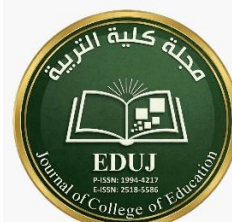


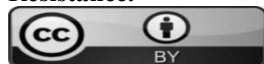


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**Guided by the Swan: Gender Performativity, Resistance, and
Identity in Alexis Wright's The Swan Book****A B S T R A C T**

The colonial history of Australia and its ongoing climate crisis have intensified explorations of identity, defiance, and the redefinition of roles, themes central in Alexis Wright's literary works. Wright, as a leading voice in Indigenous Australian literature, portrays the marginalization of Aboriginal communities and women through a dystopian lens in *The Swan Book* (2013). Oblivia, the protagonist, confronts patriarchal and colonial framework, defying societal expectations while embodying a renewed identity defined by cultural memory and resilience. This study employs Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is enacted through repeated social behaviors rather than being an innate characteristic. Through this lens, the study argues that *The Swan Book* critiques the oppressive systems that construct identities while demonstrating how acts of resistance allow for self-definition and agency. Moreover, it concludes that spiritual connections to land and non-human entities can lead to the transformation and redefinition of cultural identity.

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مسترشدا بالبجعة: الاداء الجندي، المقاومة، والهوية في رواية "كتاب البجعة" ل أنكسيس رايت

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الملخص :

في سياق تاريخ أستراليا الاستعماري وأزماتها المناخية، برزت قضايا الهوية والمقاومة وإعادة تعريف الأدوار كموضوعات مركزية، وهو ما يتجلى بوضوح في رواية "كتاب البجعة" (٢٠١٣) للكاتبة أليكسيس رايت. تُعد رايت صوتاً بارزاً في الأدب الأسترالي الأصلي، حيث تسلط الضوء على تهيمش المجتمعات الأصلية والنساء من خلال عدسة ديستوبية في روايتها "كتاب البجعة". تتحدى أوبليفيا، بطلة الرواية، إطاراً أبوياً واستعماريًا، متمردة على التوقعات

المجتمعية بينما تعيد تشكيل هويتها بالاعتماد على الذاكرة الثقافية والصمود. تتناول هذه الدراسة نظرية الأداء الجندري لجوديث بتلر في تحليل الرواية، التي تفترض أن الجندر يتم تجسيده من خلال الأفعال الاجتماعية المتكررة بدلاً من كونه سمة فطرية. من خلال هذا المنظور، تجادل الدراسة بأن رواية "كتاب البجعة" ينتقد الأنظمة القسعية التي تشكل الهويات، بينما توضح كيف أن أفعال المقاومة تتيح للفرد فرصة لإعادة تعريف ذاته واكتساب القوة. علاوة على ذلك، تستنتج الدراسة إلى أن الروابط مع الأرض والكيانات غيرالبشرية تمثل السبيل الوحيد لتحقيق التحول وإعادة تعريف الهوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاداء الجندري، كتاب البجعة، الصمت، الهوية، المقاومة.

1-Introduction:

The experiences of marginalized identities of Aboriginal Australians are integral to the works of Alexis Wright(1950-). Published to great critical acclaim, *The Swan Book* (2013) is the third novel by Wright, an exploration of the impacts of colonialism, climate crisis and systematic gender oppression on Aboriginal Australians identity and agency. The deep sense of belonging observed in Wright's works is inspired by her grandmother's fables of ancestral land and her mother's resilience in shielding her children from colonial anguish. These influences reflect the pressures Indigenous women face in a society that used to dehumanize them. Wright's identity and her experiences as a land rights activist permeate her works through prevalent themes focused on the environment, Aboriginal sovereignty, Australian culture and history.

Wright may not identify herself as a feminist in the conventional sense, but her narratives reflect an Australian Indigenous feminist perspective. One that is not only concerned with resisting oppression, but also with reimagining identity and culture in empowering self-determined ways. For her, writing is a way to explore "who we really are" and to push against the limitations imposed by colonialism, creating space for Indigenous voices, especially those of women, to define their futures.

The Swan Book pushes these concerns into speculative territory, imagining a dystopian Australia devastated by environmental catastrophe, where Aboriginal live in military-controlled camps and refugees are displaced. At the heart of the novel is Oblivia, an Aboriginal girl whose muteness reflects both systemic marginalization and a refusal to conform to colonial and patriarchal frameworks. The swans emerge as a powerful symbol, transcending their literal existence to reflect Oblivia's alienation while critiquing entrenched gender norms and colonial hierarchies. The narrative voice, with its lyrical quality and depth of insight, unfolds a vision of Indigenous resilience, particularly, women, demonstrating the ongoing relevance of decolonial thought in the context of the climate crisis and social upheaval.

