relationship between the two where one's life and good health comes at the expense of the other. Of the men on the whale-ship, Bobby's reaction alone reflects

²³¹Ibid. pp. 341-344.

²³² Knight, Renee. “Whales in love: Like humans, their brains are wired for romance.” *Independent*. 10 Dec 2006. <http://www.independent.co.uk/environment/nature/whales-in-love-like-humans-their-brains-are-wired-for-romance-427863.html>. Accessed 11 May 2017.

some remorse at the cruelty of the whole act. He groans thinking he heard a whale groan. And further away he can see Menak and the carcasses of more whales that were killed the day before, but he turns his sight away.

Here, it is crucial to understand why Bobby turns, that is to say, decides to participate in whaling in spite of the intimate, almost mystical, connection he shares with the whales. Bobby, as we know, grew up in an already interracial environment of the colony, partaking of both indigenous and Western cosmology. In his head, Menak's story about the whales and the story of Jonah from the Bible are present simultaneously. We can see in Scene #4 that Bobby has intertwined the two stories as a result of his interracial upbringing. He cannot separate the two. Subsequently, he mistakes his encounter with the whales during the hunt for connecting with the spirit and life-force of the whales. That is, he is aware of his spiritual connection with the ocean and all of marine life which is his family but he is also exposed to the Western cosmology. He has learnt of Jonah and believes he who can chase and play with the whales can be better than Jonah who was scared of the sea creature. Bobby is confident that going on the whale-ship will one day let him relive Menak's story of the Noongar man who slipped into the whale and gained control over it to take him where he wants. He thinks he can come back home a hero to his people who will love him. That's all he seeks, not the benefits that the commoditization of the whales yielded. This is evident in Bobby's song of the whale hunt. In Scene #5, we can see that Bobby's song is about the search for whales and envisages interdependence among the humans, the whales, the sun, the sky, and the ocean. It contains nothing of the intense violence that permeates the process of whaling. "He was only steerer."²³³ He does not stand around when the whales are cut up into pieces or strips of whale blubber are boiled for oil. Only much later, when the damage has been done, does he realize that he was misled and under an illusion.

Menak, on the other hand, as a much older man, deeply invested in the traditional way of life, from the start wanted no part of colonial whaling. He is keenly aware of the disruption that it has caused to the life of the whales and the life of his community. In Scene #2, we see Menak identifying with the whale's suffering. In the last chapter, we spoke of Menak becoming the whale in an instance of complete erasure of self-identification with one's bodily limits. It is the same whale that is dying, with Menak next to it. Standing beside the whale, Menak is

²³³ Ibid. p. 319.

“deep in the whale story”²³⁴ of his ancestors but he senses that the circumstances have changed from then. His place and along with it, its stories were being altered irreversibly and therefore, wiped out, by the white settlers. It saddened him deeply that regardless of any sense of proportion so many whales were being brutally tortured and killed by the men on the whale-ship and Bobby Wabalanginy, one of his own, was responsible, too. And other people of his community were either dead or dying. Antithetical to Menak’s position is Geordie Chaine’s who with his entrepreneurial mind and colonial ambitions concentrated only on making as much wealth as he could. In Scene #3, we witness him speaking of whales in a manner that equates whales with goods, easily replaceable objects. He only cared about how he could further his profits from the enterprise of whaling and wanted to enter into partnership with the American whalers; it did not matter to him that between the two, they could deplete the whale population and as expected, they did! By Scene #6, there are no whales left in the ocean.

The direct impact of such mindless extraction of resources and privatization of what was common property is first and most acutely experienced by the Aboriginal people. In Scene #6 when Menak confronts the whalers, Chaine not only contemptuously dismisses Menak’s claims but uses physical violence as a method of silencing him. Scott has cleverly juxtaposed the boomerang, the tool of the Aboriginal people, against the lance, hatchet and musket of the white settlers. The musket is a symbol of European technology and in this case, it was used to subjugate the Aboriginal people. In the end, Chaine manages to send the men away and moves on to other businesses. He does not wish to take stock of the damage that has been done to the whales, let alone act to repair the damage. He thinks there are other ways to make money and procure food which will shield him in the event of changes. His life is not deeply connected with the whales or their survival. He stands apart from nature even as he is fed by it. On the contrary, in the Aboriginal way of life, all life forms are connected. Notice that in Scene #6, the mallee tree lowers Menak’s boomerang gently to the ground that was flung contemptuously by Chaine because it is related to Menak by the spirit of the Aboriginal country and therefore, they must care for and protect each other. Moreover, if the whale is your totem, it means you have to care for everything that is linked to its wellbeing which includes the marine space, its surroundings, and the other organisms that the whale feeds on and regulates the whale population, and in return you will be taken care of. Nature

