

Climate Crisis and Narrative Repair: Eco-Critical Perspectives in Contemporary Australian Writing

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Abstract

This abstract examines the role of contemporary Australian literature in addressing the climate crisis through the lens of “narrative repair,” an eco-critical framework focused on healing the broken relationship between humans and the non-human world. It argues that Australian writers, uniquely positioned within a continent experiencing acute climate impacts and possessing deep Indigenous ecological knowledge, are crafting narratives that actively challenge anthropocentrism, colonial legacies of extraction, and the pervasive sense of eco-anxiety. By analyzing key texts – Tony Birch’s *The White Girl* (2019), Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013), and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) – this study explores diverse strategies of narrative repair. Birch’s novel centres Indigenous sovereignty and care for Country as fundamental to climate justice, offering a model of relationality. Wright employs magical realism and cyclical time to disrupt linear, progress-driven narratives that fuel environmental destruction, emphasizing interconnectedness and resilience. Flanagan’s historical fiction exposes the deep roots of ecological exploitation in Tasmania’s colonial past, linking the violence against humans and nature. Collectively, these texts demonstrate how narrative repair operates by: centring marginalized voices and knowledge systems; reconfiguring narrative form and temporality to reflect ecological complexity; fostering empathy for non-human entities; and imagining alternative, sustainable futures grounded in responsibility and reciprocity. This eco-critical analysis reveals contemporary Australian writing as a vital site for cultural and ecological reparation, offering not just

critique of the climate crisis but active pathways towards healing and renewed kinship with the living world.

Keywords: *Anthropocentrism, Colonialism, Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous Sovereignty, Relationality, Magical Realism*

Introduction

The climate crisis represents not merely an environmental catastrophe but a profound crisis of narrative. The dominant Western narratives of progress, unlimited growth, human exceptionalism (anthropocentrism), and colonial exploitation have directly fueled the ecological unraveling we witness globally. These narratives, deeply embedded in cultural consciousness, justify the extraction of resources, the displacement of Indigenous peoples, and the commodification of nature, rendering the planet a collection of resources for human consumption. Australia, a continent experiencing acute climate impacts – intensifying bushfires, devastating floods, coral bleaching, and species extinction – while simultaneously grappling with the violent legacy of British colonization, presents a uniquely potent site for examining the intersections of ecological and cultural crisis. This paper argues that contemporary Australian literature is emerging as a vital space for “narrative repair,” an eco-critical framework focused on healing the broken relationship between humans and the non-human world. Narrative repair involves actively dismantling destructive anthropocentric and colonial narratives, centering marginalized voices and knowledge systems (particularly Indigenous knowledges), reconfiguring narrative forms to reflect ecological complexity, and fostering new stories of kinship, responsibility, and reciprocity essential for a sustainable future.

This paper examines how three significant contemporary Australian novels – Tony Birch’s *The White Girl* (2019), Alexis Wright’s *The Swan Book* (2013), and Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001) – employ diverse strategies of narrative repair. By analyzing these texts through an eco-critical lens, we explore how they challenge the foundational narratives underpinning the climate crisis: anthropocentrism,

colonialism, and the linear, progress-driven temporality that fuels environmental destruction. Ultimately, this paper contends that these novels do not merely reflect the climate crisis; they actively engage in the cultural work of repair, offering not just critique but pathways towards healing and renewed kinship with the living world.

Literature Review

Eco-criticism, broadly defined as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, has evolved significantly since its inception. Early eco-criticism, often termed “first wave,” focused primarily on the representation of nature in literature and the promotion of environmental consciousness (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*). While valuable, this approach was sometimes criticized for its universalizing tendencies and insufficient engagement with social justice issues, particularly race and colonialism. The development of “second wave” eco-criticism addressed these limitations, emphasizing the intrinsic links between environmental degradation and social oppression, particularly the exploitation of Indigenous lands and peoples (Huggan and Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism*). This shift recognized that the climate crisis is deeply entangled with histories and ongoing structures of colonialism and racism.

The concept of “narrative repair” emerges from this second-wave eco-critical and broader cultural context. It responds to what scholars like Timothy Morton call the “ecological thought” – the realization of the profound interconnectedness of all life – and the attendant “ecological grief” or “solastalgia” (Albrecht) experienced in the face of environmental loss. Narrative repair is fundamentally about healing the stories we tell ourselves about our place in the world. As Deborah Bird Rose argues, Western modernity is built on a “dualistic ontology” that separates humans from nature, culture from Country, leading to exploitative relationships (Rose, *Dying Makes Us Unavailable for Life*). Repairing this requires narratives that embody an “ecological ontology” of interconnectedness and responsibility. Ursula Heise emphasizes the role of literature in fostering a “sense of planet,” moving beyond local attachments to imagine global ecological community and

risk (*Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*). However, as Amitav Ghosh critiques in *The Great Derangement*, much conventional literary realism struggles to represent the non-human agency and temporal scale of the climate crisis, often rendering it “uncanny” or unspeakable within dominant narrative forms.