In essence, the aim of this article is to examine how *The Swan Book* critiques the construction and enforcement of gender through oppressive systems. Drawing on gender performativity by the American thinker Judith Butler(1956-), this study examines shaping identity as a cultural process, far from being fixed, are constantly disrupted, and redefined in the face of environmental and colonial violence. The integration of animate and inanimate entities, particularly the representation of black swans, illustrates the fluidity of identity and the potential of resistance through non-human connections. The novel reimagines survival as

an act of agency, intertwining human struggles with the resilience found in the natural world through Indigenous cosmologies.

2-Literature Review:

The existing studies on *The Swan Book* have extensively focused on its engagement with environmental crises, Indigenous sovereignty, and colonialism. These studies are invaluable in understanding the broad socio-political themes of the text. However, there remains a significant gap in the scholarship regarding the novel's treatment of the intersection between gender and environmental issues. This gap is crucial, as Wright's work intertwines ecological harm and gendered injustice in ways that are essential to a fuller understanding of both the novel's thematic concerns and its radical narrative form.

For Barras (2016), *The Swan Book* represents a literary revolution for its creative use of symbolic connections, exploring how colonization has harmed Indigenous individuals and their environment, while also reimagining Indigenous sovereignty through the "Law of Storytelling." Similarly, Daley (2016) focuses on how Wright rejected linear time and fixed borders, showing alternative ways of thinking and being. Together, their analyses underscore *The Swan Book* as a redefinition of storytelling, a tool for cultural survival, resistance, and the creation of new relational realities.

In her article, Crane (2019) posits that while reading literature may seem trivial in the face of environmental crises, it is crucial for understanding the narratives that shape our world. She contends that Wright's novel is more than just a reflection of climate issues; it critically engages with the interconnectedness of colonialism, capitalism, and ecological crises. Furthermore, she emphasizes that *The Swan Book* challenges the notion of climate change as a speculative concern, exposing the "slow violence" of ecological harm disproportionately affecting marginalized Indigenous communities.

The use of magic realism in *The Swan Book* has sparked debates. Holgate (2015) argues that Wright's portrayal of Indigenous subjects offers a new direction in magic realism, blending Aboriginal traditions with critiques of colonialism and global economic forces. This perspective aligns with Ravenscroft (2012) who points out that magic realism often reinforces colonial binaries, associating "magic" with the Indigenous Other and "realism" with the colonizers. On the other hand, Bradley (2017) cautions against reading the novel as magic realism, emphasizing the importance of preserving the lived, complex realities of Indigenous culture and worldview.

Thus, this study is going to close this gap through using Butler's theory as framework and examines how Wright critiques societal norms and gender roles in the ecological and colonial context, highlighting the intersection of gender and environmental issues.

3-Theoretical Framework: Gender Performativity

As a theorist, Judith Butler stands as an influential contributor to the field of gender and queer theory. Her ideas emerged from this critical interrogation of second-wave feminism during the 1960s-70s in defining womanhood according to their reproductive rights, gender

roles, and the oppression of women. Butler (1993) raised crucial questions: What constitutes a woman? How do we account for those who do not fit conventional definitions based on reproductive capacity or psychoanalytic binaries? Even the notion of women as those oppressed by objectification is problematic, as it universalizes the category of women without accounting for the vast diversity of women's experiences.

With this context of instability, *Gender Trouble* (1990) became a revolutionary landmark, as it provides an opportunity to rethink gender not as a fixed identity but as a series of performances. In her preface, she writes, "Contemporary feminist debates over the meaning of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism" (Butler, 1990, p.xxvii). Instead of viewing the ambiguity of gender as a failure, Butler sees it as a chance to rethink and expand feminist goals. Her concepts stem from a strong desire to challenge "the violence of gender norms" (Butler, 1990, p.xix), which she refers to as "normative violence." This type of violence arises from the societal norms that dictate and confine gender expression, forcing individuals to either conform as "a natural manifestation of sex" or as a fixed cultural construct that seems beyond human intervention (p.xx).

At the heart of Butler's argument is the idea that gender is not something one is, but something one does. Butler's theories challenge the essentialist view that sex, gender, and race are biologically determined and immutable. Accordingly, Essentialism asserts that specific attributes and characteristics are intrinsic to the identity and function of particular entities. In contrast, Butler argues that these identities are socially constructed and fluid through stylized repetition of acts. She posits that gender is a set of periodic practices based on performative acts that disrupt and re-signify the categories of body, sex, gender, and sexuality beyond binary constraints :

"Gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed (...) There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990, p.179).

Thus, gender is a verb rather than a noun, a "doing" rather than a "being." In other words, it is not about what we have but what we do which establishes our gender.

The performative notion of gender includes "acts, gestures," and it is the 'repetitious citations of sex and gender' (Craver and Chambers, 2008 ,p.43). One key distinction in Butler's theory lies between performance and performativity. She states that "gender proves to be performance, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed" (Butler, 1990, p.25). Thus, performance is not something that can be chosen or done intentionally; rather it refers to the actions that one continually performs. When we say that gender is performed, it means that individuals take on a role, consciously or unconsciously, and act in ways that align with societal expectations of masculinity or femininity. In this

framework, gender acts as a mechanism that creates the identities it describes, such as a “masculine” man or a “feminine” woman.