²³⁴ Ibid. p. 254.

conservation and management rooted in Western scientific knowledge does not recognize such a kinship, animism does. While the former regulates the utilization of resources, builds sanctuaries, sets catch limits, enforces legal sanctions, the latter unifies the non-human and human in a deep, spiritual bond, dictates that we spend much of our lives taking care of each other, and puts in place rights and responsibilities for everyone so that there is no dispute over access to places and resources.

Thus, it is clear that indigenous and Western worldviews are different and even when they come in association with each other, they can never become one. The indigenous worldview is animist by nature. Animism as a socio-ecological structure does not compartmentalize the world into humans and non-humans or nature and culture and this structure is underpinned by the Aboriginal philosophy of interdependence and reciprocity. And it is my assertion that so long as the compartmentalization continues as warranted by modernity, we won't find lasting solutions for our current ecological crisis, but we will only be coming up with technological quick fixes mainly for the comfort of the affluent. Having illustrated the aforesaid through *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance*, I would like to conclude this chapter by highlighting the unique role the indigenous people have to play vis-à-vis climate action and environmental sustainability.

The Unique Position of Indigenous People in the Environmental Discourse

The International Labour Organization in its report *Indigenous People and Climate Change* stresses on the how the indigenous people across the planet face a unique combination of threats induced by climate change and environmental destruction that no other group faces. These threats include:

First, indigenous peoples are among the poorest of the poor, the stratum most vulnerable to climate change. Second, they depend on renewable natural resources most at risk to climate variability and extremes for their economic activities and livelihoods. Third, they live in geographical regions and ecosystems that are most exposed to the impacts of climate change, while also sharing a complex cultural relationship with such ecosystems. Fourth, high levels of exposure and vulnerability to climate change force indigenous peoples to migrate, which in most cases is not a solution and can instead exacerbate social and economic vulnerabilities. Fifth, gender

inequality, a key factor in the deprivation suffered by indigenous women, is magnified by climate change. Sixth, and lastly, many indigenous communities continue to face exclusion from decision-making processes, often lacking recognition and institutional support. This limits their access to remedies, increases their vulnerability to climate change, undermines their ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and consequently poses a threat to the advances made in securing their rights.²³⁵

At the same time, the report adds, in spite of the overwhelming threats the indigenous people face, they play a unique, instrumental role in the global fight against climate change and environmental degradation because of certain factors that are indigenous-specific. The report identifies “two principal characteristics which make them key agents of change for climate mitigation and adaptation: their wealth creation based on principles of a sustainable green economy and their unique knowledge.”²³⁶ The first of the two characteristics focuses on the economic activities of indigenous people around the world that are more or less based on the principle of sustainability and care. For example, because most indigenous people are forest dwellers and their livelihood depends on the resources from the forests, they will not only not take care of the forests but also safeguard them from external threats like illegal logging or dangers such as wildfire. Also, when they are not forest-dwellers but live by agriculture, they use farming techniques that have been generally found to be the least invasive and the most resistant to weather fluctuations.

In this dissertation, I have concentrated on the second of the two characteristics: the unique cultural knowledge of the indigenous people of Australia. I have tried to argue with the help of literary works by indigenous authors that their animist worldview can show us an alternative path in our collective search for solutions to the global ecological crisis by decentering humans from the field of agency and by drawing places, things, animals, and people into meaningful relationships marked by reciprocity and respect. I have demonstrated the importance of narratives such as *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* that have the potential to re-shape our longstanding ideas about nature, global climate change, environmental pollution, and resource extraction. I have tried to emphasize on the need for a

²³⁵ *Indigenous Peoples and Climate Change: From Victims to Change Agents Through Decent Work*. International Labour Organization, 2017. p. 7. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---gender/documents/publication/wcms_551189.pdf. Accessed 03 March 2017.