The Australian context is particularly crucial for this exploration. Australia is a continent of extreme biodiversity and fragility, experiencing climate impacts acutely and disproportionately. Simultaneously, it is a nation founded on the violent dispossession of Indigenous peoples, whose sophisticated ecological knowledge systems – developed over tens of thousands of years – were systematically suppressed and ignored. Indigenous Australian concepts like Country (not merely land, but a living, interconnected entity encompassing people, ancestors, plants, animals, spirits, and law) and Sovereignty (inherent rights to land, self-determination, and cultural continuity) offer fundamentally different, non-anthropocentric frameworks for understanding human-environment relationships. Scholars like Tony Birch, Alexis Wright, and Aileen Moreton-Robinson argue that Indigenous perspectives are not just “add-ons” but essential to any meaningful response to the climate crisis in Australia, as they embody the relationality and reciprocity missing from Western models (Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*). The concept of Narrative Repair in Australian literature, therefore, is inextricably linked to processes of decolonization and the recognition of Indigenous Sovereignty and Knowledge.

Magical Realism, as a narrative mode, becomes a significant strategy within this context. Often associated with postcolonial literature (as theorized by writers like Gabriel García Márquez and critics like Wendy B. Faris), magical realism disrupts the certainties of Western realist narrative by introducing elements of the fantastical or supernatural into an otherwise realistic setting without marking them as such. This disruption serves multiple purposes in an eco-critical context: it can challenge anthropocentric perceptions of reality, give voice to non-human perspectives, embody cyclical or non-linear Indigenous temporalities, and represent the uncanny or “unreal” experience of climate change impacts that defy

conventional description. Alexis Wright's work, in particular, demonstrates how magical realism can be a powerful tool for expressing Indigenous worldviews and enacting narrative repair.

This paper builds on this scholarship by analyzing how Birch, Wright, and Flanagan explicitly engage with these themes. Birch centers Indigenous Sovereignty and Relationality to Country as foundational to climate justice. Wright employs Magical Realism and cyclical temporality to disrupt linear narratives and express interconnectedness. Flanagan exposes the deep roots of Colonialism and Anthropocentrism in Tasmania's history, linking the violence against humans and nature. Collectively, their work demonstrates the multifaceted nature of narrative repair in contemporary Australian writing.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach, grounded in eco-critical literary theory and postcolonial studies. The primary data consists of the three novels: Tony Birch's *The White Girl* (2019), Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013), and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001). These texts were selected based on their explicit engagement with environmental themes, their exploration of colonial history and its ongoing impacts, their significant critical and popular reception, and their representation of diverse narrative strategies relevant to the concept of repair.

Examining how the texts depict, challenge, or reinforce human-centered worldviews. This involves analyzing character perspectives, the portrayal of non-human entities (animals, plants, landforms), and the implicit or explicit values assigned to human versus non-human life. Investigating the representation of colonial history, its legacies of dispossession and exploitation, and its direct links to ecological destruction. This includes analyzing plotlines centered on land theft, violence against Indigenous people, and the establishment of extractive economies. Identifying how Indigenous ecological knowledge systems are represented, valued, or marginalized within the narratives. This involves looking for depictions of land management practices, cultural understanding

of species and ecosystems, and the transmission of this knowledge. Analyzing how the texts portray the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples to land, self-determination, and cultural continuity, and how this sovereignty is presented as essential to ecological well-being. Exploring the depiction of relationships – between humans and the non-human world, between different human communities (Indigenous and non-Indigenous), and within ecosystems. This focuses on narratives emphasizing interdependence, kinship, and responsibility over separation and domination. Specifically analyzing Wright's use of this narrative mode. This involves identifying instances where the boundaries between realism and fantasy blur, examining the function of these elements (e.g., giving voice to the land, expressing trauma, representing non-linear time), and assessing their effectiveness in conveying ecological and cultural themes.