Butler’s theory is critically associated with poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, feminism, and Marxism, and influenced by intellectuals such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida (Salih, 2002, p.6). In an interview given in (1993), she explicitly connects her use of the concept “performativity” to the speech act theory of Austin’s and Derrida’s deconstruction in the formulations of gender identity. Gender identity does not exist independently of its expression through language. Rather than suggesting that identity influences discourse or language, it is more accurate to say that language and discourse actively shape gender. No “I” exists outside of language; identity is a process of signification, and culturally recognizable subjects emerge as effects of the discourses that often obscure their operations (Butler, 1990, p.183). Therefore, gender identity is structurally performative.

In extension to de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one,” (Butler, 1990, p.3). The notion of “becoming” underscores the dynamic nature of gender, suggesting that individuals are not simply assigned a gender at birth based on their biological sex; instead, they are shaped by a myriad of cultural expectations and norms throughout their lives. Women observe and replicate behaviors of other women social behaviors, perpetuating their performance. Butler emphasizes that there need not be a direct relationship between one’s body and gender presentation. The female body, while biologically distinct, does not inherently dictate one’s gender identity. Instead, it serves as a “cultural canvas,” shaped by societal discourses and norms rather than a mere biological fact. The body, then, internalizes these learned behaviors, which are mistakenly viewed as natural indicators of sex. Thus, the false link between sex and gender is reinforced.

The performative nature of identity opens the potential for subversion and transformation. Butler argues that since norms are upheld by repeated performances, they can be destabilized through acts that challenge these repetitions, allowing individuals to assert agency. Subversion, however, must operate within existing discourses, using the tools and language that maintain societal norms to critique and disrupt them, as she asserts, “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices” (Butler, 1990, p.189). Drawing on Derrida’s (1972) theory that language generates identities endlessly owing to its law of supplementary gender, therefore, it is understood not as a pre-existing essence but as something produced through reiterative acts. This process situates agency within the constraints of cultural and linguistic structures, which both shape and provide opportunities to resist dominant norms.

Moreover, resistance occurs within these frameworks, as the “I” forms in opposition to the power structures that seek to define it. Agency is, therefore, not external to cultural systems but arises through them, retaining the ability to challenge and redefine the norms it inhabits. Hall (2004, p.105) highlights the potential for “de-institutionalization” through such acts, emphasizing how identities are reshaped from within discursive boundaries. However, this resistance is fraught with uncertainty, as subversive actions such as parodic performances of gender carry unpredictable outcomes and require careful navigation to achieve meaningful disruption.

The exploration of gender as performative invites a rethinking of identity and the ways in which it is constructed and understood. Butler does not claim that her theory is comprehensive in term of its construction or relates to any specific feminist agenda. This theoretical framework opens possibilities for radical critiques of gender constitution, which is essential for feminist theory to address how oppression impacts the fundamental categories through which gender is understood.

4- *The Swan Book*: Overview

Reviewed widely, *The Swan Book* has been called a “counter intervention” (Williamson, 2013). It is about the depth and breadth of the harm that hegemonic white culture has done, and continues to do, to this southern land. Wright, while interrogates the harm of hegemonic culture, offers a vision of resistance rooted in cultural traditions and ecological connections. The novel is set in post-apocalyptic Australia, in which “Towns closed, cities were boarded up, communities abandoned, their governments collapsed”(Wright, 2013, p.8). A place where “Mother Nature” is described as “Mother Catastrophe of flood, fire, drought, and blizzard. These were the four seasons which she threw around the world whenever she liked” (ibid). Such setting forced Aboriginals into military-controlled detention camps and left thousands of refugees adrift after environmental disasters and nuclear conflicts that destroyed their homelands.

The novel centers around a young Aboriginal girl, traumatized by gang-rape, who runs away from her community, a lake settlement based on Wright’s own Waanyi nation in northern Australia(Holgate,2019, p.636). Oblivion Ethyl(ene), a mute, Black, marginalized girl who struggles to gain sovereignty over her brain. She is rescued by Bella Donna, a climate refugee who snatched her from a eucalyptus tree and became a storyteller of swans which fascinated Oblivia. However, her life takes a sharp turn when Warren Finch, a mixed-race Aboriginal president of the Republic of Australia arrives at the swamp. Declaring Oblivia as his promised bride, Finch marries her, remains imprisoned until his death, which allows her to escape with the help of her loyal black swans and return to her swamp home.

Through character portrayals, settings, and cultural symbols, Wright not only critiques the failures of modernity but offers a vision of resilience rooted in Indigenous traditions and an intimate connection with the land. Oblivia’s experiences reflect how, as Butler asserts, gender and cultural identities are not inherent but performed, enforced, and repeatedly reasserted by society’s expectations, even in a dystopian world. Oblivia's connection with black swans and the swamp represent transformation, renewal, and the sacred relationship between the land and its people. Moreover, through blending magical realism with stark realism, Wright critiques colonial violence, environmental devastation, and gender oppression, centering Aboriginal cosmologies, myths and the sacredness of the land. Thus, the novel redefines survival and belonging, emphasizing the need for decolonial and ecologically aware futures.