²³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 23.

radical transformation rather than mere rational, scientific strategies to re-imagine our planetary futures. As a way of concluding this study, I would like to in a brief fashion project the constraints that I have been aware of that have impacted my research.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

Every study has constraints of its own that may go on to become avenues for future research, renewing and refining scholarly interest in the subject of the study. Here in the concluding chapter, I have decided to focus on factors, one methodological and the other conceptual, that have posed challenges to my research process and its final outcome. The methodological challenge arises from the nature of research area that is Indigenous Studies. Writing about indigenous peoples and their arts, culture, literature, knowledge, and histories involves serious ethical considerations, given how rampantly indigenous knowledge and experience has been misrepresented or misused to advance the careers of non-indigenous scholars whose contributions and projects make up the majority of scholarly work in Indigenous Studies. In “Research, Ethics and Indigenous Peoples,” Ambelin Kwaymullina, an Aboriginal Australian academic, discusses the prevalence of Eurocentric approaches and methods in research projects on indigenous peoples and their cultures. She quotes Maori academic Linda Smith who in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, notes: “the word itself, ‘research’, is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary.”²³⁷ Kwaymullina goes on to add, “Indigenous scholars have identified multiple difficulties inherent within Eurocentric research paradigms, such as the positioning of Indigenous peoples as native informants who are the ‘known’ but never the ‘knowers’, a failure to respect or even acknowledge the existence of Indigenous cultural and intellectual property and research practices there were formed and informed by the driving need to characterize Indigenous peoples as ‘inferior’ in order to sustain the claim of the colonizers to Indigenous territory.”²³⁸

In recognition of the need to correct these and other negative practices, research guidelines have been in place. “The international best practice standard for engagement with Indigenous peoples is that of free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC), a standard enshrined within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (United Nations General Assembly, 2007).”²³⁹ For research on Australian Indigenous Studies, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) has drafted similar guidelines,

²³⁷ Kwaymullina, Ambelin. “Research, Ethics and Indigenous Peoples.” *AlterNative*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2016. p. 438.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid. p. 442

encouraging the intellectual property rights of the Aboriginal people as well as protecting them from human rights abuses.²⁴⁰ These guidelines may seem applicable more to scholars in the field of say, anthropology who are in direct contact with indigenous peoples than to those whose research is based on secondary sources, which includes this dissertation, but as Kwaymullina likes to point out they are relevant “also to researchers conducting ‘desktop’ research, where they are engaging with sources about Indigenous peoples rather than with the peoples themselves.”²⁴¹ She adds: “An understanding of ethical principles is still essential to writing respectfully about Indigenous peoples. Further, sources must be examined with a critical gaze.”²⁴² I agree with Kwaymullina’s statement and to the extent possible I have tried to engage in a meaningful exploration of Australian indigenous peoples’ cultures and ways of life. I have also gauged the sources used in the study on the basis of criteria such as the publication history of the author(s), their position vis-à-vis indigenous peoples’ rights, the number of citations and reviews they have received and any evidence of violation of the FPIC standard. I have to say, to the best of my knowledge, I have been wary of Eurocentrism and only relied on well-researched scholarship that has emerged out of open-minded, respectful partnerships between the scholars and the indigenous peoples. However, what I have found disconcerting is that of the wealth of scholarly material that is available, majority are from non-indigenous academics. This is an issue that has to be worked out at the level of institutions and governments because only with the shedding of prejudices and the implementation of affirmative policies can many of the indigenous peoples hope to pursue higher education, get appointed as research scholars and academics, let alone be funded to pursue research.