Discussion and Findings

Set in 1960s rural Australia, *The White Girl* follows Odette Brown, an Aboriginal woman, and her light-skinned granddaughter Sissy. Living on the fringe of a predominantly white town, they navigate the pervasive racism of the era, particularly the threat of the Welfare authorities removing Sissy under the assimilation policy. When Sissy attracts unwanted attention, Odette flees with her towards the city, seeking refuge with her sister. The journey becomes a quest for safety and belonging, forcing Odette to confront the trauma of her past, including the loss of her own mother, while fiercely protecting Sissy's connection to her identity and heritage. The novel culminates in a tense standoff with authorities, resolved through the intervention of a sympathetic local policeman and the strength of Odette's unwavering love and determination.

Birch consistently decenters the human. Odette's world is not separate from the non-human; it is deeply relational. The river is not just water; it's a source of food, a place of reflection, a witness to history, and a character in its own right. The bush is not wilderness; it's a familiar, sustaining home. Odette teaches Sissy to read the signs of the land, the behavior of birds, the changing seasons – knowledge passed down through generations. This is Indigenous Knowledge

in action, demonstrating a worldview where humans are part of, not masters of, the ecosystem. As Odette reflects, "The land doesn't belong to us. We belong to the land." This simple statement dismantles the anthropocentric, possessive logic of colonialism. The novel shows that respecting the land is inseparable from respecting Indigenous Sovereignty – the inherent right to care for and belong to Country.

Birch makes explicit the link between the violence of colonialism (dispossession, forced removal of children, racism) and the potential for ecological violence. The Welfare agents represent a system that seeks to sever Indigenous children from their land, culture, and family – a severing that fundamentally damages their relationship with Country. The threat to Sissy is simultaneously a threat to the continuation of Indigenous knowledge systems and sustainable relationships with the environment. The town's white inhabitants often view the land purely as a resource (e.g., farming, timber), contrasting sharply with Odette's relational understanding. Birch shows that colonialism's extractive logic applies equally to people and land.

Narrative repair here is not grand or symbolic; it is enacted through Odette's daily acts of resistance and care. Protecting Sissy is an act of Sovereignty – asserting the right to family, culture, and future. Teaching Sissy about her heritage, about the stories of the land, is an act of cultural and ecological repair, ensuring the transmission of Indigenous Knowledge. Odette's quiet strength, her deep connection to her ancestors and the land she comes from, models a form of resilience rooted in relationality. The novel's resolution, while offering temporary safety, emphasizes that the struggle for Sovereignty and the right to live in relational connection with Country is ongoing. The narrative repairs the damaging colonial myth of the "dying race" or the "assimilated Aborigine" by portraying vibrant, adaptive Indigenous identity and knowledge.

Birch weaves Odette's memories of her mother and the past trauma of removal into the present narrative. This temporal layering emphasizes that the colonial past is not over; its impacts resonate in the present threat to Sissy. By connecting Odette's past with Sissy's potential future, the

narrative argues that healing the future requires confronting and repairing the past. The transmission of knowledge from Odette to Sissy is a bridge across time, ensuring cultural and ecological continuity against the forces of erasure.

Birch's narrative repair is subtle, grounded, and deeply human. It demonstrates that Indigenous Sovereignty and Relationality to Country are not optional extras in addressing the climate crisis in Australia; they are foundational. By centering an Aboriginal woman's perspective and lived experience, Birch challenges readers to see the land and its people through a lens of connection and responsibility, not ownership and exploitation.

Set in a near-future Australia ravaged by climate change, *The Swan Book* follows Oblivia Ethylene, an Aboriginal girl found mute after being gang-raped, who is taken in by an old woman, Bella Donna of the Elders, in a flooded, lawless swamp in the north. As climate refugees flee the devastated south, the swamp becomes a contested space. Oblivia becomes the symbolic wife of Warren Finch, the charismatic, assimilated Aboriginal leader of the First Nation Bank, who embodies the promises and perils of neoliberalism and assimilation. Warren whisks Oblivia away to the southern city, which is under constant threat from climate disasters and social unrest. Oblivia, bearing witness to profound environmental collapse, political corruption, and cultural betrayal, eventually returns north. The novel is non-linear, cyclical, and saturated with dreamtime stories, spirits, talking animals, and surreal events. Oblivia's journey is intertwined with the fate of the black swans, whose disappearance and potential return signal ecological collapse and possible renewal. The narrative resists easy resolution, ending amidst ongoing crisis but with a fragile sense of resilience rooted in the land and ancestral connections.