4.1- Gender in The Broken World of *The Swan Book*

The post-apocalyptic world of *The Swan Book* exposes and intensifies existing gender inequalities, using ecological collapse to reassert patriarchal control. Gender, in this context, is tightly regulated, shaped by the remnants of traditional societal norms and the immediate demands of survival. As communities struggle to restore order amidst chaos, they retreat into familiar patterns of gendered conformity which further entrench systemic oppression. The protagonist in *The Swan Book* is disempowered and traumatized by imperialist brutality, gender-based oppression, and environmental degradation. These implications silence her identity, as Wright asserted, “It’s not that shit happens as other people have said; it’s the eternal reality of a legacy in brokenness that was the problem to them” (Wright, 2013, p.85).

Climate change is often considered as a product of the same Western culture that spawned imperialism and capital, a restless, invasive, acquisitive culture, bent on the trespass of other lands for the sake of material excess and self-promotion (Gleeson-White, 2017). *The Swan Book* portrays a world where ecosystems collapse, species are displaced, and ancestral connections are severed. The indigenous “lake people” are detained in a camp near a polluted swamp, where “boats are dumped in the lake, and after sand storms raised by climate change transform the lake into a marsh” (Wright, 2013, p.12). The site of the swamp represents ecological imperialism and environmental racism, a vibrant space that encapsulates the complexities of Indigenous identity and belonging:

“This was the history of the swamp ever since the wave of conservative thinking began spreading like wildfire across the twenty first century, when among the mix of political theories and arguments about how to preserve and care for the world’s environment and people, the Army was being used in this country to intervene and control the will, mind and soul of the Aboriginal people” (Wright, 2013, p. 41)

Wright portrays the swamp as a contested space, illustrating how ecological degradation disproportionately impacts women and Indigenous groups. In Euro-Western thought, nature is often perceived as a separate entity from humanity that emphasizes domination and exploitation. This perspective tends to feminize nature, treating it as a resource to be controlled for human benefit. Rigby (2013) critiques this view, highlighting how Euro-Western civilization portrays a unitary and feminized Nature, stripping the natural world of its diversity, agency, and inherent value. This homogenization leads to a disconnection from the ecological systems that sustain life, reducing nature to a mere backdrop for human activity and exacerbating the environmental crises we face today.

Women, in such context, are victimized, spiritually disclosed, and often excluded from the dominant understanding of what it means to be human. Oblivia’s deep connection with the lost black swans that arrive in the swamp illustrates her displacement “She knew for a fact

that the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her” (Wright, 2013, p.15). When the black swans arrive at the swamp, Oblivia understands that they share a similar experience of exile, like swans displaced from southern Australia by global warming ‘I have become a gypsy, addicted to journeys into these distant illusionary homelands’ (p.3).

In discussing the sense of self, the black swan emphasizes Butler’s argument that even biological markers like sex are culturally inscribed. Their stories and their fight for survival are brought together in an interwoven relationship as asserted by Meera Atkinson (2018, p.51). Oblivia’s bond with the swans at first becomes a potential point of vulnerability. The black swans die without sound, and Oblivia, who experiences a denial of her Indigenous voice, observes that “she had no sound either, or knew what it was like to be without sound. This country would never hear her voice, or the language she spoke” (Wright, 2013, p.157). Through the black swans, the novel encapsulates the entanglement of environmental and societal collapse, illustrating how gender and racial oppression are inseparable from ecological violence.

On the other hand, Bella Donna's displacement is one of the most significant impacts of climate change, uprooting her from her homeland and forcing her into a life of exile. Her loss of place is tied to catastrophic environmental changes:

“Her country of origin...was where people of the modern world once lived happily...But they were finished now...She had been asked to describe the inexplicable, of what happened to people affected by the climate changing in wild weather storms, or the culmination of years of droughts, high temperature and winds...or in others, the freezing depths of the prolonged winters” (Wight, 2013, p.25)

This passage vividly portrays the destruction of Bella Donna’s homeland as a result of extreme weather patterns and environmental collapse. Her personal tragedy reflects a broader global narrative of climate-induced displacement, highlighting the vulnerability of communities in the face of ecological disasters. Bella Donna’s uprooting is not merely a physical relocation but a rupture in her sense of belonging, cultural heritage and identity. Her hyper-narrativity reflects a compulsive need to reiterate her loss and exile due to anthropogenic climate change, while also conforms to gendered expectations of women as keepers of memory and tradition. Through this, Bella Donna aligns with the trope of the Western storyteller, where her value lies in preserving history rather than actively engaging in the present. Her dramatic recounting, such as beginning every tale with "once upon a time" (Wight, 2013, p.24) entrenches her character within a traditional feminine role, where storytelling becomes a means of preserving patriarchal structures through repetitive historical framing. Bella Donna’s cultural memory, centered on loss and destruction mirrors the

expectation that women bear the emotional and cultural burden of collective memory, thus perpetuating narratives of victimhood.