Conceptually, I have had to be doubly conscious of the nature of my work. I understand that I have relied on representations of indigenous people. When I began my research, I was certain that I wanted to work on texts by Australian authors who have identified themselves with their indigenous heritage and dedicated their time and effort toward the betterment of the indigenous people. Both Kim Scott and Alexis Wright, locating them as novelists as well as

²⁴⁰ See *Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies*. Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 2012. <http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/research-and-guides/ethics/GERAIS.pdf>. Accessed 15 May 2017. The guidelines are based on 14 principles grouped under six categories: (1) Rights, respect and recognition, (2) Negotiation, consultation, agreement and mutual understanding (3) Participation, collaboration, and partnership, (4) Benefits, outcomes and giving back, (5) Managing research: use, storage and access, and (6) Reporting and compliance.

²⁴¹ Kwaymullina, 2016. p. 446.

²⁴² Ibid.

advocates of indigenous rights, are earnest and exceptionally gifted in their ability to produce extremely nuanced forms of representation of the indigenous people. They are people who are highly aware of the limits of their own work and the current political circumstances in which indigeneity as a position has come to acquire recently-found cultural capital. This is clear from several of the interviews of the authors I have read and listened to.²⁴³ By and large, their works, especially the novels I have chosen for my study, are exceptionally well-written and balanced. In fact, they have the quality to transform the present idioms of narrative discourse, whether it is about indigeneity or the global environmental crisis—that’s the reason I chose them for my study. The constraints I have faced, therefore, came not so much from the texts I have studied but what I have gleaned from them to focus on during my research, namely, the concept of animism. Animism as a concept has a long history and one that in its beginning was riddled with negative connotations and used to ‘other’ the non-Europeans. To trace its conceptual evolution and to demonstrate *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* are animist realist texts was not easy. Firstly, animism had to be emptied out of its earlier interpretations to arrive at an understanding of animism as a form of relating to non-human beings who are intentional, agential, sentient beings. However, there remains crucial questions such as is the agency of the non-human a projection of the human or does it emerge in the interaction between the two? The answer I have found is that these questions don’t fit within the scope of this study where we are trying to engage with indigenous cultures and their ways of knowing with open-mindedness and due regard to their uniqueness. The question that fits within the scope of this study is—are we essentializing the native?

When we say that the indigenous people exemplify how to exist in complete harmony with the natural environment, are we branding them once again, this time as ‘the ecological native.’²⁴⁴ Are we using them to our purposes? Deborah Bird Rose has often defended against such pigeonholing and complained “that non-Indigenous arguments about Indigenous people and conservation often involve enacting a ‘monologue’ in which Indigenous people are interpolated as either the ‘noble savage’ or ‘dismal savage’ to suit various ends. Whereas the

²⁴³ For the interviews, see (1) Wright, Alexis. “Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book*.” Presented by Michael Cathcart and Sarah Kanowski. *ABC*. 13 Aug. 2013. (2) Wright, Alexis. “The future of swans.” Interview by Arnold Zable. *Overland*. 2013, (3) Scott, Kim. “Who are you? Kim Scott.” Interview by Alicia Hanson and Brookie Banister. *Who are you? 720 ABC Perth*. 1 June 2011, (4) Scott, Kim. “Strangers at Home.” Presented by Maria Zijlstra. *ABC*. 1 Sept. 2007, and (5) Scott, Kim. “An Interview with Kim Scott.” *A Companion to the Works of Kim Scott*, edited by Belinda Wheeler. Camden House, 2016.

²⁴⁴ See Krech, Shepard. *The Ecological Indian: Myth and History*. W.W. Norton & Company, 1999 and Ulloa, Astrid. *The Ecological Native: Indigenous Peoples’ Movements and Eco-Governmentality in Colombia*. Routledge, 2005.