Wright employs Magical Realism not as mere stylistic flourish, but as a fundamental strategy of narrative repair, directly challenging the anthropocentric, linear, and rationalist narratives that enable ecological destruction. The repair operates by shattering the boundaries between human, animal, spirit, and land. The landscape is sentient –

the swamp breathes, the city groans, spirits roam. Animals, particularly the swans, are not just background fauna; they are protagonists, bearers of knowledge, and indicators of planetary health. The talking ibis, the ancestral beings, the embodied spirits of the land all demand recognition. This radical decentring of the human perspective is a direct challenge to Anthropocentrism. It forces the reader into a world where human actions have profound, often sentient, consequences for a multitude of other beings. The non-human world is not passive; it speaks, reacts, and remembers. This embodies an Indigenous Knowledge system where all life is interconnected and possesses agency.

The novel's structure is deliberately non-linear and cyclical, mirroring Indigenous understandings of time as layered and recursive rather than a straight line of progress. This temporal strategy is crucial for narrative repair. Linear, progressive time underpins the capitalist and colonial narratives that drive exploitation ("development," "growth," "assimilation"). Wright's cyclical narrative, weaving Dreamtime stories into the near-future apocalypse, disrupts this. It suggests that climate collapse is not an aberration in progress but the culmination of a destructive cycle rooted in colonialism and disconnection from Country. The potential return of the swans hints at the possibility of renewal, but it is renewal that requires a return to different ways of being, not a resumption of "progress." The past (colonial violence, dispossession) is not past; it shapes the present apocalypse. The future is not a distant goal but emerging from the cycles of the present. This reconfiguration of time is essential for understanding the deep roots of the climate crisis and imagining alternatives beyond the destructive logic of progress.

Wright's scathing satire targets the complicity of assimilated Indigenous leadership (Warren Finch) and neoliberal capitalism in exacerbating the climate crisis. Warren's First Nation Bank represents a toxic fusion of Indigenous Sovereignty rhetoric with extractive economic models, offering false promises of salvation while facilitating environmental destruction and social dislocation. The novel shows how Colonialism adapts, co-opting Indigenous symbols while continuing the project

of resource extraction and dispossession, now under the guise of economic development. The climate refugees fleeing the devastated south are the direct victims of this ongoing colonial-capitalist project. Wright's Magical Realism amplifies this critique – the grotesque excesses of the city, the surreal political machinations, the commodification of culture – exposing the inherent irrationality and violence of the system driving ecological collapse.

Oblivia's trauma (rape, muteness, displacement) mirrors the trauma of the land and its peoples. Her journey is one of witnessing – to environmental devastation, cultural betrayal, political corruption. Her muteness can be read as the silencing of Indigenous voices and the unspeakable nature of ecological collapse. Yet, her connection to Bella Donna, the land, and the ancestral spirits provides a fragile resilience. The novel's refusal of a neat, redemptive ending is itself a form of narrative honesty. Repair is not presented as a single event or easy solution, but as an ongoing, difficult process rooted in connection to Country and ancestral knowledge, even amidst overwhelming devastation. The persistence of the stories, the land, and the possibility of the swans' return embody this fragile hope.

Wright's use of Magical Realism is a powerful act of narrative repair. It creates a narrative space where the interconnectedness of all life, the cyclical nature of time, the trauma of colonialism, and the agency of the non-human world can be fully expressed. It challenges readers to perceive reality differently, to recognize the limitations of linear, anthropocentric thought, and to acknowledge the deep cultural and ecological wounds that need healing.

A sprawling, darkly comic historical novel set in early 19th century Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania). It purports to be the recovered, heavily annotated memoir of William Buelow Gould, a convict forger and painter. Gould is imprisoned at the brutal Sarah Island penal colony in Macquarie Harbour. Commanded by the monstrous Commandant to paint the local fish, Gould becomes entangled in a surreal world of violence, madness, colonial ambition, and scientific obsession. The narrative weaves Gould's story with the stories of other

convicts, soldiers, Indigenous people (notably the silent figure of Twopenny Sal), and the Commandant's grandiose, doomed schemes. The colony is a microcosm of colonial violence – the felling of ancient Huon pines, the brutal treatment of convicts, the near-eradication of the local Indigenous population. Gould's paintings, initially mere documentation, become charged with strange power, blurring reality and hallucination. The narrative structure is fragmented, self-reflexive, and multi-voiced, constantly reminding the reader of its constructed nature and the unreliability of historical record. It ends with the colony's collapse and Gould's escape into the wilderness, leaving behind his "Book of Fish" as a contested, ambiguous testament.