Drawing on Foucault's ideas, the novel critiques postcolonial power structures through Oblivia's experiences in a world dominated by a "very complex power that has the population as its target" (Foucault, 2007, p.108). *The Swan Book's* world reveals the institutions, ideologies, and practices that reinforce a sovereign, neo-colonial state, subsuming and commodifying indigenous identity. Foucault's theory of power posits that identity is formed by discourse and ideology, and Wright's narrative breaks down these systems, revealing how they entrench the displacement and dispossession of Aboriginal individuals. While these systems often claim to promote unity, they silence and push aside the sovereignty and independence of Indigenous people, as Oblivia's lament that settlers "could steal a whole country, kill your people, and still not pay all those centuries' worth of rent" (Wright, 2013, p.50).

Oblivia's silence mirrors Butler's idea of forced performance, in which gender and racial oppression are internalized through repetitive societal norms. As Butler notes, gender is not a static identity but a stylized repetition of acts, where these enforced performances define what it means to be feminine or Indigenous within a colonial structure. Bella Donna's tales, poetry, and folklore do not genuinely represent an alternative reality on par with Oblivia's. Instead, they impose a dominant white cultural narrative. The focus on European white swans in her stories, instead of native black swans, which embody Oblivia's Aboriginal identity, highlights a cultural and ecological invasion. Bella Donna's aim to "rectify the problem of the speechless child" (Wright, 2013, p.27) and "to get the girl to act normal" (28) echoes the historical enforcement of acculturation on Aboriginal Australians by successive white Australian governments.

This authoritarian paternalistic approach aims to save Oblivia not by recognizing her gender-based identity but by imposing a framework rooted in a colonial worldwide view. As Takolander (2016, p.116) argues that Bella Donna not only discovers Oblivia, paralleling how white Australians are said to have discovered the continent, but also attempts to save her from her cultural practices, reflecting the treatment of Aboriginal peoples throughout Australia's colonial history. This act of cultural interference reflects a broader violation, symbolizing the profound harm inflicted on Aboriginal land, people, and traditions. It encapsulates the dispossession, cultural destruction, and marginalization that are central to Australia's colonial history.

Moreover, Finch exemplifies the notion that identity is shaped by discourse and institutional practices, as observed through his interactions. Positioned as a "gift" to the Aboriginal Nation, he uses "a strategy for resisting dispossession that employs a language understood by those wielding power" (Kendrick and Lewis in Birrell, 2016, p.85). His use of language and narratives resonate with those in power, perpetuating his status while undermining Oblivia's authenticity. Oblivia, on the other hand, raised in the swamp, enduring

displacement and imprisonment, resists assimilation and retains her cultural identity, impervious to the virus of postcolonial narratives invading her sovereign mind. In marrying Oblivia, Warren envisions an Aboriginal Law idealized in his dreams. However, it is Oblivia who embodies the Aboriginal Law, safeguarding it within herself. In contrast to Warren, who “grew up on ‘dreams of looking down on the world,’” (Wright, 2013, p.106) believing he would “lead” it, Oblivia remains grounded in the lived reality.

The wedding between Oblivia and Warren symbolically absorbs Oblivia into the State's narrative, where Warren's gaze assigns value to her, positioning her as an object within the colonial fantasy. During the ceremony, a guest proclaims, "We are one country here. We are all Australians. All equal. No one is any different" (Wright, 2013, p.208), aiming to erase cultural distinctions and the unique challenges of Indigenous communities. Unlike Warren's guests, who learned ‘about poverty by not being poor themselves, Oblivia's experiences and heritage find no place in this vision of Utopia. Warren too, loses authenticity by embracing white narratives, silencing Oblivia with his voice, and reshaping history to fit the State's view, “Trust me, and I will tell you everything you need to know,” he insists (p.212).

The marriage portrays the tension between resistance and compliance, with Finch representing a sanitized and commodified version of Indigenous identity shaped to align with the dominant culture's expectations. In contrast, Oblivia embodies the authentic, though contested, struggle for sovereignty and identity, which is fundamentally at odds to the state's cultural expectations. Oblivia becomes acutely aware of her erasure in this narrative. She is an outsider to the world Warren embraces, observing that:

“There was no miniature Black girl such as herself in any of these depictions of humanity, no swamp world of people quarrelling over food, not even Warren Finch among the black shepherds or a black Wise King” (Wright, 2013, p.201)

This realization captures Oblivia's marginalization, as her identity is systematically erased by the perspectives Warren internalized. Wright challenges the idea that blending Indigenous and colonial cultures is enough, emphasizing that identity and resistance require fully valuing and understanding Indigenous culture and history. Wright critiques the idea that simply blending Indigenous and colonial cultures is enough, arguing that true recognition and resistance require a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Indigenous culture and history, rather than superficial integration.