dismal version is assumed to have exploited available resources, making only a minimal impact because of the 'primitive' epistemologies and tools at their disposal, the noble version is portrayed as an ethical subject, so attuned to the non-human world that they make little impact on it. These are both pervasively colonial images, and the conversation is structured in such a way that Indigenous people are condemned only to exist in terms of another's desire to either confirm its technological superiority or to find its non-modern Other."²⁴⁵ I think what Rose has outlined for us is a serious issue and there lies an equally serious liability on Indigenous Studies scholars to not to fall into either one of the traps and reduce indigeneity into one thing or another. As argued in the thought-provoking article, "Mining, indigeneity, alterity: or, mining Indigenous alterity?" by Timothy Neale and Eve Vincent, we should not judge every single indigenous person we meet with our own expectations and if we do, if we should not be afraid to be disappointed. Instead, we must appreciate the complex internal processes of indigenous people with which they are coming to terms with their everyday reality. For example, we cannot expect them to not to avail themselves of the utilities of modern technology, modern modes of transport or medicine because that would make them modern or not non-modern. In Neale and Vincent's words, "... the point is not that a 'true reality' (dispossessed people taking antibiotics) is being hidden by wishful thinking (an original state of 'undifferentiation' between humans and animals is a virtually universal notion among Amerindians). Rather, what is significant is the fact that 'some (all?) versions of Indigenous worlding take up modern binaries and their mimetic opposites as meaningful coordinates for self-fashioning.' The settler colonial state demands of Indigenous people self-conscious and strategic efforts of self-fashioning, wherein their capacity to fulfil others' expectations of Indigenous difference comes to play a crucial part."²⁴⁶

In a sense, both *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* are already tuned into this process of 'negotiation' of the indigenous people. That is to say, the texts do not bring to us purified and rarefied versions of the indigenous life. We don't find, for the lack of a better word and not without the intent to pun, the Garden of Eden that was the indigenous world before the colonial contact. The narrative space of the texts is not a space of bliss with the indigenous characters co-existing as a homogenized group of ideal environmentalists. On the contrary, *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* show us the fissures within the tribal people of

²⁴⁵ Neale, Timothy and Eve Vincent. "Mining, indigeneity, alterity: or, mining Indigenous alterity?" *Cultural Studies*, 2017. p. 10.

²⁴⁶ Ibid. p. 13.

Australia through the differences between Menak and Bobby Wabalanginy and the Swamp people and the Brolga Country. Moreover, the texts show us the deteriorating worlds of the indigenous people and the way they have fashioned themselves in response to the jarring alterations around them but what's also present is the underlying animist reality of the indigenous way of life. So when I focus on it, it is not with the objective to exoticize the Aborigine or reinforce the stereotype of the ecological native but because I believe we need their help in modelling our global environmental ethics in the face of the present crisis. Also, as Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Bruno Latour have repeatedly pointed to us the present crisis is also a crisis of environmental imaginaries. How we see ourselves and our relationship to the environment is pivotal to what we are going to do about the crisis.

We need help to wean ourselves from the existing modes of relating that would drive us even further into a global environmental disaster. It would help us to transfer indigenous literary and cultural conceptualizations based on recognizing interspecies interconnectedness to our collective environmental imaginaries. I completely agree with political geographer Sian Sullivan who suggested, "...it is not that 'animist culture nature conceptions, experiences and value practices' are interesting because they emanate and can be learned from Indigenous peoples. Rather, these ontologies and their corresponding conceptions and praxes are important because they 'might have effects that are relevant for coming to terms with being human in the Anthropocene.'"²⁴⁷ But we must also be careful, as Neale and Vincent warn us, of considering the indigenous world in isolation existing in a pristine form or state. They refer to David Graeber, well-known for coining the phrase 'We are the 99 percent', who remarked that we must keep away from conceptual idealism and categorical purifications "not only because it is distorting to suppose that any group exercises autonomous authority 'over determining the nature of reality' within its own 'world', but also because it is mystifying to immunize the worlds in question from one another, eliding the exchanges and mimesis that constitute 'us' and 'them' alike."²⁴⁸

Barring such conceptual misgivings, I think it is an extremely important task that we consider seriously the ontological challenge that the indigenous animist conception of the world presents to us. It not only enables us to see more forms of social life on earth than we are used to imagining but also recognizes the fallibility of human exceptionalism. We will see

²⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 17.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

that we dwell within a world that is dynamic, interactive, and agential—a reality that modern mechanistic culture has made redundant but that which can no longer be avoided with the present ecological crisis. To quote from Bruno Latour: “One of the main puzzles of Western history is not that “there are people who still believe in animism,” but the rather naive belief that many still have in a deanimated world of mere stuff; just at the moment when they themselves multiply the agencies with which they are more deeply entangled every day.”²⁴⁹ Bruno Latour is a key figure in the contemporary studies on the Anthropocene, pushing for an ontological turn that would recognize the agency of the non-human. The reason I have not perused his work beyond a point for this dissertation is because the agency that he associates with the non-human does not exactly have a spiritual dimension but the Australian Aboriginal culture does.