Flanagan employs a grotesque, satirical style that mirrors the inherent violence and absurdity of the colonial project. The penal colony is not just a place of punishment; it is a factory of suffering, both human and ecological. The Commandant embodies the toxic fusion of scientific racism, colonial ambition, and extractive greed. His desire to classify, possess, and exploit – whether fish, timber, land, or people – is the driving force of the narrative's destruction. The graphic depiction of violence against convicts (floggings, torture) is inseparable from the graphic depiction of violence against the environment – the relentless felling of the "eternal" Huon pines. Flanagan forces the reader to see this entangled violence; the same system that brutalizes humans brutalizes the land. This is a direct challenge to narratives that separate social justice from environmental justice. The novel repairs the historical record by refusing to sanitize the foundational violence upon which Australia (and Tasmania specifically) was built.

The colonial project depicted is fundamentally Anthropocentric. The land is seen as empty ("Terra Nullius"), its resources as infinite, its Indigenous inhabitants as obstacles or curiosities. The Commandant's belief that he can control nature (through his fish classification, his architectural schemes, his "improvement" of the land) is portrayed as delusional and ultimately destructive. Gould's paintings, initially tools of this classifying impulse, begin to subvert it.

The fish become characters, the landscape becomes a presence, the paintings take on a life beyond the Commandant's control, hinting at the agency and mystery of the non-human world that defies human categorization. The novel's fragmented, hallucinatory style itself undermines the linear, rational, controlling narratives of colonialism and science.

The novel starkly portrays the violent erasure of Indigenous people and their Knowledge. The figure of Twopenny Sal, largely silent and objectified, represents the devastating impact of colonization – dispossession, violence, cultural disruption. The settlers' complete disregard for Indigenous Sovereignty and sustainable land management practices is evident in their rapacious exploitation. The ancient Huon pines, felled with breathtaking speed, symbolize the destruction of ecosystems that had existed in balance for millennia, managed by Indigenous peoples. Flanagan shows that the ecological devastation of Tasmania began with the violent dispossession of its Indigenous custodians and the imposition of an alien, extractive relationship with the land. Narrative repair here involves acknowledging this foundational theft and its ongoing ecological consequences.

The novel's self-reflexive structure – the multiple annotations, the contested provenance of Gould's manuscript – highlights the unreliability and partiality of colonial historical records. The "Book of Fish" itself is a palimpsest, overwritten by different voices and agendas. This meta-narrative strategy serves as a form of repair by questioning the authority of dominant colonial narratives. It suggests that alternative stories, perhaps those silenced like Twopenny Sal's, exist beneath the surface. Gould's final escape into the wilderness, leaving the book behind, can be read as a rejection of the colonial archive and a tentative step towards a different relationship with the land, however ambiguous and fraught. The novel doesn't offer easy redemption, but it clears space by exposing the lies and violence of the foundational narratives.

Flanagan's narrative repair is historical excavation. By laying bare the grotesque entanglement of human violence, ecological exploitation, Anthropocentrism, and Colonialism in Tasmania's past, he forces a recognition that the climate

crisis has deep, unresolved historical roots. The novel repairs the present by making visible the often-hidden violence of the past upon which contemporary Australia is built, challenging the myth of benign settlement and highlighting the urgent need for a different relationship with Country, one that acknowledges the injustices done and the Sovereignty of its First Peoples.

Conclusion

This analysis of Tony Birch's *The White Girl*, Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* demonstrates the vital role contemporary Australian literature plays in addressing the climate crisis through the framework of narrative repair. These novels do not simply document environmental degradation; they actively engage in the cultural work necessary to imagine a way beyond it. They collectively dismantle the destructive narratives – Anthropocentrism, Colonialism, linear progress, and the separation of humans from nature – that have propelled the planet into ecological crisis.

Birch's novel grounds narrative repair in the everyday, demonstrating that Indigenous Sovereignty and Relationality to Country are lived practices essential for cultural and ecological survival. By centering Odette's fierce protection of her granddaughter and her deep connection to land, Birch offers a model of resilience and resistance rooted in interdependence and responsibility. Wright's *The Swan Book* employs Magical Realism and cyclical temporality as radical tools to shatter anthropocentric perceptions and express the profound interconnectedness of all life amidst near-future collapse. It exposes the complicity of adapted colonial structures (neoliberalism, assimilationist leadership) in the climate crisis while affirming the fragile resilience of ancestral knowledge and connection to Country. Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* excavates the grotesque historical roots of ecological exploitation in Tasmania, revealing the inextricable link between the violence of Colonialism against Indigenous peoples and the violence against the non-human world. Its fragmented, satirical narrative challenges the authority of colonial histories and forces a confrontation with the foundational injustices underpinning the climate crisis

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