Rather than seeking personal power or influence through marriage with Warren, Oblivia becomes a tool for his political legitimacy. This marriage is a performative act that assigns a gendered role to Oblivia. The concept of “slippage of language” conflates women's silence with cognitive, psychological, or linguistic impairment (Geil, 2020, p.97) reinforcing patriarchal control that idealizes women as passive and docile. Oblivia's muteness symbolizes the systemic violence faced by Indigenous women, as they are constrained by narratives that deny their agency and erase their identity.

The reference to a "cut snake virus" in the prelude serves as an allegory for the psychological and cultural encroachment of white settler-colonial culture on Aboriginal

individuals. This virus represents the subtle, yet harmful impact that seek to erode Indigenous knowledge and law. The depiction of this virus, residing in the "doll's house" of Oblivia's mind indicates the confinement of her identity. Oblivia's infantilization reflects the fragility imposed on her through personal and collective trauma. Cathy Caruth's concept of "impossible history", a history that reflects not only personal suffering but also transgenerational experiences (Caruth, 1995, pp.3-12), offers insight into Oblivia's experience. This framework reveals how her layers of grief exemplify the disproportionate impact of power structures and ecological crises on women. Her silence ties her to an alternative, ecocentric reality, one that stands against colonial structures but is continually marginalized. These Colonial stories have taken hold and obscured her sense of self and cultural understanding. Such dehumanization positions Oblivia as a victim of both gender and racial oppression. Societal norms, as Butler notes, often restrict agency by dictating how individuals perform gender. Oblivia's muteness embodies her forced victimhood, shaped by historical and societal narratives that portray women as inferior and passive:

“She had a white dress and white shoes and white stockings... she looked like a child on her way to a party, but she didn't know the time or the place” (Wright, 2013, p.15).

The second implication of muteness lies in its association with reduced cognitive and social intelligence, a perception that reinforces ableist and patriarchal biases. Warren interprets Oblivia's silence as an intellectual deficit and disempowerment. He assumes that she is “deranged” and “unhinged” (Wright, 2013, pp.155-156). This characterization mirrors the ancient Greek notion, explained by M.Lynn Rose “muteness and deafness were often equated with intellectual deficiency, with people who could not speak or hear regarded as lacking in intelligence” (2006, pp.17-20). Finch reduces Oblivia to a childlike state exemplifies how patriarchal societies view muteness as a sign of intellectual disability or inferiority, fostering ableist perspectives that conflate speechless with incapacity.

The captivity of the black swans' further mirrors Oblivia's confinement, emphasizing how environmental degradation can intensify the vulnerabilities of women in marginalized communities. Just as the black swans are displaced from their natural habitat due to colonization and climate change, Oblivia's connection to her culture and land is disrupted. The experiences in the novel reflect a broader narrative in which Indigenous women's bodies and identities are subjected to violence and domination. Such actions elaborate on what Butler noted “Gender proves to be performance, which constitutes the identity it is purported to be (Butler, 1990, p.34). Oblivia's identity is continually shaped and constrained by external forces that deny her autonomy, reducing her to a symbol of fragility in a post-apocalyptic world.

4.2- Resistance and Reimagining Gender

Wright's fiction is effectively understood through what Kate Rigby (2013) noted as a “poetics of decolonization.” Gender norms, according to Butler can be disrupted and subverted through alternative performances: “In acts very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting their reified status” (Butler, 1988, p.520). As Aboriginal people

reclaim sovereignty over their land, history, and foundational ways of thinking, they gain the freedom to preserve memory and foster hope. This process, in turn, enables settler nations to confront and transcend their historical legacies, opening new possibilities for cross-racial collaboration (Brewster, 2010).

Barras (2016) envisions a new literary space where Indigenous sovereignty is expressed through relationships that respect individual autonomy and acknowledge the unique knowledge systems shaping them. In contrast, Wright critiques the sovereign state as a destructive force, unable to relinquish power. She proposes "relational sovereignty," a framework where diverse voices coexist and engage on equal terms. This approach seeks to free individuals from state control and challenge the individualism embedded in dominant narratives (Foucault, 1982).

Wright subverts dominant cultural narratives by engaging with literary references to figures like Wagner, Whitman, and Neruda, alongside cultural symbols of swans from Indian and Chinese traditions. Through the act of creating new stories from established ones, with the Wanyu language and European languages, including onomatopoeic expressions to depict animal sounds and musical reference, she creates a hybrid narrative that challenges racial stereotypes and colonial power structures. Characters of mixed racial heritage complicate traditional boundaries, while the use of white rhetoric by Black characters and animals exposes the artificiality of superiority-inferiority dynamics. Through these narrative tools and language choices, Wright advocates for the reclamation of sovereignty and the disruption of colonial authority, emphasizing the power of self-definition.