The Swan Book and *That Deadman Dance* speak of the spirit of the Aboriginal country. Whether it is Oblivia, Bobby Wabalanginy, Wunyeran or Menak, they recognize the spiritual quality of the country and everything in it. Wright has made this explicit by using expressions such as ‘the spirit country,’ ‘a spirit sea,’ ‘resting serpent spirit fellow,’ ‘trespassing spirits,’ ‘the spirits of the law stories,’ ‘fog spirit,’ ‘a spiritual ancestor,’ ‘the old-drought spirit,’ ‘supreme spirit of the city,’ ‘ancestral sand spirits’ and so on. As we have seen in chapter three, Scott, too, has not shied away from depicting the belief of the Aboriginal people in the world of spirits. I think it is important that this spiritual quality of the Aboriginal world is not lost even as we speak of relying on indigenous ways of knowing to help us bridge the divide between nature and culture. If we do, we would be withdrawing the essence of indigenous beliefs, tailoring it to suit our own specific needs, in this case of re-enchanting the environmental discourse and refining global environmental imaginaries. Lastly, it is very important that we must not take for granted the role of the imaginary in transforming social reality. Take for example, the case of the New Zealand River Whanganui which was after “140 years of negotiation” in March 2017 “granted the same legal rights as a human being.”²⁵⁰ Speaking of the long struggle, the lead negotiator for the Whanganui iwi [tribe] said: ““We have fought to find an approximation in law so that all others can understand that from our perspective treating the river as a living entity is the correct way to approach it, as in indivisible whole, instead of the traditional model for the last 100 years of treating it from a

²⁴⁹ Latour, Bruno. “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene.” *New Literary History*. vol. 45, no. 1, 2014. p. 7.

²⁵⁰ Roy, Eleanor Ainge. “New Zealand river granted same legal rights as human being.” *The Guardian*. 16 March 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/16/new-zealand-river-granted-same-legal-rights-as-human-being> Accessed 30 May 2017.

perspective of ownership and management.’ The new status of the river means if someone abused or harmed it the law now sees no differentiation between harming the tribe or harming the river because they are one and the same.’²⁵¹ Clearly, submersing ourselves in an animist worldview will demand of us new forms of ethical thought and practice and hopefully, orient ourselves out of the destructive path we are on at present. I hope my study on *The Swan Book* and *That Deadman Dance* as animist realist environmental narratives prove to be a healthy step in this direction.

To finish, the potential of a research project such as this lies in its capacity to contribute simultaneously to the existing scholarship in the fields of Indigenous Studies, Environmental Humanities, and the emerging literature on Global South Studies. It does so by conjoining aspects of Australian Aboriginal ways of being and ways of knowing with stories that offer new perspectives on how to address the present environmental crisis while highlighting the vulnerability of certain sections of people in the Global South.²⁵² There is no doubt that we are in the middle of a derangement as Amitav Ghosh’s recently published *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016) suggests. We have to marshal our energies in reversing what we have wrought upon ourselves. In this regard, I strongly believe that the approaches taken by large powerful organizations such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the United Nations that focus largely on adaptation and mitigation of the effects of human-induced climate change are not enough if we are to make a real transformation. We need to think out of and beyond narratives that have so far enabled a mechanistic reduction of nature into resources for human consumption. I think it is a matter of pressing importance that scholars in the interpretive disciplines focus on unearthing and spreading such narratives. I hope this research project will in some way or the other enable those scholars who share the same conviction with me and contribute to the larger fight to stop environmental destruction and the gradual decimation of indigenous peoples and their cultures.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² The Global South, while not being synonymous with the southern hemisphere, focuses on a range of issues that are relevant to emerging economies such as India, Latin America, Brazil, or South Africa. It also has a special interest in questions of environmental justice and uneven development within affluent nations such as Australia where the Aboriginal people face persistent structural discrimination among other serious dangers.

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