The act of storytelling in *The Swan Book* becomes an integral form of decolonization. For Indigenous cultures, storytelling transcends mere entertainment; it is deeply spiritual, political, and a means of regaining sovereignty. Wright asserts "Stories belong to the land, to its people. They come alive with the land, and they die when taken away from it" (Wright, 2013, p.17). The "Law of Storytelling" in *The Swan Book* is a mechanism for fostering relational subjectivity through literature (Barras, 2016), which in turn allows the characters to redefine their identities and reassert their autonomy within a postcolonial context.

The Aboriginal understandings of Country are diverse and dynamic. Country is deeply rooted in the vision "Dreaming Ecology" (Rose, 1996) which emphasizes reciprocity between all living beings, plants, animals, and people. This belief system underscores the intrinsic connection between land and people, where taking from the land is balanced by giving back (Grieves, 2009, p.49). The connection to the swans represents a significant aspect of Oblivia's identity and agency. The swan resists easy categorization, much like Oblivia herself, who epitomizes gender that is unbound by binaries. Her agency becomes most apparent when she ventures out of Finch's apartment at night to rescue the swans harmed by street children. As Wright notes, "the swan had been banished from wherever it should be singing its stories and was searching for its soul in her" (Wright, 2013, p.22). Consequently, Oblivia asserts not only her autonomy but also her commitment to protecting the land and its creatures.

Oblivia's resistance is further demonstrated when she aids the swans to survive from the contaminated swamp, an act that represents her yearning for freedom and transformation. As she becomes a climate refugee, her connection to the swans becomes a guiding force, navigating her through an increasingly hostile and alienating world. This theme of resistance climaxes when Oblivia chooses to travel incognito, resisting the paths of those with "passports who were not a threat to national security" (Wright, 2013 ,p.273). Instead, she aligns herself with those navigating "unofficial and illegal crossings"(p.274). In doing so, she resists the social hierarchies that govern legal mobility and embraces a form of resistance rooted in nonconformity and survival.

Through these acts, Wright constructs "heterotopias" sites of resistance against colonial narratives, such as Oblivia's mental space, the swamp, Wedding Country, and the People's Palace (Gientzotis,2019). For Foucault, heterotopias are "counter sites" that exist outside of normative spaces and provide opportunities to resist (Foucault,1986). These spaces oppose the idealized Utopian vision of a unified nation-state, a vision which Wright critiques as superficial and exclusionary. The swamp, for example, is a key heterotopia within the novel, it functions as a liminal space of survival and resistance, embodying the enduring connection of Indigenous people to the land despite attempts at colonial erasure. It stands in stark contrast to the postcolonial state's vision of unity, representing a space where Indigenous identity persists and defies assimilation.

The anthropomorphic qualities of the tree further suggest indigenous notions of interconnectedness, in opposite to Western traditions that view nature as passive or merely a resource to be exploited. The tree represents the emotional and psychological empowerment that Country gives to Indigenous people. It becomes a conduit for Oblivia's spiritual and cultural connection, helping her learn the language of her Ancestors and rediscover her identity. As Wright asserts, "I must continue on, to reach that one last place in a tinder-dry nimbus where I once felt a sense of belonging" (Wright, 2013, p.14). This connection to the land and its elements provides Oblivia with a sense of belonging that transcends the trauma imposed by colonization. The tree, like the land itself, becomes a source of resilience and strength, enabling Oblivia to reclaim her sovereignty and voice.

In doing so, Oblivia rejects binary opposition, challenging the dualistic thinking that privileges reason, masculinity, and civilization over nature, femininity, and passivity. Plumwood (1988), argues that this structure exploits nature while marginalizing women. Oblivia's bond with the swans and the natural world resists these gendered and colonial frameworks. The tree and swans act as active participants in her life, embodying Indigenous views of the environment as alive and full of agency. This connection with the non-human world aligns with Plumwood's feminist ecological perspective, which links the oppression of women and nature, and resonates with Indigenous cosmologies that see land and life as interdependent. The novel calls for a rethinking of nature not as an object to be controlled, but as an active, interconnected partner in ecological and cultural communities.

Language becomes a vital tool for resistance in *The Swan Book*. As Butler (1988) argues in "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," language plays a crucial role in constructing and performing gender identities, asserting that gender is performative and not pre-existing. Language, thus, functions as a mechanism that enforces societal norms and can be used to challenge them. Oblivia's relationship with language extends beyond human communication, as her "swan talk" embodies a form of interaction with the non-human world. Also, through "gestural language" and writing "stanzas in ancient symbols," Oblivia engages with Indigenous epistemologies, resisting colonial speech structures that privilege verbal communication while marginalizing alternative forms of knowledge. In this way, language becomes a means of reclaiming agency and resisting dominant narratives that seek silence and control.

This mode of communication challenges Western frameworks that equate agency with verbal expression and invalidate non-Western forms of knowledge. Her embrace of birdsong and natural symbols indicates that meaningful communication can occur outside human speech, disrupting the conventional gendered binary where speaking is associated with masculinity (active) and silence with femininity (passive). Through these interactions, Oblivia's silence transforms into a powerful form of self-expression and resistance, while advocating for a return to Indigenous knowledge systems and ecological harmony.

Additionally, silence becomes a subversive tool to the expectation of verbal communication that Butler critiques, where women are often expected to embody traits associated with speech and submission. Oblivia's deliberate decision to "not to speak" (Wright, 2013, p.19) grants her agency over her narratives, allowing her to resist the colonial authority embedded in language. The muteness is another way of rejecting the language that legitimizes oppression, as seen in the colonial term "terra nullius," which she recognizes as consuming "an entire country with two little words" (Wright, 2013, p. 22). This language suggests that contrary to her portrayal as a silent "other," Oblivia exercises agency and autonomy, challenging stereotypes about Indigenous women.

On the other hand, Bella Donna's resistance strategies manifest through her cultural negotiation and the Indigenous experience in the hybrid space. According to Homi Bhabha (1994), hybridity exists in a "third space" where identities are fluid and interstitial. The swamp and the hull of the decommissioned naval vessel becomes a symbol for a hybrid space, where western memory and Aboriginal law meet. In these places, Bella Donna reconciles her identity with the Indigenous experiences surrounding her. She defies patriarchal expectations of her role as a white woman by asserting a collaborative, fluid identity rather than a fixed one. Her storytelling becomes a means of cultural exchange with Indigenous narratives, allowing her to share her experiences and perspectives. However, these stories become repetitive "It is after all factual that terribly, terribly dry stories that flip, flop seven times in one hour straight are dangerous to the health of the mind" (Wright, 2013, p.40), position her as an outsider, illustrating the challenges of cultural appropriation and the limitations of her narratives in resonating with the swamp community.

Bella Donna's embracing vulnerability is another crucial point. Her willingness to confront her flaws and biases underscores her commitment to authentic engagement with the world around her. This humility contrasts with the authoritative voice demanded by patriarchal norms, instead promoting collaboration and shared experience. Her storytelling becomes a collective effort, valuing diverse voices over traditional notions of authorship and ownership. Bella Donna's desire to reach out to the swans positions her as a catalyst for healing, understanding, and cross-cultural dialogue within the novel's exploration of identity and resistance.

At the novel's outset, Oblivia questions what will endure after destruction, asking "what will be left standing in the end" and which fragments of truth will remain in mind (Wright, 2013, p. 324). *The Swan Book* concludes in a post-apocalyptic landscape where nothing appears possible, and yet anything might happen. The narrative enters a "tabula rasa place," a metaphorical blank slate free from predetermined roles and identities. Yet, within this space, memory persists, safeguarded in the old languages spoken by myna birds. Oblivia's haunting presence reflects her connection to the Aboriginal past as she negotiates with Country to reclaim control. Oblivia's voice resonates through the landscape, invoking the Rainbow Serpent, Bujimala, to heal the land and return the swans reflect a reclamation of Indigenous sovereignty and ecological stewardship.

5-Conclusion

The current analysis conclude that Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* is an exploration of the intersection of climate change, gender oppression and the Australian Aboriginal connection to land and culture. Identity, as proved by Wright is not a fixed attribute, but a dynamic process that shape the characters journey, particularly in their resistance and resilience against patriarchal and colonial systems. This vision align with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity that identity is enacted through repeated behaviors that subvert societal constraints. Thus, this study attempts to universalize Wright's characters and position the main female characters in the category that of women without accounting for the vast diversity of their experiences as Butler suggest.

Oblivia, the protagonist's bond with country transcends mere survival. It becomes an assertion of sovereignty and a reclamation of identity in a world shattered by dispossession and climate crisis. Her resistance to gendered expectations emerges as a performative act of defiance, where her every gesture and silence redefines what it means to exist on her own terms. On the other hand, Bella Donna establish her voice as a woman through storytelling to carve out spaces of belonging and solidarity within the swamp community. Both characters represent ideological challenges and resistance, they make use of their stories to present gender as fluid and performative while advocating for the inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and achieving ecological harmony.

The novel represents the significance of emphasizes the necessity of embracing alternative identities and frameworks to address global crises, demonstrating how acts of cultural survival and resistance preserve agency and memory, even amid erasure and destruction. What makes *The Swan Book* significant is its call for a decolonization of thought, a return to Indigenous knowledge systems, and a reimagining of ecological harmony. It challenges readers to confront the global crises of our time not just by altering policies or practices but by fundamentally rethinking the narratives that shape our identities and relationships with the world.

The interconnection of the stories in the novel remind us that resistance is not an isolated act but a collective symphony of voices and actions. The novel inspires local and international readers to imagine a future where gender, culture, and ecology coexist in fluid harmony, where identities are not imposed but reclaimed, reshaped, and celebrated in all their complexities. In this way, the current study has shown that *The Swan Book* is more than a narrative, it becomes a guide, urging us toward resilience, transformation, and hope in the face of cultural erasure and destruction.

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